



BACKGROUND: WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY

We Can Do Better 2015 calls on the Government of Canada to:

1. Advance women's rights in the international policy arena by supporting a robust, rights-based set of post-2015 sustainable development goals (SDGs).
2. Invest significantly in women's rights and gender equality, at home and abroad.
3. Take action to end women's economic and social inequality.

Do better at promoting women's rights and gender equality!

Women's rights and gender equality are a global issue

The world has taken action toward gender equality. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action on Women's Rights and Gender Equalityⁱ – a blueprint for advancing women's rights. Thanks in large part to the tireless struggle of women's organizations and their allies, huge strides toward equality have been made, especially in terms of girls' education and maternal mortality.

But many hard-won gains for women are being threatened and eroded by fundamentalisms, austerity measures, climate change, and growing economic inequality. Women still represent 70% of the world's poor. Around the world, unequal power relations relegate women to the lowest paying and most precarious jobs, and women's unpaid labour goes unrecognized and undervalued, especially with respect to child and family care. Furthermore, women continue to experience social, political and economic exclusion, and have limited voice, influence and decision-making power both inside and outside the home. Globally, women 15 to 24 years of age are at particular risk of HIV infection, early unintended pregnancy, and violence, in addition to having their reproductive health needs unattended.ⁱⁱ

And spending on gender in international development remains low, and has been declining since 2009. In 2013, only 3% of all aid dollars globally went to projects primarily aimed at advancing gender equality and women's rights. Women's organizations, and institutions such as UN Women, receive less than 0.3% of all official development assistance (ODA).ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, the combined total annual income of autonomous women's organizations around the world is only USD\$106 million.^{iv}

Yet women's organizations are crucial partners in the struggle for gender equality. Most of the major international advancements in women's rights were spurred by women collectively raising their voices and turning their struggles into a political force for change. Women who are collectively organized, can hold politicians and governments to account for delivering on existing laws and policies, and bring about changes in attitudes, behaviours and beliefs about gender that policy and legislation alone cannot achieve.

Canada in a global context

Canada has been a champion of gender equality. Historically, Canada has been a global leader in the field

of gender equality. It established an international reputation through its advocacy on women's rights, its support to women's organizations overseas and its pioneering work in organizational gender policy.

But our commitment appears to have waned. Internationally, only 1-2% of Canada's aid budget has been allocated to programs that are specifically designed to advance gender equality and women's empowerment.^v This is below the OECD donor average, even though Canada has increasingly mainstreamed gender throughout its international development programs. Canada has the greatest percentage of "gender-blind" spending among the world's top 10 humanitarian donors.^{vi} In 2013, less than 1% of Canadian funds specifically addressed gender dynamics, such as projects that respond to sexual violence in conflict.^{vii}

And major federal funding cuts have severely undermined the work of women's organizations at home. Status of Women Canada has undergone profound changes, closing 12 of 16 offices across the country and ending all funding for advocacy and policy research. Since 2006, funding cuts to women's organizations from coast to coast to coast have severely undermined their capacity to offer frontline services to women and get at the root causes of discrimination and inequality. This has had particularly dire consequences for women who are poor and marginalized, and for Aboriginal women who experience discrimination on multiple grounds.

So while the lives of some women in Canada have improved, inequality remains. In Canada, more women than ever graduate from university, enter new professions and run for public office. However, access to political leadership, economic opportunities and job security have seen less progress; and violence against women remains unchecked.^{viii} Women earn 19% less than their male peers for the same work, are more likely to be poor, and do twice as much unpaid work at home.^{ix} Since 1980, more than 1,000 Aboriginal women and girls have been murdered or are missing,^x and each day more than 8,000 women and children seek protection in shelters.^{xi}

More needs to be done. A robust, rights-based set of post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a successor global framework to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), should include a stand-alone goal on gender equality and women's rights, and specific targets on ending violence against women and on sexual and reproductive health and rights. The percentage of ODA for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment and leadership should be increased, including support for women human rights defenders and women's rights organizations that offer frontline services and tackle the root causes of gender inequality. Universal public services in developing countries, equal opportunities to decent work, and equality in remuneration would all level the playing field and reduce inequalities.

It's time to act. Governments, civil society and other stakeholders around the world are increasingly speaking in unison about the need to invest in women and girls. When global leaders meet in 2015 to review the Beijing Declaration and adopt a new set of Sustainable Development Goals, they have a chance to make real commitments toward advancing women's rights and to galvanizing new resources for gender equality.^{xii} At home, Canada can build on its leadership around Maternal Newborn and Child Health and its pioneering work on gender equality by doing the following: advocate for a more holistic approach to protecting and promoting all women's rights and freedoms, including reaffirming its comprehensive support for the full range of sexual and reproductive rights; call on the international community to fill critical funding gaps on women's rights and gender equality, and follow suit in our own commitments; and support universal public services in developing countries, which help level the playing field and reduce inequalities. In 2015, Canada can make gender equality and women's empowerment a core strategy to achieving a world free from injustice and poverty. We can #DoBetter2015.

ENDNOTES – Women’s rights and gender equality

ⁱ For more details on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, go to <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>

ⁱⁱ Civil Society Working Group on AIDS and Development, Statement to the Commission on the Status of Women, February 26, 2015. Accessible at: http://www.icad-cisd.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=660%3Acritical-gaps-at-the-59th-session-of-the-commission-on-the-status-of-women&catid=1%3Alatest-news&lang=en

ⁱⁱⁱ Development Initiatives, *Trends in donor spending on gender and development*, 2014. Accessible at: http://devinit.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Gender-briefing_development_081014.pdf

^{iv} In its 2012 global survey, the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) found that the total combined annual income of autonomous women’s organizations was USD 106 million. AWID, *Watering the Leaves, Starving the Roots: The Status of Financing for Women’s Rights Organizing and Gender Equality*, 2013. Accessible at: <http://www.awid.org/Library/Watering-the-Leaves-Starving-the-Roots>

^v Betty Plewes, *Digging Deeper: Towards Greater Action on Global Rights for Women and Girls*, 2014. Accessible at: <http://go.oxfam.ca/docs/digging-deeper-global-rights-en.pdf>

^{vi} CARE International, *Donor Spending on Gender and Emergencies 2013*, 2013. Accessible at: http://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Donor_Spending_on_Gender_in_Emergencies_2013_2.pdf

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} For a comprehensive analysis of progress on the Beijing Platform for Action in Canada, see Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, *Progress on Women’s Rights: Missing in Action report - A Shadow Report on Canada’s Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, 2014. Accessible at: https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2014/11/Progress_Women_Beijing20.pdf

^{ix} Conference Board of Canada, *Gender Income Gap*, 2015. Accessible at: <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/details/society/gender-income-gap.aspx>

^x Tonda MacCharles, “1,000 native women murdered, missing in Canada over 30 years: RCMP,” Toronto Star, May 1, 2014. Accessible at: http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/05/01/1000_native_women_murdered_missing_in_canada_over_30_years_rcmp.html

^{xi} Benjamin Mazowita and Marta Burczycka, *Shelters for abused women in Canada, 2012*, Juristat, Statistics Canada, 2014. Accessible on-line: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2014001/article/11906-eng.htm>

^{xii} OECD, *Financing the unfinished business of gender equality and women’s rights: priorities for the post-2015 framework*, 2014. Accessible at: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/Short%20version%20-%20FINALFinancing%20the%20unfinished%20business%20of%20gender%20equality.pdf>