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Understanding Gender Expertise in the Post-Truth Era: Media Representations of Gender-Based Analysis Plus in Canada

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the post-truth era as a contextual factor in how gender expertise is constituted, challenged, and defended in policy discourse in Canadian context. Using post-structural policy analysis to explore the contours of media scrutiny and the resulting debate about gender-based analysis plus (GBA+), Canada's approach to gender mainstreaming, we reveal that it was ultimately a debate about the role of gender/intersectional expertise within government. We demonstrate that GBA+, and the gender expertise informing it, was often represented in mainstream media as either a "political intervention" or as a "technical tool", both of which reinforce traditional representations of policy expertise, including political neutrality and professional competence, which, in the past, have been used to justify the exclusion of "other" forms of knowledge. In unpacking these representations, we suggest that, even among critics of post-truth claims, post-truth discourse offers a new vocabulary, anchored in what Ringrose (2018, 653) refers to as "post-truth anti-feminism", which emphasizes not simply identity politics, but also potential harm resulting from interventions based on feminist knowledge. We also suggest that such claims have resulted in a distancing between gender expertise and feminism, thus contributing to the erasure of feminist knowledge in policy contexts.

Keywords

gender expertise, gender mainstreaming, GBA+, post-structural policy analysis, post-truth

Introduction

As far-right and populist governments emerged throughout the West and in Latin America, Canadian voters chose a different path, electing in the 2015 federal election what has come to be known as the “Feminist Government” (FG). Led by the Trudeau Liberals, a centre-left party, the FG includes a number of institutional and substantive reforms, including Cabinet parity, the elevation of the women’s policy agency to a full department, renewed pay equity legislation, and explicitly feminist international assistance and open government policies. Unlike previous gender initiatives, which tended to be siloed and focused only on those issues thought to be “women’s issues”, such as occupational segregation, pay gaps, violence against women, and reproductive rights, the FG is premised on the expansion of gender-based analysis plus (GBA+), the Canadian approach to gender mainstreaming, across the entire government and into areas that had been previously shielded from gender analysis, including international trade, finance and budgeting.

The FG was met with considerable media scrutiny. In particular, GBA+ and the gender expertise that informs it received widespread attention in mainstream media, often introduced as a “new way of doing things”. Many Canadians were for the first time learning about GBA+ through media reports. In policy studies, media has been conceptualized as a conduit of information, an intermediary between state and society (e.g., Tolley, 2016), as well as a policy actor in its own right, priming and framing particular issues in ways that shape responses to them and influencing their appearance on a government agenda (e.g., Murray 2007). For a number of scholars, media is a key site of knowledge production, a purveyor of “truth” (e.g., Verloo, 2018). It is therefore important to consider what “truths” media produced with respect to gender expertise and GBA+, especially in light of the “post-truth” context in which we find ourselves.

To be sure, the FG, premised on the deepening and expanding of gender expertise, emerged against the backdrop of the “post-truth era”, where the rejection of expertise is a legitimate, and increasingly mainstream, political stance (Higgins, 2016), and where media plays a central role. Indeed, Verloo (2018, 23) defines post-truth politics as “intricate links between the polity and media by which powerful media support hegemonic (or “wannabe hegemonic”) polity actors making truth claims that are not based on rational facts.” Feminist scholars engaging in debates about “post-truth” or, relatedly, the “death of expertise” (e.g., Nichols 2017), point to the ways in which knowledge production and transfer have always been shaped by the politics of power and position, including gender, class, race and so on (Mejia, Beckermann, & Sullivan 2018). Feminist knowledge, as well as knowledge stemming from racialized and indigenous communities, has been historically undermined and challenged on epistemological grounds as lacking rigor and as being subjective, relativist, etc. (e.g., Harding, 1996).

At the same time, however, amidst feminist backlash and the emergence of Men’s Rights Activism, criticisms of feminist knowledge and expertise in the post-truth era have moved beyond epistemological concerns to emphasize the potential harm they produce, including material harm and the suppression of liberty. This view, what Ringrose (2018, 653) refers to as “post-truth anti-feminism”, is linked to the broader post-truth critique of political correctness, in which “reasonable and acceptable ideas like gender equality...have been somehow distorted, taken too far, abused and turned into something monstrous, dogmatic, and authoritarian” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 37). From this perspective, gender expertise is not simply identity politics, but is also potentially harmful.

Although post-truth politics is perhaps most pronounced in the United States and the United Kingdom, Canada has not been immune to such shifts. Indeed, several Canadians have been at the forefront of the “alt-right” movement, and governments across the country have grappled with related post-truth issues, such as anti-vaxx and declining trust in public institutions and decision-making (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2017). The introduction of the FG in Canada therefore offers an opportunity to explore how gender expertise is constituted, challenged, and defended in policy discourse, and to consider whether or not “post-truth anti-feminism” flavours these discussions. How gender expertise is represented in media offers a glimpse into how gender and feminist knowledge mediate broader understandings of, and resistance to, expertise in policymaking contexts.

