

# WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY IN CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION: PRINCIPAL INSIGHTS AND STRATEGIES FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

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The conference entitled “Women’s Rights and Gender Equality in Canadian Cooperation: Challenges and Perspectives” was the culmination of a broader research and mobilization project, carried out with the support of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation<sup>37</sup>. In this essay, I present a number of important observations, recommendations, and strategies for collective action deriving from my research in Canada and Mali and from the discussions held during the two days of the conference<sup>38</sup>.

The ideas, recommendations, and strategies presented here are divided into four categories as they concern:

- I. all Canadian international cooperation stakeholders, notably CIDA and the international cooperation organizations (ICOs);
- II. CIDA specifically;
- III. Québec and Canadian ICOs specifically;
- IV. Relations among Canadian international cooperation stakeholders.

## **I. Concerning all Canadian international cooperation stakeholders, particularly CIDA and ICOs:**

**1. Despite some progress in the last decade, our success in integrating gender equality and promoting women’s rights in Canadian international cooperation efforts has been somewhat limited. Considerable effort must be made by CIDA, the ICOs, and all partners in Canadian international cooperation to make good on their commitment to gender equality and the advancement of women’s rights.**

Recent studies and analysis highlight the divide, common to both CIDA and the ICOs, between policy and discourse on the one hand and practice on the other. Given this track record, it is incumbent on all Canadian international cooperation stakeholders to rethink our organizational practices and to renew our commitment to gender equality.

<sup>37</sup> For more information on this project : <http://www.gordonfn.org/resfiles/RSoaresPinto.htm>

<sup>38</sup> The author sincerely thanks Joanna Kerr for her advice and for fruitful discussion throughout this study. She also thanks Fréda Thélusma and Sylvie Perras for their judicious comments at the writing stage.

**2. The new challenges confronting international aid, and in particular a new context that is particularly unfavourable to women's rights and the promotion of gender equality both in Canada and internationally, call for a renewal of our strategies and practices, especially where policy dialogue and funding are concerned.**

It is essential for organizations and activists working for women's rights to show creativity and to develop new ways of overcoming challenges old and new if we are to seize the opportunities offered by the new architecture of international aid and Canadian aid policy. Basic ingredients in a recipe for effective action include a solid capacity for policy analysis and critical thinking about trends in the international and Canadian political landscape, enlightened by a strategic vision and by close ties with activists and communities at the grassroots. Furthermore, in this age of crisis, our contextual analysis must consider the effects of the financial and economic crisis, the food crisis, and climate change on the status of women and the exacerbation of gender inequalities.

**3. It is critical for us to repoliticize our work and our discourse, and to clarify the vision of social change and of gender relations change that we are trying to instill.**

We must recentre our work around a bold conception of international cooperation as an instrument of social change. Only this will make it possible to eradicate poverty and social injustice while building a more egalitarian world for women and men. This vision must be constructed in close collaboration with our partners in the Global South and with women's movements. It must be firmly rooted in specific local contexts.

**4. It is essential that we invest in bold strategies to tackle the root causes of women's poverty, violence against women, and power imbalances between women and men.**

These issues must be linked to other struggles for economic and social justice. A determination to tackle the root causes must pervade all of our work, whether it involves women's economic empowerment, women's leadership and political empowerment, education, sexual and reproductive health, combating violence, etc.



**5. Current approaches to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment must be re-examined, politicized, and reappropriated by Canadian international cooperation stakeholders. The political dimension of these approaches must be restored to its central position, and we absolutely must counteract the observed trend towards the bureaucratization, technification, and depoliticization of these approaches.**

More and more people draw attention to the potential of the rights-based approach to reframe the work of the organizations in order to allow for more in-depth transformation of power relations, emancipation, and inclusion; others draw attention to the importance of restoring the feminist analysis to its central position in policies and programs and within the very structures of our organizations.

**6. Levels of investment in gender equality and women's empowerment have not been commensurate with the policy statements and commitments issued by CIDA and the ICOs. New funding approaches are necessary; more particularly, there is a need for better coordination between resources allocated to specific gender equality projects and resources devoted to the cross-cutting approach.**

While contemplated in the Beijing Platform for Action, the idea of coordination between these two strategies has often been misinterpreted. In practice, in the last decade, the cross-cutting approach has tended to dominate while specific projects have declined, and this is true for both CIDA and the ICOs.

**7. The importance of specific gender equality projects must be given more recognition. Funding for these types of projects must be increased and become a key Canadian international cooperation strategy for advancing the cause of women's rights and gender equality.**

Despite the limited resources allocated to these types of projects, experience has shown that they yield the most significant results in terms of advancing women's rights and combating gender inequalities. CIDA must honour and be held accountable to its 2006 commitment to

increase the share of its specific budget. The ICOs, likewise, should re-examine their funding priorities and the place of specific gender-related projects within them. While external funding constraints, especially those imposed by CIDA, wield an increasing amount of influence over the work of the ICOs, the organizations retain some leeway to choose their Southern partners, to prioritize certain types of work and projects, and to inject a transformative vision of gender relations into these projects.

