

Holding the Line on Gender Equality: A Fundamental Principle to Safeguard

Key Recommendation

Reaffirm gender equality as a standalone goal and cross-cutting objective of Canada's international assistance, backed by sustained and predictable funding, strengthened policy coherence and an explicit commitment to locally led feminist approaches.

Gender Equality Under Pressure

Gender equality is one of the most **evidence-backed priorities** Canada has for building a more **stable, inclusive and prosperous world**. Nearly a decade of feminist international assistance has shown this clearly. Yet at a time when the evidence is strongest, the global political environment is most challenging. At the same time, a **coalition of states**, including Canada, has recently reaffirmed that gender equality, human rights and feminist approaches remain indispensable to democracy, peace, multilateralism and sustainable development, despite global backlash and shrinking civic space.

Aid budgets are shrinking globally and the political environment for **international assistance has become increasingly contested**. Gender equality programming is among the hardest hits, with **anti-gender/anti-rights actors** gaining ground in several countries and growing political resistance to gender equality initiatives in some contexts. These dynamics have translated into concrete policy and funding shifts, including restrictions on support for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), such as the reinstatement of the Mexico City Policy. **Evidence from UN Women** also highlights the disproportionate impact of funding cuts on gender equality efforts, particularly on Women Rights Organizations (WROs). Moreover, recent government messaging has provided limited clarity on where gender equality sits within Canada's evolving foreign policy priorities. This comes after a decade in which Canada positioned itself as a global leader of gender equality. These concerns are further compounded by the significant reductions announced in the 2025 federal budget.

This brief makes the case that stepping back from gender equality would be a strategic and fiscal mistake. The evidence is clear: gender equality investments deliver results that matter across health, education, economic resilience and trade, climate adaptation, crisis response and peace and security. Walking away from those investments now would mean paying higher costs later, in humanitarian crises, fragile states and eroded Canadian influence.

A Decade of Results

Evidence drawn from evaluations, audits and partner reporting consistently demonstrates that gender equality programming has delivered concrete, measurable results across sectors and regions.

In 2022-2023, 54 projects reached 18.2 million people across 42 countries, 15 million of whom were women and girls. These investments also trained 150,000 health service providers and strengthened 8,353 health facilities. The FIAP's explicit recognition of SRHR, including access to safe abortion and preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence, shifted both government thinking and funding in an area that had long been underfunded. **These outcomes matter beyond health:** fewer maternal and infant deaths, reduced unintended pregnancies, greater protection from gender-based violence, fewer child marriages and improved girls' educational attainment translate directly into greater workforce participation and household earnings, making Canada's SRHR investments a long-term contribution to stability and economic resilience.

Supporting women's rights organizations (WROs) and feminist movements has been central to advancing gender equality under the FIAP. Canada's Women's Voice and Leadership (WVL) program covered 30 projects across 28 countries. Evaluations found that this core, flexible funding allowed WROs to pursue their own priorities, deliver frontline services and engage in advocacy, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. In countries such as Bangladesh, Colombia and Senegal, WVL also helped grassroots organizations access policymakers they had previously been excluded from. Supporting **women-led organizations** builds more stable, prosperous and democratic societies - strengthening Canada's trade relationships, reducing drivers to conflict and displacement and creating more reliable long-term economic partners.

Results extend beyond flagship programs. In education, Canada supported the Global Partnership for Education, reaching 120 million students, training 481,000 teachers and renovating or building 6,700 classrooms. In nutrition, 155 million children received Vitamin A supplementation (2024-2025). Under the climate resilient economic agency, 3.6 million women entrepreneurs, farmers and small holders were provided with financial or business development services and nearly 90,000 women benefited from climate adaptation projects (2024-2025). Across regions, feminist programming contributed to a 26% relative increase in positive attitudes toward women's and girls' rights, helped 2,000 women secure roles in local decision-making in Nepal and supported 70 women- and youth-led climate adaptation initiatives in Guatemala.

These are not isolated examples. They reflect a pattern: when gender equality is treated as a structural priority rather than a side objective, results improve across regions and sectors¹.

Gender Equality as a Strategic Asset

Gender equality is not only a driver of development. It is also a foundation for democratic resilience and inclusive governance. The **5th Ministerial conference on Feminist Foreign Policy** has increasingly framed gender equality as a strategic enabler of democratic resilience, peacebuilding, human rights protection, effective multilateralism and social cohesion.

Gender equality investments do more than advance rights. They strengthen the outcomes Canada cares most about. It is therefore not a question of prioritizing other areas over gender equality, but of ensuring that gender equality remains at the core of any priorities of the Canadian government and Canadian international assistance.

Economic resilience: programs supporting women's economic empowerment, financial access and skills development increase women's labourmarket participation, formalize work and expand access to decent work. Furthermore, investing in health is a key driver of human capital, job creation and economic growth - outcomes that align directly with Canada's current trade and economic resilience priorities.

Humanitarian action: Gender-responsive approaches improve the effectiveness, inclusiveness and accountability of humanitarian assistance while strengthening community resilience. Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy recognized that the impacts of crises are highly gendered and that they can create opportunities for women to

¹ OECD (2022), **Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls: DAC Guidance for Development Partners**, OECD Publishing, Paris.

increase their participation and challenge harmful social norms, contributing to more sustainable recovery efforts. By addressing some of the root causes of fragility and exclusion, gender equality investments also contribute to stability and security outcomes Canada seeks to advance through its current foreign policy priorities.