In what follows, we use post-structural policy analysis to explore media representations of GBA+ and gender expertise within the context of the FG. We reveal that underlying these representations is ultimately a debate about the role of specifically gender/intersectional expertise within government. Our analysis reveals that GBA+, and the gender expertise informing it, was often represented in mainstream media as either a “political intervention” or as a “technical tool”, both of which serve to reinforce traditional representations of policy expertise, including political neutrality and professional competence, which, in the past, have been used to justify the exclusion of “other” forms of knowledge. In unpacking these representations, we suggest that, even among critics of post-truth claims, as many in mainstream media are, post-truth discourse offers a new vocabulary, anchored in post-truth anti-feminism. We also suggest that such claims have resulted in a distancing between gender expertise and feminism, thus contributing to the erasure of feminist knowledge in policy contexts. The paper is organized as follows: We first discuss gender expertise within the Canadian context. This is followed by an introduction to post-structural policy analysis (PSPA) and our data. We then present our findings and offer a discussion on the implications for transformative politics.

Gender Expertise and Feminist Knowledge(s) in the Canadian and Post-Truth Contexts

Gender expertise has a long history, both internationally and domestically, reflecting varying degrees of institutionalization within states (e.g., Hawkesworth, 2012; McBride & Mazur, 2012; Hoard, 2015). Within Canada, growing activism among women during the post-WWII era saw the emergence of the so called “Women’s State,” a multi-nodal approach to gender inequality that included state institutions, arms-length bodies, and funding for advocacy groups (Rankin & Vickers, 2001). Under the “Women’s State”, early gender experts were primarily located in women’s policy agencies that were removed from the center of government.¹ By the 1990s, policy capacity was cut drastically, resulting from what Brodie (2007, 167) refers to as the three Ds: “the *delegitimization* of feminism, the *dismantling* of gender-based policy units, and the disappearance of the gender subject of public policy.” As women’s groups were increasingly maligned as “special interest groups,” funding declined and avenues for participation in policy making were closed off (Brodie, 2007; Knight & Rodgers, 2012).

Replacing the Women’s State is what Squires (2007) refers to as “the politics of process”, where gender expertise was integrated into policy analysis in the form of gender mainstreaming (GM). The Canadian variant of GM is gender-based analysis plus (GBA+)², an expert-bureaucratic ap-

1 – It should also be noted that the policy machinery largely reflected the demands of white, middle-class, heterosexual, and largely Anglophone and settler women. See Bunjun (2018) and Bromley (2018) for discussions

2 – The initial approach to GM adopted in 1995 was simply Gender-Based Analysis, which was rebranded in 2011 as GBA+, where the “+” signals a shift towards more intersectional analysis.

proach to mainstreaming that privileges experts housed within the bureaucracy over community voices (Rankin & Wilcox, 2004; Paterson, 2010). Adopted in 1995, the implementation of GBA+ has been limited and uneven, as acknowledged by two reports issued in 2009 and 2015 by the Office of the Auditor General, an independent auditing office that reports directly to Parliament, and the results have been marginal at best. As a result, gender experts within the public service reported feeling devalued and under-utilized (Scala and Paterson 2018). However, the 2015 election of the Trudeau Liberals breathed new life into the role of gender experts and expertise in policy-making with the initiation of the 'Feminist Government' (FG).

While the degree to which the FG is in fact feminist, or rather, whose feminism it reflects remains a matter of debate (see Paterson & Scala, 2020), it has brought renewed focus on the role of GBA+ and, indeed, gender expertise, in policymaking. GBA+ starts from the assumption that policy impacts are shaped by different social locations and positionalities, and aims to integrate an intersectional perspective into all policies and programs, including to those areas previously shielded from scrutiny, such as security, international trade, and budgeting. To be sure, GBA+ undergirds the entire FG initiative, reflecting an extension of gender expertise across the whole of government. Scholarship has debated what exactly constitutes gender expertise, and whether or not it is necessarily feminist (e.g., Hoard, 2015; Prugl, 2012, Kunz, Prüg, & Thompson 2019); how it should be practiced (e.g., Prugl, 2016); and various forms of resistance both faced by gender experts (e.g., Lombardo & Mergaert, 2016) and used by them so as to get things done (e.g., Scala & Paterson, 2017). A significant body of work has also described the unique challenges facing gender experts, who often risk being labeled as "missionaries", and therefore too radical by government colleagues, or as "mandarins", and therefore 'sell outs' by activist peers (Miller & Razavi, 1998).

Despite these challenges, there is no doubt that gender expertise plays an important role in policymaking, as governments and international organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the OECD, increasingly rely on gender experts to produce knowledge for action and to help guide them in decision-making (e.g., Hoard, 2015). Hoard (2015) suggests that gender expertise emerged just as governments' monopoly on policy expertise was declining and as expertise itself was fragmenting, forces which opened the possibility for a variety of experts, including feminist experts, to compete for a role in policymaking. The proliferation of 'experts', however, alongside the rise of social media, where everyone's opinion matters (Cain, 2016), also raised public suspicion and mistrust in science, evidence and expertise, hallmarks of policymaking in the technocratic era (e.g., Fischer, 2009).