**8. The cross-cutting approach must be reinforced and reinvented if it is to yield tangible results in the area of gender equality and advancement of women's rights.**

For both CIDA and the ICOs, research and experience have shown that in practice, the cross-cutting approach has quite often been marked by a phenomenon of evaporation or invisibility of results. One important cause of this phenomenon is a lack of genuine political will and commitment to gender equality, resulting in an insufficient allocation of financial and human resources to the objective of gender integration. Further problems encountered when implementing the cross-cutting approach are the lack or weakness of gender institutionalization mechanisms, the inadequacy of training and tools for staff members, and the weakness of established accountability systems.

CIDA and the ICOs must recognize that a cross-cutting approach has costs. It is unrealistic to hope that commitments to gender equality will effectively take place without a considerable allocation of resources, particularly for development of staff knowledge, skills, and commitment. To counteract the pattern of evaporation that has characterized the majority of past initiatives, it is important that there be an explicit and visible statement of both the commitments made and the results targeted by the cross-cutting approach as well as the resources required to meet these commitments and achieve these results (notably through gender-sensitive budgeting).

**9. Both CIDA and the ICOs must make efforts to improve their monitoring and accountability mechanisms. They must have reliable methods for measuring changes in and impacts on the lives of women and girls as a result of the projects carried out, especially with regard to the power dynamic transformation between women and men.**

**Efforts to improve accountability should be designed in a spirit conducive to organizational learning and collective knowledge about gender equality.**

It is likewise important to improve accounting mechanisms and systems for budgets allocated to gender-equality-related programs, initiatives, and activities. In particular, a system is needed to improve investment measurement and monitoring in the cross-cutting approach. These accounting mechanisms and systems must go beyond mere statements of intent at the project design phase to encompass genuine financial measures of effort expended as well as assessments of the effective use of resources assigned to gender equality promotion. CIDA and the organizations must publish detailed information on their funding of gender equality initiatives.

**10. Dialogue with Southern partners must be enhanced with a view to constructing a shared vision of the goals, approaches, and activities necessary to the pursuit of gender equality and women's rights.**

In order to engender this dynamic, Canadian international cooperation stakeholders must be more attentive to the realities, points of view, and aspirations of the partners and populations – women and men – with whom they work. In addition, this entails a review of partner selection criteria to ensure more systematic and explicit inclusion of the goal of gender equality. In particular, minimal criteria must include the organizations' openness and willingness to move towards a more in-depth integration of gender considerations into their mandate and work. Ultimately, this requires a firm commitment on the part of Canadian stakeholders to making gender equality central to relations with the partners, and notably to implementing an innovative process of accompaniment that is specifically rooted in cultural realities and specificities. This can only take place if sufficient human and financial resources are specifically allocated to the goal of gender equality.

**11. The importance of the role played by Global South women's organizations and movements in the promotion of women's rights and gender equality must be given more recognition and support.**

Women's organizations and rights advocacy groups play a critical role in inducing changes in mentalities, behaviours, and cultural practices and in the enactment of more egalitarian laws and standards. Despite this important role, they remain underfunded by Canadian international cooperation organizations and other international donors. Their access to decision-making and consultation spheres remains limited. Their role as key stakeholders and interlocutors in the construction of a more gender-equal world must be given more recognition and support by Canadian international cooperation stakeholders, including both CIDA and Canadian CSOs. To sum up, the construction of a strong, diversified, multi-generational women's rights movement that finds its deep inspiration in the grassroots must be prioritized as a key strategy for the achievement of gender equality.

## II. Concerning CIDA specifically:

### **12. CIDA must make major efforts to secure compliance with its Policy on Gender Equality and effective, systematic implementation of that policy.**

Results obtained on gender equality to date remain highly variable from one sector, geographical area, and/or partnership to another. CIDA must tackle the many internal obstacles and constraints that prevent it from genuinely institutionalizing gender and cause its policy commitments to evaporate in practice (see paragraph 8). It must also review its mechanisms for channeling Canadian aid through ICOs, national governments, and multilateral agencies, paying close attention to the demonstrated commitment of these entities to gender equality and using any leverage it may have to ensure that a concern for gender equality is incorporated into the projects funded. CIDA's internal review of the Policy on Gender Equality<sup>39</sup> is a golden opportunity to make the changes and reforms necessary to improve the integration of gender equality considerations into Canadian official development assistance.

