

A Feminist Approach to Canada's International Assistance

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A written submission to the International Assistance Review by Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, Oxfam Canada, Inter Pares and ??

Executive Summary

On July 5th, 2016, the Women's Rights Policy Group¹ brought together 50 civil society and government representatives for a full-day dialogue. Its goals were to develop a common understanding of feminist approaches to international assistance, to assess the challenges, gaps and opportunities in Global Affairs Canada's approach, and to develop a set of practical recommendations for implementing a feminist approach. The recommendations presented in this brief are informed by that dialogue, and by the authors' longstanding experiences with feminist policy and programming.

Key recommendations include:

1. Begin all international assistance decision making with the fundamental question: how does this initiative address power and structural barriers to gender equality?
2. Ensure that 20 percent of all aid investments have as their principal focus advancing women's rights, women's empowerment and gender equality. As part of this, dedicate \$100 million annually towards an explicit fund for long-term predictable support for feminist and women's rights organizations and movements.
3. Create a standalone thematic pillar that would operationalize feminist principles through targeted women's rights and gender equality programming.
4. Mainstream gender equality objectives throughout all policy and programs, with a commitment to ensure that all international development programming has at least one well-resourced intermediate level outcome that specifically addresses structural gender inequalities.
5. Develop mechanisms to ensure the application of a feminist approach is a necessary criterion for all international assistance.

¹ A working group of about forty Canadian NGOs (and some individuals) who work internationally on women's rights issues

Context and Rationale

Led by a feminist Prime Minister, and with a new commitment to a feminist approach to international assistance, Canada has an opportunity to become a global leader on women's rights and gender equality. This is a game changer.

A feminist approach is fundamentally new; it is not simply about improving upon what has been done. It's about being bold in our ambition to move the needle forward. It's about rethinking how we work and who we work with. It's about walking the talk and ensuring that our financial commitments match our level of ambition.

This will not be easy. Inequality is entrenched globally, and patriarchal systems and attitudes are the norm. A cultural shift towards equality will require significant resources and time. The approach will have its critics, but a feminist approach has the power to truly transform societies.

Integrity and coherence are fundamental to feminist work. It is therefore difficult to look at a feminist approach to international assistance in isolation from a whole-of-government approach. Canada should ultimately adopt a feminist foreign policy that underpins its efforts and activities in international assistance, foreign relations, development and trade. For the purposes of this review process, this submission will focus on international assistance.

The timing could not be better. Women's rights work is sorely underfunded worldwide – with Canada itself a below-average donor in recent years – and political backlash continues to prevent the advancement of women's rights in global policy-making. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development hinges on women's empowerment as a pre-condition for ending poverty and inequality. By embracing a feminist approach, Canada can take this one step further – tackling unequal gendered power relations as a core strategy to bring about transformational change. With decisive action and investment, Canada can become a frontrunner in pioneering a feminist approach to development, joining only a small handful of other countries who have pledged to take this on.

Feminist Principles

Canada's feminist approach must seek to address the root causes of structural and systemic inequalities and transform systems of power, many of which are grounded in social constructions of gender and patriarchal attempts to control women's bodies and choices. Central to the implementation of a feminist approach are: intersectionality, agency and process.

Intersectionality is a framework that recognizes the multiple aspects of identity that play out in our lives and experiences, such as class or race, and that compound and exacerbate oppression and marginalization. It also challenges us to expand our understanding of gender beyond binaries (woman/man, femininity/masculinity). Adopting an intersectional approach allows us to identify and address complex contexts, and formulate strategies to best meet the needs of those intended to benefit from initiatives.

Agency is an individual or group's ability to make choices, and to transform those choices into desired outcomes. Feminist agency includes principles of autonomy, choice, empowerment and meaningful engagement. Agency allows us to recognize that individuals are experts and knowledge holders in their own right.

A feminist lens is not just about results, but **process**. Fundamental to feminist process are integrity, contextualization, learning, collaboration, participation, inclusivity and responsiveness.