In the post-truth era, public suspicion of elites, 'politics-as-usual', and established institutions, such as political systems and the media, has only intensified. According to a recent survey, only forty-three percent of Canadians have trust in government and only twenty-six percent rated government officials as extremely or very credible (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2017). Trust in experts has also declined. One survey found that thirty-two percent of Canadians are skeptical of scientists while forty-four percent view scientists as elitists. The survey also found that almost a third of Canadians believe that scientists are influenced by government agendas (Haig, 2019). Within this context, as policy no longer draws its legitimacy from expertise, government's role as producer and user of gender expertise is potentially regarded with suspicion.

In the post-truth era, gender expertise occupies a particularly fraught position. On the one hand, governments around the world have adopted the language of "smart economics" and "gender-inclusive governance" in an attempt to mitigate the fragmenting effects of the current climate, resulting in an instrumentalization of gender equality and the erasure of feminist

knowledge (Caglar et al, 2013; Dobrowolsky, 2008). On the other hand, however, the association between gender expertise and feminism, a decidedly political project, enables critics to challenge and undermine the role of gender experts in policymaking, suggesting that it compromises bureaucratic neutrality, a core tenet of democratic governance (Bustelo, Ferguson, & Forest, 2016). These epistemological challenges are long standing in Canada and beyond. For example, analyses of the Canadian Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which was established in 1967 and tabled its report in 1970, demonstrate how interpretations of evidence and testimony were gendered and racialized, and how “hard” data was privileged over experiential knowledge (Freeman, 1998; Sangster, 2011).

The challenges brought by the post-truth era, then, are not new. What is new about post-truth anti-feminism is that it discredits feminist research by positioning it as expertise while simultaneously putting into question the legitimacy of that expertise, and so [...] “feminist ideas become the object of ridicule, identified variously as postmodern, fluffy, obscure, ideological, foolish or simply wrong” (Evans and Riley, 2020, 5). Post-truth resistance to feminist knowledge extends beyond epistemological concerns to also emphasize the potential harm it produces, including material harm and the suppression of liberty. In speaking of the post-truth politics that informed the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, Cain (2016, 5) notes, “The deployment of the language of victimisation by the new Right in both America and Britain (posing ‘feminazis’ and ‘left/libtards’ as intimidating bullies and enemies of ‘free speech’) fuels the widespread sentiment that political correctness is blocking the expression of home truths, [...]” This has been referred to as “post-truth anti-feminism” (Ringrose, 2018, 653), premised on “hatred, anger and resentment of feminism specifically, and women more broadly” (Wilkinson, 2016, cited in Ringrose, 2018).

In what follows, we want to consider if and how the post-truth context, particularly “post-truth anti-feminism” (Ringrose, 2018), shapes mainstream debate about gender expertise. In particular, we examine how gender expertise is represented in public and policy discourse through public debate of GBA+, and consider what that might mean for using the bureaucracy as a site of claims-making towards social justice objectives. To do this, we use post-structural policy analysis to explore how these debates were presented in print media subsequent to the emergence of the FG.

Post-Structural Policy Analysis and Representations: Thinking about Media and Policy Discourse

As bureaucratic practice, GBA+ had been largely shielded from public view since its initial adoption in 1995, after Canada became a signatory to the Beijing Convention. This changed in 2017 when the Trudeau Liberals announced that the federal budget, and all subsequent budgets, would be subject to GBA+. For the first time, GBA+ and gender expertise were scrutinized and debated in popular media in the context of a heightened visibility of feminism in public and political discourse. In the wake of the announcement, a number of media outlets across the country began reporting on GBA+, explaining to the public who does it (i.e., gender experts), what it is, what it entails, why it is used, and to what ends. What is important here is that, perhaps for the first time, the majority of Canadians were learning about GBA+ through the media.

As the scholarship on public policy and the media demonstrates, media plays a key role in not only communicating government (and governing) priorities, but also in shaping broader understandings (and acceptance) of policy practice (e.g., Lawlor, 2015; Crow & Lawlor, 2016; Murray, 2007; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008; Marston, 2004; Hajer 2011). As noted

above, this literature has emphasized media as both a resource, operating between state and society (e.g., Tolley, 2016), and a policy actor, priming and framing issues in salient ways. In this sense, media not only shapes understandings of policy issues, potentially influencing the agenda-setting process (e.g., Murray, 2007), but also play a key role in legitimizing or challenging the government of the day. In feminist policy literature, media has been conceptualized both negatively, notably with respect to the portrayal of female electoral candidates (e.g., Goodyear-Grant, 2013), and positively, in terms of its potential role in aligning feminist issues with the state (e.g., McBride & Mazur, 2012; Holli, 2008).

Perhaps more foundationally, in her work extending Walby's (2009) social complexity theory, Verloo (2018) suggests that media is one of the three main epistemic institutions, along with religion and the sciences, that are central to the production of knowledge. As such, she argues that such institutions need to be interrogated for their role in the production of gender knowledge, as well as its opposition. She writes,

When opposition to feminist politics takes the form of a political project to change society, as recently seems to be happening in Europe and the Western world (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018), it engages prominently in activities of knowledge production about gender and gender relations that fit its goal (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). To better understand opposition to gender+ equality and feminist politics, we therefore need to analyze where and how which knowledge on gender is produced, and how the truth claims of opponents to gender equality and social justice become credible or dominant. Aside from analyzing what these actors do and say, a good starting point for this is to identify the domains in which this knowledge production and transfer happens (Verloo, 2018, 22).