### **13. CIDA must revisit its commitment to gender equality and women's rights in the current context, marked by an emphasis on aid effectiveness and new aid modalities.**

In this context, CIDA's Policy on Gender Equality has been weakened as a result of more intense pressure for visible results, the concentration of aid in certain sectors, and a tendency for policy to evaporate in program-

<sup>39</sup> The results of this review were made public in February 2009.

based approaches and other new aid modalities. The Agency must revisit the mechanisms by which its policy is applied, strive towards a more cohesive institutional vision and strategy, and develop the knowledge necessary to adapt and act strategically in this new context.

**14. The central role played by both Southern and Canadian civil society in regard to gender equality and women's rights must be recognized and not marginalized in an ongoing context of aid effectiveness marked, in particular, by direct budgetary support and sectoral support. In particular, CIDA must recognize that women's organizations and other organizations working for women's rights are key allies in advocating and lobbying national governments for national policies and plans containing gender equality as an integral component.**

Institutional support to these organizations must be a fundamental component of Canadian aid, and it must be framed within a strategy conducive to greater democracy and active participation by these organizations in public debate. Only under such conditions can women's specific interests be effectively taken into account in national development plans and in aid programs funded by Canada and other donor countries.

**15. The social, cultural, economic, and political transformations necessary to the attainment of gender equality take place over the long term and require greater allocations of physical and human resources.**

Canada's official development assistance tends to put a premium on control, tight timelines, and results-based management. It prioritizes easily measurable short-term changes in place of the complex long-term changes necessary to address the issues of power and of access to and control over resources that are central to eliminating gender inequalities and alleviating women's poverty.

The dominant vision among most donors today is a linear, technocratic, short-term vision that is not capable of producing the results we want. It must be replaced by a longer-term, more politically aware vision comprising more stable and predictable funding, conducive to innovative approaches, and open to a certain amount of risk.

**16. Under the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act, CIDA funding is required to contribute to poverty reduction, take into account the perspectives of the poor, women and men, and be consistent with international human rights standards.**

This act should be considered by both CIDA and civil society as a valuable tool for reaffirming their commitment to women's rights and gender equality in Canadian international cooperation. They can and should draw on it as a catalyst for strengthening the CIDA Policy on Gender Equality.

**III. With specific reference to Québec and Canadian ICOs:**

**17. Firming up political will at the highest levels (ICO management and boards of directors) is decisive in creating an environment conducive to integrating and prioritizing gender equality into the organizations.**

Management has a key role to play in appropriately and effectively supervising the integration of gender equality, which by definition affects every management structure of the organization. Management's role is fundamental in holding all employees and volunteers accountable for their actions in regard to gender equality and in overcoming any obstacles or resistance, which often lead to the above-mentioned phenomenon of evaporation. Management's key role must also make itself felt outside the organization through support for promotion and policy dialogue around women's rights and gender equality.

Collective initiatives to strengthen the leadership role and commitment of ICO management on gender equality must be taken and reinforced, concurrent with the internal advocacy role played by women's rights activists vis-à-vis the management of their organizations. ICO joint board/management meetings on gender equality should be held in order to foster peer emulation<sup>40</sup>, strengthen management's active support for gender equality, and clarify the decisive role played by management in driving the relevant initiatives internally. AQOCI, CCIC, and CIDA have an important motivating role to play in this regard.

<sup>40</sup> The breakfast meeting held during the conference, attended by 30 management representatives of ICOs, human rights organizations, AQOCI, and CCIC (with the participation of CIDA and one speaker from the Global South) is a good example of the sort of gathering that is favourable to peer emulation.

**18. Political will must go hand in hand with the necessary organizational changes, and particularly the taking of measures to develop gender equity within organizational structures, procedures, and culture.**

In order for any organization to effectively promote gender equality and women's empowerment, its organizational culture must be aligned with its mission and be reflected in the expression of consistent values and attitudes on the part of the staff and management, thus creating a conducive environment. Research and experience have highlighted the need for systematic organizational change efforts designed to improve the institutionalization of gender within organizations. Such efforts must extend over the long term; they can be facilitated by establishing gender policies, performing gender audits (also known as gender self-assessments), and implementing action plans suited to the realities of each organization.

**19. Building staff commitment and capacity in the area of gender equality is a basic condition for the effective integration of gender considerations.**

The relatively low priority given to gender considerations and the inadequacy of the funding allocated to the goal of gender equality have translated into a generalized lack of human resources assigned to these considerations. The result is that even where a formal commitment to gender equality exists, organizations and individuals lack the knowledge and tools with which to suitably incorporate gender equality into their mandate and programming.

Furthermore, the unfortunate truth is that training and capacity building initiatives have tended to convey a technocratic vision (e.g., checklists, deliverables, etc.) to the detriment of true ownership of the approach that values its political character.