In practice, a feminist lens must go hand in hand with a human rights-based approach to international assistance, as both frameworks position rights-holders (and their needs) at the center. This also means shifting from a 'supply' driven approach which prioritizes service delivery, to a 'demand' driven

approach that positions individuals' needs and realities at the center of all initiatives. Ultimately, a feminist approach must challenge systemic inequality, unjust power systems, discriminatory laws, policies and programmes – at local, national, regional and global levels.

For an illustrative example of feminist programming please see Annex 1 on page 7.

A Standalone Pillar on Women's Rights and Gender Equality

A focus on the “health and rights of women and children”, as currently articulated in the International Assistance Review discussion paper, is too broad to allow either “rights” or “health” the prominence they deserve. Conflating these two themes also preserves an outmoded social welfare approach to women's rights that is counter to a feminist approach.

Experts worldwide agree that the most effective way to achieve gender equality is through a twin-track approach, combining dedicated resources with a robust system for mainstreaming across all sectors. Mainstreaming efforts are also far more likely to succeed if complemented by the leadership, resources, commitment and expertise that a standalone pillar brings. Feminist international assistance must include an explicit commitment to resourcing women's rights and gender equality. This approach is most likely to foster the political commitment, necessary internal buy-in, accountability, and resources to create sustainable and effective action.

Throughout the negotiation of the post-2015 agenda, women's rights organizations clearly articulated that a standalone pillar should focus on the structural determinants of gender-based inequality that impede women's empowerment, agency, and the full realization of their rights. Canada can demonstrate leadership by addressing global thematic and funding gaps for women's rights and gender equality, and ensuring that this pillar focuses on the structural drivers of inequality. Areas of focus of this pillar should include:

- Creating the systems and environment which promote women's agency in public and private spheres;
- Addressing the pandemic of violence against women by looking holistically at gender discrimination in all its forms, including social norms, laws, policies and institutions;
- Supporting advocacy, internationally and here in Canada, to hold governments accountable and to benefit from the expertise of civil society;
- Investing in expanding women and girls' capabilities, resources, and opportunities; and
- Building national capacities to advance women's rights through gender-responsive public services and budgeting support to local civil society (especially women's organizations) and increased capacity to collect sex-disaggregated data.

A standalone pillar for women's rights and gender equality must be as well-resourced as other priority pillars in order to translate commitment into action. Options for funding mechanisms within this pillar are further explored in the Feminist Funding section.

Feminist Mainstreaming

GAC's Gender Equality Action Plan Reports for 2010-2014 stressed the need for both targeted interventions (standalone pillar) as well as mainstreaming. However, the department's approach to gender equality integration has had mediocre results at best.²

Feminist mainstreaming is an important strategy to increase targeted programming for transformative change, and to address root causes of gender inequality through an intersectional power analysis. Measures to ensure the success of mainstreaming include:

² Evaluation of CIDA's Implementation of its Policy on Gender Equality, Executive Report. April 2, 2008.
<http://www.oecd.org/derec/canada/42174775.pdf>

- Ensuring that all international development programming has at least one well-resourced intermediate level outcome that specifically addresses structural gender inequalities;
- Focusing on the transformational aspect of mainstreaming rather than simply the integration of basic gender equality indicators such as percentages of female participants;
- Developing and empowering complex gender equality expertise in all thematic areas at GAC and creating space for dialogue and learning with civil society and partners; and
- Learning from past experiences through research and programming. One mechanism to achieve this is through unsolicited proposals, which enable partners and beneficiaries to build programs based on experience. Another mechanism is core (institutional) funding.

Feminist Implementation

Equally important as Canada's new policy framework for international assistance is the manner in which it is implemented. As outlined above, process is critical to a feminist approach. A feminist lens calls for an investment in leadership and learning within GAC and beyond, and calls for a new approach to monitoring and measuring results.

- **Invest in leadership**

Structural changes are slow and require champions on all levels. Leadership within GAC is required at the highest levels to ensure that a feminist approach to international assistance is fully understood, owned and integrated. This will require capacity building, mentoring and rewarding feminist leadership and empowering feminists within GAC.