To be sure, at issue is not just "alternative media" that supports or thwarts post-truth advocates. As noted above, even traditional, mainstream media has played a role in disseminating post-truth claims, both directly, by covering and giving platforms to high profile proponents, and indirectly, by remaining silent on their false claims. Thus, how GBA+ and gender expertise are represented in media discussions is important not only in terms of 'what' is represented, but also 'how' those representations implicate a whole host of social relations that underlie contemporary Canadian governance, including how feminist knowledge is de/legitimized in policy contexts.

Towards this objective, in this paper, we apply post-structural policy analysis to media debates about GBA+ and gender expertise. Post-structural policy analysis focuses on *representations*, which, in simple terms, refer to the production of meaning through discourse, where discourse refers not to language, but rather to systems of knowledge (Bacchi, 2015; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).³ From this perspective, analysis is premised on examining "the deep-seated conceptual logics that underpin governmental problematizations in existing policies, problematizations which shape who we are" (Bacchi, 2015, 4-5). Emphasis here is on exposing "unexamined ways of thinking" (Rose, cited in Bacchi 2015, 7), including the underlying assumptions and presuppositions, the "contingent practices" through which the representation has gained authority and legitimacy, and their discursive, subjectification, and material effects (Bacchi, 2015, 7).

3 — Note that this definition builds on Hall's definition of representation as "the production of meaning through language" (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013, 2) to align it with Bacchi's (e.g., 2015) work on problematizations (i.e., "problem representations"), in which the focus is not language per se, but rather discourse as a field of expertise. Though it should be noted that Hall's conceptualization of language is quite broad, including verbal and non-verbal forms such as signs and images (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013, 5).

Moreover, it is important to identify where and how representations have been endorsed and by whom, as well as to uncover the silences and erasures among perspectives and subjects.

Illuminating representations then requires us to consider how such discursive positionings connect to or disrupt contemporary power relations. The representations produced in and through media are constitutive of the discursive field in which governing and governance takes place; they are part of policy discourse, shaping not only how subjects understand phenomena, including the state itself, but also how they understand and experience political subjectivity.

Data and Methods

To analyze media representations of GBA+ and gender expertise in Canada, we searched Eureka and ProQuest databases for English media reports using the terms “GBA+”, “gender-based analysis”, “gender mainstreaming” and “gender expertise” for the period from January 1, 2016 to December 31, 2019. This period spans the first four years of the Trudeau government, and reflects the time period during which the FG was most active, announcing, for example, the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), mandatory gender budgeting, pay equity legislation, and the elevation of the main women’s policy agency, Status of Women Canada, an administrative agency, to a full department subsequently named Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada. The terms GBA+ or “gender-based analysis” produced the most hits (30), and five were returned using the term “gender expertise”, for a total of 35 articles. Most of the articles were from major national dailies, such as the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, but also from regional outlets, such as the *Winnipeg Free Press* and the *Montreal Gazette*. In addition, articles from a few magazines were returned, including *Maclean’s*, *Chatelaine*, and *Policy Options*.

Our analysis focused on representations of GBA+ and gender expertise more generally, rather than those of the particular policy issues, such as parental leave, childcare, pay equity, etc., that were often addressed in the articles. To identify and unpack media representations, we applied Bacchi and Goodwin’s (2016, 20) list of sensitizing questions to the texts to explore the following: how GBA+ and gender expertise were represented in media discourse, with particular attention to what was represented as the “problem”; underlying assumptions that inform the representations; and, finally, the discursive, subjectification, and material effects, and whether or not these representations were informed by post-truth politics.

Representing GBA+ and Gender Expertise in the Post-Truth Era: Political Maneuvering or Technocratic Skill?

In applying Bacchi and Goodwin’s questions to the texts, we revealed two distinct representations of GBA+ specifically and gender expertise generally. On the one hand, GBA+ and gender expertise were represented as the politicization of the bureaucracy, where identity politics and virtue signalling undermine the neutrality of the civil service. It is here where post-truth anti-feminism arguments are most apparent, used to undermine gender expertise, though in ways that re-affirm the “old ways” of doing policy. On the other hand, GBA+ and gender expertise were represented as technocratic skills, where GBA+ is simply “good policy analysis”. While post-truth anti-feminist arguments are not immediately obvious in this representation, we suggest that it works in less direct ways, prompting an anticipatory and defensive framing of GBA+ as neutral competence. We argue both representations juxtapose GBA+ with “policy-making as normal”, invoking particular ideas about the “proper” place of the bureaucracy and bureaucrats in political life. In what follows, we discuss the results of our analysis, discussing each representation, their underlying assumptions, and the effects they produce, illuminating the subtle yet significant ways in which post-truth anti-feminist discourse informs both representations.

