

WOMEN, CANADA AND THE WORLD: IS CANADA FAILING?

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A couple of years ago the Economist came out with the bold proclamation to “forget China, India and the internet: economic growth is driven by women”. Without a doubt, women’s leadership is on the rise, with world leaders and opinion-makers finally recognizing the pivotal role women have in successful development, peace-building, and environmental sustainability.

There is growing evidence that neglecting women’s potential contribution to international development undermines the success of all development efforts – and conversely, as the recent IFAD evaluation found, that successful programming and attention to gender equality go hand in hand. World Bank research has shown that educating women improves household health and education levels. Recent FAO findings also indicate that overall, women farmers produce between 20 and 30% less than men farmers – not because they are less capable, but because they have less access to land, inputs, technology and credit. And we’ve all seen on our TV screens the brave women activists in the streets of Cairo and Tunis. This is one important rationale for making sure gender dimensions are considered in any development effort.

The second reason for including women in development programming is that women’s rights to equality are enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, to which Canada is a signatory, as well as in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We are therefore obligated to ensure, at the very least, that we do no harm to women in our international development work.

Canada used to be a leader in the effort build gender equality. We were one of the first countries to adopt a policy to ensure women were not left out of our development efforts. We adopted a three-pronged strategy:

The first element of the strategy was to ensure that gender issues were adequately taken into account in all of CIDA’s programs and projects. This was bolstered by agency-wide investment in training – spearheaded by the President and Vice Presidents – to equip CIDA staff with the tools to examine how to address gender issues. Building gender equality is not a simple process: it is not a question of ‘add women and stir’. For example, to get more girls – as well as boys - in school requires making sure the family has the income to provide books and uniforms. It means making sure the girls can travel to and from school safely without harassment; it means making sure the government invests in schools, and that the curriculum addresses the needs and perspectives of girls as well as boys. It means persuading parents that schooling for daughters is a good idea. And education for girls has proven to be one of the easiest MDG targets to meet. But just because it is complex does not mean that progress is impossible. Women have made major gains in recent decades, from Ruanda to Guatemala, from rural India to Morocco.

The second element of CIDA's strategy was to provide funding targeted to women – for their economic advancement, to provide educational opportunities, to enable them to organize around issues of violence and discrimination. To do this, CIDA established dedicated gender funds in many countries, which were positively rated by its gender evaluation in 2008.

The third element of the strategy was to support Canadian diplomats and aid officials to raise gender equality concerns in international fora – from the Executive Board of the UNDP to the World Bank; from international conferences like the human rights conference in Vienna in 1993 and the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994.

Canada has been much admired as a leader internationally for its work in building gender equality in its international cooperation. Our funding has translated into gains on the ground – for women fighting honour killings and violence against women in South Asia, for women getting the income from their production of milk or chickens in Africa, and for women having access to family planning during the era when the U.S. refused to fund such services.

The bad news, however, is that our practice is going backwards and we are less and less viewed as a contributor, much less a leader in this important area. Funding for gender equality has slipped, and there has been a steady marginalization of women's rights in our international aid program. In 2000 under the Liberals CIDA's funding for gender equality- specific programming was a measly 1.85% of its spending. By 2006 this fell to only 1.01 percent. CIDA's own evaluation in fact highlighted its shortcomings in implementing the gender equality policy this past decade. The poor results came down to three key factors: lack of political will, inadequate resources and most certainly lack of accountability.

But recently, CIDA has discontinued two gender funds in Pakistan and Kenya: funding explicitly dedicated to gender equality in two countries where women's rights violations and violence against women are profound and systemic.

CIDA staff tell organizations applying for funds to do development work are told that if they use words like 'women's rights' or 'gender equality' in their proposal, it will not be funded. Canadian organizations like MATCH International, which work explicitly to support women have been cut.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade has eliminated of the entire division focused on women's rights and gender equality: a unit of 4 staff with a small budget. Where we used to lead on women, peace and security Canada has never released our own national action plan. On gender and trade issues Canada used to stand way out amongst decision makers in our visible efforts to ensure women were benefiting from globalization. This work has fallen silent. At the UN Canada's negotiators used to proactively propose new language in relation to women's human rights but no more.

What has been happening is policy change by stealth. What is on government websites and in government documents has not changed. There has been no public consultation or

parliamentary debate about why that policy is inadequate or needs to be changed. But decisions made by the current government and its Ministers reflect a new policy direction that has not been debated in public, and for which the Ministers are not accountable. It is a direction that builds on ideology, not evidence, and that tries to reduce complex issues to simple, countable 'results' in an unrealistically short time frame.

Foreign diplomats and officials dealing with international organizations say that CIDA no longer speaks out on important issues like the need to include women's perspectives in rebuilding fragile states: they ask what has happened to Canada.

Governments, of course, have the right and the responsibility to formulate policy. What is distressing about what is happening to Canada's position on women's rights and gender equality is two-fold. First, the secretive, and opaque way that policy decisions are being made ill befits a democracy. It exemplifies a breathtaking lack of accountability. It seems that these decisions are being made with a view to potential partisan gain rather than to building on development evidence. This is in contradiction to the claims made by the President of CIDA, Margaret Biggs, in a letter to the Globe and Mail on February 15th, that "we learn more as time passes. We know more now about effective aid than we did 50 years ago." This is true, but unfortunately current CIDA policy is going back to "Father Knows Best", to the detriment of both Canada's reputation and the world's women. Canadians who care about this need to exercise both their voice and their vote.

In a few weeks, on March 8th will be the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. To celebrate, we can urge CIDA to restore the dedicated gender equality funds. We can urge CIDA to spend more than 1% of its budget on gender-specific programming. We can support CIDA's increased investment in UN Women. And we can urge Canadian diplomats and officials to renew their advocacy for gender equality wherever Canada has a place at the table.