- **Facilitate learning**

While feminism is not new, it is often misunderstood. There is a need to invest in building capacity and raising awareness amongst the Canadian public, GAC staff, and GAC partners (Canadian NGOs, recipient countries and multilateral platforms.) A feminist approach opens the door to a more serious consideration of how to operationalize the “universality” of the 2030 Agenda through areas in which Canada can teach (for example, a strong legal framework that promotes gender equality) and areas in which we can learn (for example, Indigenous women's rights.) Feminist work requires prioritizing knowledge-building, opportunities to learn from experience, and mutual learning through exchanges and collaboration.

- **Create feminist systems for monitoring and measuring results**

Both results and value for money can be interpreted in narrow terms, in ways that do not capture the complexity of development or appreciate the challenging and fragile situations in which aid is and should be delivered. A feminist approach to monitoring and measuring results involves innovative mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the implementation of feminist policies, organizational capacity, and commitment. As a first step, GAC should update and revise the 1999 CIDA Gender Policy to reflect the government's feminist approach. Based on this, GAC must develop and publish a Feminist Action Plan with annual published reporting.

For further detailed recommendations in all three of these areas, please see Annex 2 on Page 8.

Feminist Funding: Innovation

Currently, women's organizations receive very little support from governments and donors. It is estimated that autonomous women's organizations and institutions that work to advance gender equality receive less than 1.5% of all Official Development Assistance.³ Unfortunately, “investing in women and girls” has not translated into meaningful and sustainable new funding for women's rights organizations themselves, let alone feminist initiatives. Moreover, existing funding mechanisms remain inherently un-feminist, in that they carry onerous administrative and reporting burdens,

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neglect advocacy and the need for core funding, and encourage short-term, thematically narrow projects.

- **Make a bold funding commitment to support women’s rights and feminist organizations and movements**

Evidence confirms that these organizations and movements are fundamental in catalyzing change towards gender equality.⁴ A core component of a standalone pillar must be a mechanism to fill the funding gap for women’s rights organizations and feminist movements. Specifically, Canada should establish a \$100 million (annual) funding mechanism dedicated to supporting feminist and women’s rights organizations and movements. This fund could be a bold financing instrument to support work on a variety of structural issues, to build an enabling environment where women and girls can realize their full potential and enjoy the whole spectrum of human rights. This fund should have predictable mechanisms for funding long-term responsive programs which support women to define their own agendas, increase their capacity to work on issues that they themselves have prioritized, strengthen their organizations, and build movements for social change. Core, flexible, and multi-year funding should be a priority.

- **Become a global frontrunner on funding for women’s rights and gender equality**

To show real leadership, Canada should move from the middle of the pack of OECD countries in terms of funding for women’s rights and gender equality (2% in 2014)⁵ to placing itself among the frontrunners. A bold commitment to funding for women’s rights and gender equality, with a clear timeline for achieving funding targets is necessary to reinforce Canada’s stated commitment to a feminist approach. Canada must ensure that 20 percent of all aid investments have as their principal focus advancing women’s rights, women’s empowerment and gender equality.

- **Improve existing funding systems to foster a strong feminist civil society in Canada**

Funding for feminist programming from GAC used to be easier than it is now. This backsliding must be reversed. There are a number of key simple changes which can be made to remove barriers for partners with the capacity to conduct feminist initiatives. Many of these are related to the new ‘Authorized Programming Process’ and the Calls for Proposals approach. These prioritize GAC-defined programming over programming designed and led by local communities, which respond to local contexts at the appropriate moments. By closing down all communication prior to project approval, this process also eliminates any opportunity for collaboration or mutual learning between GAC and partners. The combination of limited-scope calls for proposals, the limited scope of Partnership Branch programming and increased cost-share requirements lead to a difficult dynamic for feminist programming and prudent financial management. This system only works for very large partners or those with a “family” of offices where programming is shared between multiple bases. Creating long-term, predictable and responsive funding mechanisms would ultimately facilitate the fostering of a strong feminist civil society in Canada.