Representing GBA+ and Gender Expertise as Politics

Overtly ‘feminist’ positioning puts off development partners and acts as a deterrent to working with Canada on other issues, [... it’s] fairly obvious that the [Feminist International Assistance Program] is a political project supported by handpicked Canadian civil society organisations.
- Wright, December 5, 2018

As noted above, in the post-truth context, all expertise is called into question. Gender expertise, however, is conceived as particularly pernicious, causing potential harm to society through alleged limits on rights and freedoms. While our analysis of traditional media outlets, perhaps not surprisingly, revealed little overt hostility to gender expertise, as frequently witnessed in exclusively “alt-right” media, post-truth anti-feminism flavoured discussions in more subtle ways. For example, the passage above is emblematic of those media reports that represent gender expertise as overtly political. Referring to the Feminist International Assistance Program (FIAP), which resulted from the application of GBA+ to international assistance and aims to encourage women and girls’ rights and equality through aid programs, the Hill Times passage not only argues that the program is political, but also that folks outside of government – civil society organizations – hold sway over the Liberal government.

In this representation, what is problematized is not inequality, but rather initiatives that centre gender equality efforts and the expertise on which they are based. Moreover, the representation very subtly links feminist policy analysis and gender expertise to potential harms, such as, in this case, deterring partners from working with Canada. Consider, for example, an editorial appearing in the *Edmonton Sun* in response to the 2018 Budget, the first full gender budget in Canada, which claims:

Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is a buzzphrase created by the federal Status of Women department and some consultants. [...] The truly troubling aspect of the skewed priorities in the Trudeau government’s budget is that the Prime Minister and his caucus really do seem to believe this symbolic stuff is as important – or even more important – than keeping our tax rates competitive with those in the U.S., negotiating a new NAFTA, controlling the deficit and reviving Canada’s energy sector (Editorial, March 4, 2018).

In this account, GBA+, claimed to be a largely symbolic exercise, is situated in a zero-sum context, where it comes at the expense of “more important” issues. Importantly, gender expertise in this representation is not problematic because of epistemological concerns, but rather because of the harm it produces.

Representing GBA+ and gender expertise as political rests on a number of assumptions. For example, in problematizing gender expertise as political, this representation reifies the politics-administration dichotomy, invoking the concept of the “neutral bureaucrat”. To be sure, early literature on the bureaucracy was premised on this dichotomy, seeking to break the bureaucratic arm of the state from the shackles of patronage, in which elected officials govern the “messy” domain of “values”, while professional administrators “fearlessly advise and faithfully implement” on the basis of “facts” (Wilson, 1887; Weber, 1967). This ideal-type that came to dominate in the early 20th century was based on a merit-based, professional bureaucracy that was to be shielded from political pressures. Instead, bureaucrats were to be “neutral”, engaging objective, scientific analyses so as to advise their political masters.

The concerns with this ideal-type and its implications for equality are well known. Indeed, feminist public administration scholars have noted that the "neutral" bureaucracy is not neutral at all, but rather an institution that shapes and is shaped by white-capitalist-hetero-patriarchy (e.g., Stivers, 2002; Ferguson, 1983; Ashcraft, 2006). At the same time, recent shifts in managerial practice and bureaucratic form have prompted some to raise concerns about an increasingly "politicized bureaucracy", in which the public service exhibits an explicitly partisan face (e.g., Aucoin, 2012). From this perspective, politicization of the bureaucracy is cause for concern simply because it allows for governing based on ideology rather than facts and analysis.

This concern is especially apparent in an *Edmonton Journal* article that reported on the adoption of GBA+ at the municipal level,

[...] GBA+ will bog down city staff in extra cost and red tape, while at the same time endeavouring to transform what should be an *apolitical city civil service* into a *decidedly political actor*. [...] But GBA+ would essentially take the concerns of all these [progressive advocacy] groups and try to ensure the city bureaucracy is governed by them - and that's a major over-reach. It's the lobbyists taking over the government. *The role of a civil service isn't to take sides, but to be impartial* (Staples, May 30, 2018, emphasis added).

In this context, the bureaucracy is constituted as a separate and autonomous entity whose legitimacy will be questioned if it pursued GBA+ in response to a government's directive. GBA+, then, is regarded as a potential threat to bureaucratic neutrality and, by extension, democracy.

Integral to this dichotomy and to the image of the neutral bureaucrat is the distinction between "facts" and "values" and the implied claim that "science", and the technocratic interventions resulting from it, will produce just outcomes. In contrast, and invoking earlier epistemological critiques, gender expertise, in calling attention to social location in the experience of policy, is 'inherently' political, and therefore based on values, not facts. For example, in an article on the use of GBA+ in Environmental Impact Assessments, *The National Post* observed:

In a report on the legislation, the law firm Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP said the new gender provision makes "the role of an impact assessment more of a policy-setting exercise than focused on the merits of a specific project, which is likely to increase the scope of studies the proponents will need to engage in and contribute to overall project uncertainty" [...] The law firm Dentons similarly flagged the gender language as a source of uncertainty, "since it is not clear how these factors, which are *subjective and difficult to assess*, will be applied." (Hamilton, April 3, 2018, emphasis added).

