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CANADA

How Ottawa is trying to breathe new life into a 22-year-old policy for gender equality

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OTTAWA—Twenty-two years ago, the Canadian government made a commitment — every piece of legislation, and all new policies and programs, would be treated to what is called a “gender-based analysis.”

This bureaucratic procedure, while arcane, was meant to do something momentous: bring the experience of women to the nerve-centre of political decision-making. A government that does gender-based analyses is a government with gender equality on the brain.

But that’s not what happened — at least not immediately.

Consider the current Liberal government’s national housing strategy, which was unwrapped in Toronto in November. In a different world, Colette Prévost of the YWCA wouldn’t have worried that the politicians crafting the policy could be blind to the gender dynamics it grapples with. She wouldn’t have felt compelled to organize a lobbying blitz in the weeks before the policy was unveiled, to make sure it dealt with the particulars of homelessness for women and girls, whom she said often flee violence and are uncounted by shelter systems across the country.

And though she was ultimately happy with what the Liberals came up with — including a pledge to put 25 per cent of the billions of dollars in new spending to initiatives for women and girls — her experience in recent years underscored her skepticism towards the gender-based commitments of government.

As she put it, “We have to do better than what has been done in the last several years.”

What she meant, of course, is what has *not* been done. In 2016, Auditor General Michael Ferguson released a report that found the government’s gender-based analyses — GBAs for short — were “not always complete, nor of consistent quality.” Speaking at a committee about the report a few weeks later, Meena Ballantyne, head of Status of Women Canada, said the work of tracking and ensuring GBAs are done better is “just beginning.”

In other words, despite two-decades of supposed adherence to the completion of GBAs, the current administration under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is still trying to breathe new life into this longstanding promise.

“It’s been this 20-year, episodic effort,” said Nancy Peckford, executive director of Equal Voice, an organization devoted to bringing more women into politics. “It’s not going to happen overnight.”

One can wonder what would be different today, had this pledge been taken more seriously since 1995. Tracy Porteous, executive director of the Ending Violence Association of British Columbia, pointed to recent harassment scandals among the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and within the Canadian military.

She suggested such controversies could be avoided with better government direction on gender equality – something that would ostensibly be achieved with good GBAs.

Even initiatives with no obvious gender dimension can yield eye-opening results from a GBA, such as resource projects, Porteous said. For instance, a new industrial site, like a fresh mine or a refurbished shipping terminal, can bring large numbers of male workers into small communities, which can increase the likelihood of violence against women, she said. If such projects get a GBA, then government can plan for this and increase funding to local shelters and support programs when such resource projects are approved, she said.

“The only thing that can happen in relation to doing a deeper gender-based analysis is good outcomes,” she said. “Women and children and whole families will only be safer.”

The Trudeau Liberals say they’re beefing up GBAs and have placed gender equality at the centre of the government’s thinking. Since the auditor general’s 2016 report on GBA inconsistencies, the government has made GBAs mandatory for all memoranda to cabinet – policy proposals that need cabinet approval – and submissions for spending to the Treasury Board.

There is also a new survey for deputy ministers on the implementation of GBAs, which have been expanded to include the consideration of policy impacts on people with various gender, racial and sexual identities.

Status of Women Canada, meanwhile, is “updating training tools and materials” relating to GBAs, and providing advice on proposals such as the housing strategy defence policy review and innovation agenda, said agency spokesperson Léonie Roux.

The finance department also brought GBAs to the fore last spring when it published a “gender statement” in the 2017 budget. Officials from Finance Minister Bill Morneau’s office said this month that the department is working to make gender issues a major plank of the 2018 spending plan. In an emailed statement, Morneau said the department has increased funding for its own GBAs and raised the idea of budgets including gender statements with provincial finance ministers in December.

As Finance Department spokesperson Jocelyn Sweet explained, each federal budget proposal is now expected to go through a GBA, which are reviewed by department officials and then passed along to the minister.

There are exemptions to this requirement, though, including if the initiative is deemed to be urgent or a matter of “macroeconomic policy” – meaning if it applies in a general sense.

But Sweet couldn’t say how often policies are exempted from GBAs because the finance department doesn’t track how often the exemptions are used. So while GBAs are being emphasized as important by the Trudeau government, the extent of their implementation remains unclear.

Morneau’s spokesperson Chloe Luciani-Girouard added later that staff are tracking the use of exemptions and want to make sure they’re no longer used at all in the 2018 budget.

On top of that, it’s difficult to say whether they’re having an impact on policy. A senior official from the finance department who spoke to the Star on background could not provide a single example of how a GBA had changed a spending plan or federal policy.

For Michele Austin, who was chief of staff to the Status of Women Minister in Stephen Harper’s Conservative government, this underlines how GBAs are little more than window dressing. Austin, who is now a senior advisor at Summa Strategies in Ottawa, said she has “absolutely no clue” what impact GBAs have on government policy.

“I fully applaud the Liberal government for raising the profile of gender – full top marks,” she said. “At the same time, I would note that it costs nothing to do that and often changes very little.”

Indeed, since the inaugural and unprecedented act of including an equal number of men and women in the federal cabinet, the current Liberal government has placed gender in the top rung of its priorities.

Judy Sgro, a long-time Liberal MP from Toronto who served in Paul Martin’s cabinet, said that GBAs are an important part of the government’s overall stance on gender equality. She pointed to the Canada Child Benefit, one of the government’s most frequently championed policies, as an initiative that was designed to have a big impact on women.

According to the 2017 budget’s gender statement, roughly 90 per cent of people who receive the maximum child benefit of \$9,000-per-year are single mothers.

Sgro blamed the Harper Conservatives for delaying deeper GBA implementation during their decade in power, having been chair of the Status of Women committee in 2006 when she recommended that the analyses become mandatory for all government departments.

“The leadership (that is now) coming out of the prime minister’s office is that these issue matter, and he wants to see these things put into action,” Sgro said.

“It’s a long time coming.”

The YWCA, at least, is applauding Ottawa’s gender focus. On the housing strategy, Prévost said the government struck the right balance, with a significant orientation toward how to improve the housing situation for women and girls.

“I have to say I was almost surprised,” she laughed, adding that she will be “anxiously monitoring” how the spending is actually rolled out.

“We’re hopefully optimistic,” she said. “I think this is a very good first step.”

This story was updated Dec. 29.

Correction: Jan. 3, 2018: This article was updated from a previous version to make clear that that Tracy Porteous, executive director of the Ending Violence Association of British Columbia, pointed to recent harassment scandals among the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and within the Canadian military. She did not refer to the Canadian Security Intelligence Agency.

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