Political Opportunities

To position itself as a leader on bringing a feminist approach to all international assistance, Canada must actively set the tone during global moments and within multilateral fora. Examples include:

- **Global Fund Replenishment Conference, September 2016**

As the host country, Canada should ensure that the inequality and discrimination that puts women and girls at increased risk for infectious diseases is front and center at the conference. For example, it

⁴ A global study conducted over four decades across 70 countries revealed that the mobilization of feminist movements is the most important factor in making progress towards ending violence against women at the national level. Reference: Htun, Mala and Lauren Weldon (2012). “The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975–2005.” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 3 August 2012

⁵Canadian Statistical Reports on International Assistance, as compiled by CCIC

could push for greater focus on sexual and reproductive health and rights, from a rights-based perspective, and encourage other donor governments to do the same.

- **UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants, September 2016**

Canada should consult women's rights organizations ahead of the Summit to make sure their priorities make it onto the formal agenda, and insist that the specific obstacles faced by refugee women and girls – including sexual violence, access to sexual and reproductive health services, and forced marriage – are at the heart of those discussions. Canada can showcase a gender in emergencies approach, and announce a commitment to funding women's rights organizations in fragile states and in conflict and humanitarian settings. Canada can also promote robust action by other UN Member States, and strengthen the capacity of partner governments to address gender equality and gender-based violence in natural disaster risk reduction, resilience, preparedness and response strategies and programs.

- **World Economic Forum in Davos, January 2017**

Canada can build on the momentum Prime Minister Trudeau created last year when he championed feminism as a means to improve decision-making in politics and business, by organizing a follow up high-level panel on this topic. This panel could focus on issues such as: the importance of having more feminist leaders in politics and business (not just more women leaders), and the structural barriers to women's leadership such as their disproportionate burden of unpaid care and the profound impact of violence against women.

- **UN Commission for the Status of Women**

Canada must use its seat on the commission to be a strong voice for advancing the rights of women and girls and to champion progressive language on contentious issues such as women, peace and security, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Canada should commit to, and advocate for, guaranteeing sufficient resources and mandates for institutions guiding and overseeing 2030 Agenda implementation.

- **G7 Summit in Canada, 2018**

Just as Canada carved out a leadership role on maternal, newborn and child health at the 2010 G8 in Muskoka, Canada could make a big splash when it hosts the G7 in 2018 – for example, by announcing a big leap forward in terms of Canada's feminist commitment to funding women's rights.

Annex 1: A Comparison of Approaches, Traditional vs Feminist

This is not an exhaustive list of the multitude of steps involved in programming; it is intended as a simple illustrative example.

	Traditional Approach to International Development: Family Planning	Feminist Approach to International Development: Family Planning
Program Concept Development	<p>GAC identifies country/ies and sector and issues a call for proposal, defining the parameters for the timeframe, budget, ultimate outcome and a selection of intermediate outcomes to be used in a program. Questions regarding the submission process are permitted through a public portal by a specified deadline. A deadline for applications is set for within three months. Final approval may be anywhere from six to eighteen months</p>	<p>Local people identify problems with access to family planning. Together with local civil society and a Canadian NGO, they discuss the root causes of the problems and potential solutions. The NGO meets with GAC to assess interest expertise and the extent to which the initiative will address power and structural barriers to gender equality. The NGO secures some small seed funding from GAC to explore the idea. Together the local groups and the NGO develop an idea and then a concept note. The Canadian NGO meets with staff at GAC to discuss the note and ideas for a proposal. The NGO develops a proposal based on all of these discussions and submits it to GAC. The proposal is adjusted a little with GAC input and then approved within three months.</p>
Program Content	<p>A Canadian NGO creates systems for distributing condoms and Depo-Provera to marginalized communities and for mandatory family planning education for all hospital staff.</p>	<p>A Canadian NGO works with local civil society to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct an assessment of barriers to access distribution of contraceptive options and safe abortion care • Monthly adolescent and women’s exchanges in local languages • Support strengthening of sex education curriculum with local school authorities • Develop advocacy campaigns to increase awareness of health rights (including contraception and abortion) and to repeal restrictive laws that are barriers to women’s agency (i.e. criminalization, parental or spousal consent laws) • Develop feminist counselling curriculum for the ministry of public health HR department • Facilitate exchanges with regional and Canadian organizations working on sexual and reproductive health and rights • Enhance local distribution systems for contraception options, with effective referral pathways for safe abortion services

Monitoring and Evaluation

In the project’s final year, GAC hires a Canadian evaluator to travel to the area for the first time and evaluate the program. The Canadian NGO provides translation and logistical support. The evaluation report is coordinated with GAC. Once completed the Canadian NGO can issue an official response.