Another article from the same newspaper notes:

It's obviously *not an exact science*. [...] [W]hile seeking out "disaggregated" data is a key component of the GBA+ process (Statistics Canada is even setting up a special GBA+ unit), the program is still addressing things that can be *hard to quantify*. [...] The term is so "ill-defined as to be *meaningless in a scientific context*," wrote the Fraser Institute's Kenneth Green and Ross McKittrick. And indeed, there doesn't seem to be any limit to how granular GBA+ can become" (Hopper, National Post, March 2, 2018, emphasis added).

Thus, despite the decline in public trust and in science more generally across Canada, in this representation, objective expertise is reinscribed as the norm, and deployed in ways that aim to delegitimize and silence gender experts.

In a similar vein, underlying the representation of gender expertise as political is the assumption that gender equality has already been achieved, rendering GBA+ irrelevant, at best, or harmful, at worst. For example, an article printed in the *Financial Post* asks, “With all the progress we’ve made in terms of women assuming power and influence in this society, is now really the time to start institutionalizing gender relations?” (Watson, February 28, 2018). Similarly, a number of articles connected gender expertise and GBA+ to identity politics, a common complaint among post-truth advocates, obscuring the role of persistent systemic inequality that is built into policymaking processes and institutions. A number of outlets, both national and regional, posted a Canadian Press commentary that noted, “The Liberal government is championing its values - and its spending - in a federal budget that reads like a campaign-friendly road map designed to ensure that no woman, scientist or national wildlife area gets left behind” (e.g., Smith, *Financial Post*, February 27, 2018). A regional paper reported on the reactions to the 2017 Budget, revealing, “Conservative leadership candidate Maxime Bernier reacted strongly to the idea Monday. ‘More identity politics nonsense from those who want bigger and more interventionist government pandering to every subgroup of Canadians,’ Quebec MP posted to Twitter” (Smith, *Chronicle Herald*, February 14, 2017). These claims reflect longstanding skepticism of feminist expertise and methodologies committed to social justice, which has only intensified in the post-truth environment.

This representation of GBA+ as politics produces a number of effects. Bacchi (2009, 2015) and Bacchi & Goodwin (2016) identify three types of effects: discursive, which limit what we think and say about the problem; subjectification, which produce certain kinds of political subjectivities; and lived or material effects, which speak to the ways in which policies are experienced in the everyday. With respect to discursive effects, this representation limits how we think of both the bureaucracy and GBA+, and limits the range of bureaucratic practices to those that allow quantification and intervention. Bureaucracy, in this context, is apolitical, neutral, objective, and procedurally fair. GBA+, in contrast, is political, feminist, and biased and therefore undermines administrative practice. Subjectification effects produce the ‘ideal’ neutral bureaucrat, who analyzes policies on the basis of ‘facts’, as well as the maligned ‘political’ bureaucrat, who analyzes policy on the basis of ‘values’ and who has no place in the bureaucracy. In addition, the bureaucrat in this representation is constituted as “undifferentiated”, often code for white, hetero, male, etc. Women, racialized and Indigenous people, those living with disabilities, and gender and sexually diverse people are constituted as “outside” of the bureaucracy. Finally, perhaps the most significant potential material effect produced by this representation is an overall silencing of claims for change. In (re)producing the bureaucracy as separate from politics, the representation closes off space for thinking about change both within the bureaucracy, in terms of bureaucratic representation and practice, and beyond it, in terms of who has voice and who benefits.

From this analysis, we can see that the representation of GBA+ and gender expertise as politics is subtly informed by post-truth anti-feminism. While there is little explicit vitriol, this representation delegitimizes gender expertise by emphasizing both identity politics and potential harm, while at the same time, re-inserting traditional (read: androcentric) policy knowledge as the norm.

Representing GBA+ and Gender Expertise as Technical Knowledge

The federal government says GBA+ is not advocacy for women. Instead, it is “an analytical process to help government ask questions, challenge assumptions and identify potential impacts, taking into account the diversity of Canadians.”
- Caufield, Journal of Commerce, February 12, 2019

In the previous section, we identified the subtle ways in which post-truth anti-feminist discourse shaped media representations of GBA+ and gender expertise as political, emphasizing the harms they produce for policymaking and democratic governance. Our analysis revealed another representation, which constitutes GBA+ and gender expertise as technical knowledge. This representation, we argue, is in many ways a pre-emptive, though not necessarily conscious, response to post-truth politics generally, and post-truth anti-feminism specifically. We suggest that in invoking a technocratic discourse to constitute and defend GBA+ and gender expertise, proponents of this representation aim to stave off claims that they are political. Indeed, in the above passage, it is clearly stated that GBA+ is “not advocacy”, and is rather an analytical process that helps government decision-making.