Peace and security: women's meaningful participation and leadership in peace processes is linked to more durable peace outcomes and stronger institutional trust. Canada's Elsie Initiative improved the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations by addressing barriers to women's participation.

Climate: actively advancing women's voice and leadership in climate governance, clean energy and climate-smart agriculture improves the effectiveness and durability of climate adaptation, food security, disaster response and natural resource management - all of which reduce instability that can disrupt economies, trade, supply chains and regional security.

Democratic resilience: by supporting WROs and feminist civil society, Canada helps sustain the watchdog organizations that hold governments accountable. In contexts of shrinking civic space and rising authoritarianism, authoritarian actors frequently target women's rights organizations first, because dismantling them is a proven step toward consolidating power, suppressing inclusive structures and manufacturing the cultural "moral panic" that rally their base. Supporting WROs is not a peripheral investment - it is a **frontline support to democracy**.

The 2025 OECD Peer Review of Canada's development cooperation recognized Canada as among the top DAC donors for **gender equality**. That leadership was built over decades. It cannot be rebuilt quickly if lost.

Where Canada Needs to Do Better

A credible positioning on gender equality requires acknowledging where implementation has fallen short. The Cooperation Canada **FIAP study report** points to persistent structural challenges that, if addressed, would significantly strengthen Canada's impact.

Political clarity and guidance: Canada needs a clear unequivocal statement and political guidance that gender equality continues to be a core strategic goal and a contributor to Canada's broader foreign policy objectives. Without this signal, no implementation of improvements will be sufficient and the institutional processes introduced under the FIAP may be abandoned or significantly deprioritized.

Policy coherence. Gender equality commitments have at times been undermined by contradictions elsewhere in Canada's domestic and foreign policy, including arms sales to countries with poor human rights records, insufficient attention to extractive industries' impacts on women's and girls' rights, a lack of consistent integration of gender equality across Canada's trade-development approach and emerging blended finance pathways and siloed programming that prevents a joined-up humanitarian-development-peace approach. Canada should also ensure that its international engagement protects civic space and provides sustained support to feminist movements, women rights defenders and women peacebuilders. A genuine commitment to gender equality requires coherence across government, not just within the international assistance envelope.

Funding access is still too difficult for the organizations that matter most. Administrative burdens, complex reporting requirements and low institutional risk tolerance have systematically disadvantaged smaller, locally led WROs in favor of larger, established partners and intermediaries. This contradicts the principle of locally led development, undermines commitments to gender equality and women's leadership and ultimately reduces the reach and sustainability of results. Simplifying funding and due diligence processes, particularly for smaller organizations, is not about lowering standards. It is about improving performance, enhancing the quality and value for money funding and increasing accessibility to those who need it most.

Certain groups are still left behind. Despite a stated commitment to inclusion, evidence shows that 2SLGBTQI+ communities, persons with disabilities, adolescent girls, displaced and migrant women and small or unregistered

WROs remain underserved by current programming. A genuine intersectional approach requires going beyond adding marginalized groups to a list and actively designing programs that reach those facing the greatest structural barriers.

Conceptual clarity is needed. Uneven interpretation of terms like feminism and intersectionality across departments and programs has led to inconsistent implementation. Stronger shared definitions, paired with better measurement frameworks that capture qualitative and transformative change, would make gender equality commitments more usable, defensible and effective.

Strategic position: consolidate, don't rebrand or retreat

The evidence does not support a retreat from gender equality. It supports a sharper, more coherent and better-resourced version of what already works.

Weakening Canada's commitment now would fragment years of hard-won progress, damage relationships with trusted partners in the Global South and erode Canadian credibility at precisely the moment global leadership on gender equality is most needed. Rebuilding comparable frameworks, partnerships and influence later would require significantly more time and resources than sustaining and adapting what is already in place.

The case is not for the status quo. It is for consolidation with purpose: reaffirming the core principle, protecting the most effective funding streams, fixing the systems that slow delivery and communicating results more clearly to Canadian audiences.

Gender equality is not a peripheral social program. It is a strategic investment in human capital, institutional resilience and inclusive growth. Canada has built recognized leadership in this space. Now is the time to hold the line.

Concretely, this means:

- 1 Reaffirm gender equality as a core goal:** Provide explicit, unambiguous reaffirmation of gender equality as a standalone and cross-cutting objective of Canada's international assistance, grounded in human rights, intersectionality and shifting power analysis.
- 2 Protect the most effective funding streams:** Sustain core, flexible and long-term funding for WROs, girls' organizations and feminist movements, including through the WVL program and the Equality Fund, the ten-year commitment to Global Health and Rights (SRHR) and dedicated funding for 2SLGBTIQ+ organizations - all of which have demonstrated the strongest and most durable results.
- 3 Safeguard Canada's gender equality funding commitments:** maintain Global Affairs Canada's commitment to allocate at least 15% of international assistance to programs with gender equality as the principal objective, and protect this commitment from future budget cuts
- 4 Improve policy coherence across government:** Ensure that trade, development and security policies do not undermine gender equality commitments made through international assistance and clarify how gender equality fits within Canada's broader foreign policy framework.
- 5 Fix the systems that slow delivery:** Simplify funding, reporting and due diligence processes for smaller and locally led WROs, as well as other local organizations. Adapt risk models to reflect the realities of feminist programming in fragile contexts. Invest in measurement approaches that capture qualitative and transformative change.
- 6 Communicate results to Canadians:** Build a compelling, evidence-based narrative of gender equality results for Canadian audiences and share it through accessible channels, including social media, media engagement and public events, to strengthen understanding of why sustained investment matters.