After the first year of programming, GAC and the NGO discuss mechanisms for evaluating which will improve programming. Local civil society identifies areas which might benefit from reflection and external expertise. Together the local organizations, the NGO and GAC embark upon a mutual learning evaluation facilitated by an evaluator with expertise in the local context.

Reporting

The Canadian NGO completes the reporting as laid out in the standardized reporting requirements for all GAC contracts.

Reporting timing is agreed upon so that it works for all three partners (GAC, NGO and local). The local groups report to the Canadian NGO on a regular basis with the same report that they send to all of their donors. The NGO collates information and documents the story of change in a clear and compelling manner to share with GAC and the Canadian public.

Annex 2: Additional Detailed Implementation Recommendations

Invest in Leadership

- Establish a Special Ambassador within GAC tasked with championing a feminist approach to IA;
- Establish an appropriately resourced advisory council (consisting of Canadian and global feminist activists from within and outside of government) that meets regularly to offer guidance, track progress, and evaluate success;
- Reform human resource practices at GAC to prioritize the hiring of new staff with demonstrated experience employing feminist principles;
- Identify key positions within GAC that require strong feminist perspectives and ensure that individuals in those positions possess the skills required to implement a feminist approach; and
- Establish a recognition programme for GAC staff who exemplifies feminist principles and the advancement of gender equality in programming and policy-making.

Facilitate Learning

- Allocate resources for feminist learning and culture change for GAC staff, partners, missions, and the Canadian public;
- Support public engagement and education within Canada and internationally on the meaning of feminism to demystify the concept and challenge negative connotations which create barriers to implementation;
- Invest in mentoring all GAC staff towards greater support for feminist approach to IA;
- Create a bank of success stories of driving transformational change through feminist approaches;
- Facilitate learning and information exchange opportunities for GAC staff with feminists in the Global South and experts in feminist international assistance, including with like-minded countries;
- Build the capacities of partners to better collect and track feminist indicators;
- Support strengthening of national-level statistics, specifically sex and age disaggregated data, time use data, instances of gender-based violence, endowment of assets and skills, etc.;
- Utilize heads of mission and focal points outside of Ottawa to deploy feminist principles;
- Increase capacity of new and existing feminist and gender equality specialists with policy and programmatic experience across range of sectors throughout the department;
- Conduct a gaps analysis on GAC’s current capacity to implement a feminist approach to IA;

- Remove obstacles which prevent advocacy-related work in Canada and globally (including CRA's categorization of charitable organizations); and
- Strengthen mechanisms for the integration of feminist principles and gender equality initiatives in humanitarian programming.

Monitoring and Measuring Results

- Develop a bank of feminist indicators, participatory tools and definition sheets to monitor and evaluate change at individual, organizational and movement levels;
- Integrate gender equality marker into Memo to Minister template;
- Foster an environment that celebrates the use of qualitative data in internal and external GAC evaluations;
- Recognize the complexities associated with measuring qualitative change, and establish systems that value qualitative results, methodologies and process;
- Increase capacity of NGOs to monitor qualitative indicators;
- Establish a range of indicators that speak to diverse contexts, including interim indicators for long-term gender-based development;
- Review approach to monitoring and evaluation as a whole from a feminist perspective;
- Empower local actors to be meaningfully engaged in monitoring and evaluation;
- Demonstrate flexibility in how impact is measured and reported;
- Integrate a gender audit into evaluations;
- Explore reporting requirements which facilitate telling the story and embracing complexity;
- Apply a holistic approach to program development and implementation as a continuum (design, planning, implementation, follow-up and evaluation);
- Improve the GAC-OECD conversion methodology for gender equality markers in order to ensure accurate reporting; and
- Make monitoring and evaluation a learning partnership, not a performance test.