What is problematized through this representation is policy capacity, or lack thereof, including lack of data and implementation issues, which limit policy outcomes. For example, a 2017 *Globe and Mail* report on the gender dimensions of peace, conflict and security observes, “There is also a need for greater awareness of the gender-specific impacts of conflict, in order to devise appropriate interventions” (Guehenno, November 13, 2017). In addition, *Global News* reported on their website that “Conservatives and Liberals alike have called GBA-plus a useful way to think about what they’re doing and make sure nobody is accidentally left out of government plans” (Canadian Press, February 2, 2019). From this perspective, GBA+ is simply an exercise aimed at improving policy outcomes (see also Bacchi & Eveline, 2003 and Paterson & Scala, 2020). This problematization simultaneously directs attention away from GBA+ itself towards the bureaucratic context in which it is implemented, as discussed below. This further enables the depoliticization of GBA+ and gender expertise.

Indeed, in contrast to resulting in potential harm, GBA+/gender expertise are constituted through this representation as a process/skill set that “benefits everyone”, appealing to the post-truth language of ‘common sense’. For example, a number of articles emphasized the potential economic benefits that result from GBA+ and gender expertise, thereby linking feminist knowledge with neoliberal priorities. An article on the 2017 Budget in *Maclean’s* noted, “These measures don’t just benefit women, but they benefit women the most and, crucially, start to close a range of inequalities among all Canadians. And—bonus points—all these measures would improve purchasing power and opportunities, generating new growth” (Yalnizyan, March 8, 2017). Writing for the *Huffington Post*, Unifor National President Jerry Dias noted,

Raising the rest of Canada to Quebec's level could add \$13 billion to Canada's GDP by helping more women join the workforce and contributing dollars and cents to the economy, the report [from the Advisory Council on Economic Growth] says. For the sake of all Canadians, that can only be a good thing. (Dias, March 16, 2017).

Similarly, a Canadian NewsWire article covering the GBA+ Forum, hosted by the Status of Women in November 2018, quoted a government press release explaining the role of GBA+:

Advancing gender equality is essential to the Government's plan to grow the middle class, help the people working hard to join it, and strengthen Canada's economy. That is why the Government of Canada is working to ensure that its policies, programs, legislation and decision-making *benefit everyone by using Gender-based Analysis Plus* (GBA+). (Canada NewWire, November 21, 2018, emphasis added).

Underlying this representation of GBA+ and gender expertise are a number of assumptions relating to bureaucratic practice and its role in social and political life. Similar to the previous representation, underlying this representation is the assumption of the politics-administration dichotomy. However, unlike the previous representation, in this case, gender knowledge is depoliticized, and inequality is removed from its socio-political context and rendered mere “fact” that can be measured, benchmarked, monitored, and addressed through “better” policy processes. As such, gender expertise can be neatly folded into bureaucratic neutrality (see also Paterson & Scala, 2017). We see this clearly in this OpEd appearing in the *Globe and Mail* in response to the 2018 Budget:

Budget 2018 sets benchmarks and invests in data gathering, creating metrics to track improvement or slippage across categories such as leadership, violence and poverty reduction. It sets a starting point for diagnosing and addressing inequalities, and –crucially – proposes legislative steps to ensure that future federal budgets also undergo GBA+ analysis. (Bezanson, March 14, 2018).

GBA+ is simply a “tool” for uncovering unintended potential “disparate impacts”. This representation of GBA+ and gender expertise is premised on the privileging of substantive rather than formal equality, where it is assumed that equal treatment does not necessarily result in equal outcomes.

The representation of GBA+ and gender expertise as technical knowledge is further premised on the assumption that GBA+ as it currently exists is an adequate approach with which to address inequality. To be sure, any problems with GBA+ are not the result of the tool itself, but rather with the lack of good data or implementation issues. Consider, for example, a *Toronto Star* article that notes, “[...] 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” (Ballingall, December 28, 2017). Similarly, the *Globe and Mail* writes of GBA+:

A more ill-conceived approach to correcting gender discrimination is hard to imagine. No analysis, no monitoring, no evaluation, no enforcement and no consequences: No surprise, really, that gender inequity will continue under the federal government's gender-based analysis implementation plan. Even worse than taking no action is to claim to be correcting gender discrimination, but doing nothing of the kind. (Gulason, March 9, 2017).

More recently, the *Thunder Bay Chronicle* (Wright, Feb 4, 2019) cited a recent internal survey that revealed that “fewer than half of departments and agencies have a G-B-A-plus plan [sic], with most departments saying they lack the internal mechanisms to apply one.”

In this representation, gender expertise and GBA+ are constituted as apolitical, technical knowledge that aims to create “better” policy. What is problematized is policy capacity, including lack of data and implementation problems, that impede policy outcomes. In response to post-truth anti-feminism, this representation of GBA+ and gender expertise attempts to thwart claims that such expertise is political and a threat to bureaucratic neutrality. Indeed, in this representation, gender expertise *is* neutral.