Thus, it is not just a matter of increasing the number and frequency of training and capacity building initiatives, but also of revisiting their content. They must above all be designed to encourage heightened individual commitment to gender equality and to instill a transformative approach that is genuinely capable of addressing the unequal power dynamics between women and men as well as the structural impediments to

women's empowerment. Moreover, efforts should be made to offer training sessions whose content is pertinent and suited to the job descriptions and mandates of each different staff member. The training must go beyond gender sensitization to equip the participants with the technical proficiency necessary to incorporate gender considerations into their mandates.

Training and awareness raising efforts must be accompanied by an emphasis on recruitment of people with a manifest commitment to gender equality and women's rights. Concurrently, organizations must implement accountability mechanisms and incentives with a view to improving performance in this area.

#### **IV. Concerning relations among Canadian international cooperation stakeholders:**

##### **20. Dialogue and alliances among Canadian international cooperation stakeholders around the advancement of women's rights and gender equality must be reinforced.**

Better and more frequent dialogue can be important in creating an environment conducive to gender equality in Canadian international cooperation.

##### **21. In terms of dialogue among ICOs, it is important to create or strengthen discussion forums that allow for the improvement of organizational capacity, peer emulation, or the development of collective advocacy strategies.**

Existing initiatives (Comité Québécois Femmes et Développement, "Gender in Practice" community, SID gender network, CCIC women's rights group, etc.) must be reinforced so that they can play a more front-line role and rise to the challenges facing organizations as well as the women's rights activists working for them. Networks like AQOCI and CCIC have an important role to play in mobilizing ICOs around this type of concerted initiative.

Collective initiatives should also be envisaged in countries where several Canadian international cooperation stakeholders, and particularly several ICOs, have operations. Forums should be created for discussion and professional development on gender issues among all Canadian

international cooperation partners in a single country, for instance. Such initiatives could be a creative and concerted solution to a situation in which local partners and staff are beset by a lack of funding and staff specializing in gender-related capacity building.

**22. The dialogue between CIDA and CSOs, particularly ICOs, must be reinforced and framed within the perspective of mutual responsibility with a view to strengthening these stakeholders' commitment to gender equality.**

While CIDA has a crucial role to play in compelling the ICOs to effectively apply its Policy on Gender Equality, the more progressive ICOs on gender issues have an equally critical role in eliciting innovation and in urging the Canadian government and CIDA to respect Canada's international commitments to gender equality. Greater openness on CIDA's part and the establishment of consultative and participatory processes are basic conditions for such a dialogue to take hold.

**23. It is critical to reinforce and consolidate strategic collaborations and alliances with a wide range of stakeholders in Québec and Canadian civil society, and particularly with the women's movement, the trade union movement, and academia.**

Such solidarity is crucial to giving a newly politicized impetus to the goal of gender equality, strengthening the development of critical feminist thought, moving into new loci of knowledge, and consolidating the body of knowledge that we need to support our action. In addition, such networking is an essential driver of the mobilization of Québec and Canadian civil society to ensure that the voice of international cooperation that speaks from a place of solidarity, social justice, human rights, and gender equality is heard.

**24. To achieve this level of dialogue, concerted action, and construction of collective power, the stakeholders (ICOs, other CSOs, and CIDA) must devote more time and energy to structured, face-to-face discussions.**

Such structured training and discussion forums are essential to achieving mutual understanding, developing a similar comprehension of the

political context and strategies, negotiating differences, coordinating collective action, and amplifying possible synergies among different areas of work. Successfully carrying out such a process demands the capacity to develop new ideas and a vision that brings people together, in spite of their differences, in their attempts to attain a broader goal; namely, gender equality and the advancement of women's rights.

**25. This dialogue should be a source of inspiration, creativity, and renewal for women's rights activists. It should serve to rally ever larger numbers of people to a full commitment to the movement for gender equality and women's empowerment in Canadian international cooperation. In particular, innovative and inclusive strategies must be adopted with a view to getting more men involved.**

Men are key allies, yet, they remain in the minority both numerically and in terms of the intensity of their involvement in these forums. A thoroughgoing strategic transformation is necessary so that men, just as women, feel concerned, involved, and mobilized around the goal of gender equality. This is a major challenge that women's rights activists will have no choice but to tackle in the coming years. It relates equally to Canadian international cooperation stakeholders, their Southern partners, and the populations and communities with whom we work.

**26. Finally, in order for this work of dialogue and consensus building among Canadian international cooperation stakeholders to take on genuine legitimacy and credibility, dialogue and close collaboration with Southern organizations and networks will be indispensable. In this regard, we must ensure that we can continue to build and reinforce such networks, fund them, and use them more effectively.**

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