This representation produces a number of discursive, subjectification, and material effects, many of which are strikingly similar to the representation of GBA+ and gender expertise as politics. Regarding discursive effects, as briefly discussed above, the representation of GBA+ as technocracy constitutes the bureaucracy, GBA+, and gender expertise as separate and shielded from politics, thereby obscuring the feminist knowledges that inform gender expertise and delinking them from political projects that aim for social justice. It thus closes off space for rethinking the bureaucracy as a site of social politics, and for rethinking GBA+ in more transformative ways. Similarly, in anchoring gender expertise within the bureaucracy, and by subjecting social relations to technocratic analysis, the representation strips social relations of their broader context and obscures the feminist dimensions of gender expertise. Thus, emphasis is on measurable outcomes rather than challenging marginalization and oppression. At the same time, however, in contrast to the previous representation, where politics and administration were perceived to be too close, here GBA+'s lacklustre performance is not just a bureaucracy problem; it is also the result of the arm's length relationship between the government and bureaucracy. Lack of political leadership and commitment to GBA+ are regarded as the key reasons for how and to what extent GBA+ was taken up by the administrative arm of government.

Subjectification effects similarly construct the bureaucrat as neutral, though one whom is concerned with substantive rather than procedural fairness, thus limiting the scope of practices available for social change. In addition, the gender expert, though likely female, is an "undifferentiated" individual who produces knowledge aimed at improving current systems and processes (e.g. government; the economy, etc) rather than improving women's lives and experiences. Finally, this representation of GBA+ and gender expertise produces material effects that potentially silence claims for change. In separating the bureaucracy from politics, and in limiting GBA+ and gender expertise to technical knowledge, the potential for transformative policy is limited (see Rankin & Wilcox, 2004). Together, these effects deflect attention away from claims that GBA+ is political and, by extension, harmful.

From this analysis, we can see that the representation of GBA+ and gender expertise as technocratic knowledge is in many ways a response to post-truth anti-feminism, though not necessarily a conscious one (e.g., Bacchi, 2009). In reifying the separation of politics and administration, and in asserting technical expertise in the realm of gender equality, this representation inadvertently distinguishes between feminist (i.e., political/advocacy) and gender (i.e., neutral/technical) knowledge, and distances (and erases) the former from the latter. In so doing, while it aims to silence post-truth anti-feminism, it might also silence feminist claims. As Verloo (2018, 28) aptly notes, "In these times, any technocratic positioning of gender equality is a trap."

Conclusion: Mediating GBA+ and Gender Expertise in a Post-Truth Context

In a post-truth context, gender expertise is particularly fraught. As demand for gender expertise has increased, post-truth anti-feminism (Ringrose, 2018) challenges its very existence, questioning claims of inequality and rejecting feminist knowledge as legitimate. Although, as noted above, knowledge production and transfer have always been shaped by the politics of position, serving to delegitimize feminist knowledge, post-truth politics moves beyond these earlier epistemological challenges to include material disadvantage and harm. Notably, post-truth politics positions men as victims of feminism, which is dismissed as identity politics or political correctness. The analysis above reveals that even more traditional media outlets are not immune to post-truth discourse.

Media discourse produced two distinct representations of GBA+ and gender expertise, both of which were subtly shaped by post-truth anti-feminist discourse. In one case, GBA+ was represented as politicization, which compromised the neutrality of the bureaucracy. Here, gender expertise was constituted as potentially harmful as it undermined a professional public service. In the other case, GBA+ was represented as an essential part of bureaucratic practice. Gender expertise was constituted in ways that stave off post-truth anti-feminist claims that identify potential harm. Instead, GBA+ was constituted as simply “good policy analysis” that “benefits everyone”.

Despite these differences, the analysis revealed that neither of these representations, politics or technocratic knowledge, challenge the configuration of the state or its role in contemporary governance. Both are premised on a classic understanding of policymaking in which elected officials mandate policy directions and expert bureaucrats design and deliver policy. In effect, they both potentially silence claims for change that fall outside bureaucratic operations, shielding seemingly “political” questions, such as access to power, social stratification, redistribution of resources, etc., from bureaucratic scrutiny. In so doing, they limit the potential of GBA+ to transform social relations.

This finding reveals that even among critics of post-truth discourse, that is, mainstream media, post-truth anti-feminism has at least some appeal in resisting gender expertise within policymaking. While critics invoked a referent that reasserts the authority of the state and traditional bureaucratic expertise based on formal equality, they often did so by referencing ‘identity politics’ or ‘political correctness’ and questioning demands for social change in ways that subtly undermined gender expertise. Thus, resistance to gender expertise reflects not only the persistent undermining of feminist knowledge, but also the ways in which post-truth discourse, at least partially, flavours contemporary debate. This likely prompts the privileging of some forms of feminism over others (e.g., Halley et al, 2006; Halley et al, 2018, 2019; Paterson & Scala, 2020), on the one hand, or an outright erasure of feminist knowledge within the context of gender politics, on the other (e.g., Davids & van Eerdewijk, 2016), as we witnessed with the second representation of GBA+ and gender expertise.

In conclusion, our analysis of GBA+ and gender expertise shows not only how the practice is represented in public debate, but also how the roles of government and the bureaucracy in advancing gender equality are understood in the Canadian post-truth context. On a broader level, it also raises questions about how governments and bureaucracies should work together with epistemic communities in pursuit of gender equality goals, especially at a time when the legitimacy of all three institutions are being challenged. We argue that although the value of gender expertise in policy-making has always been questioned, its emancipatory potential remains at risk in a post-truth framework.

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