

Workshop on Gender Equality

Key Themes

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The Challenging Context: Resistance and Backlash

The importance of gender equality in development, humanitarian, peacebuilding and security engagement is clearly supported by evidence. Gender equality builds and sustains more prosperous and peaceful communities.

However, the process of building gender equality remains contentious. Efforts to promote gender equality have long faced resistance and backlash, and gender equality has never been advanced without a fight.

For workshop participants, the fight for gender equality seems to be getting more difficult – both at the global level and in local contexts.

Globally, there is a well-funded and organised anti-gender movement. This movement is active in multilateral forums and works to influence domestic policy in many countries. US positions on gender equality have been rolled back, the Mexico City policy has been reinstated, and US ODA dramatically and abruptly cut.

At the community level, participants discussed the growing but varied challenges to gender equality work, including the heightened sensitivity to words like ‘gender’, misinterpretation of words such as ‘transformative’ and ‘inclusive,’ and the rollback of rights in some contexts. This rollback includes reproductive rights and the criminalization of some forms of gender identity and expression. Populist movements - often linked to authoritarianism - are demonizing and weaponizing gender equality to mobilize support. In some contexts, [political violence targeting women](#) has increased.

Social media, particularly the misogynistic elements of the manosphere, has fueled online hatred towards women and gender diverse people. Participants discussed how social media is an unsafe space for many, undermining their ability to use this tool to expand networks and engage in advocacy.

These developments remind us that gender equality is reversible. Progress often seems like two steps forward, one step back. Or sometimes ‘two steps forward, three steps back.’¹

Canadian Leadership in Gender Equality

Canada has a long history of promoting gender equality initiatives and advocates in many countries throughout the world. Long before the FIAP (see below), Canada effectively supported women’s rights organisations in their fight for equality.

We discussed how the feminist movement has deep, historical roots in the Global South, evidenced by robust participation in women’s conferences and local civil society organisations. Women from the Global South formed a critically important component of a global community of advocates and researchers for gender equality.

Historical case studies may provide important lessons for Canada’s future gender equality efforts – particularly in a context where ODA will likely be reduced. We discussed the utility of including a historical example and its key lessons as a ‘box’ within the Report.

We also discussed the importance of coherence between domestic and foreign policies to ensure that Canada ‘gets its own house in order’ in relation to gender based violence.

The Feminist Label: Clarifying or Divisive?

Canada frames all its gender equality efforts as part of Canada’s overall prioritization of feminist approaches to development:

Canada’s international assistance mandate is to reduce poverty and build a more peaceful, inclusive and prosperous world. The Feminist International Assistance Policy identifies gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in all their diversity as the best way to contribute to this mandate as well as to contribute to larger commitments and obligations, both departmentally and globally.²

Workshop participants debated the divisiveness of the term feminist. In some contexts, feminist label may undermine actions to advance gender equality. The use of the term feminism was less important than ensuring development is rooted in feminist principles. (Advancing social, economic and political equality through inclusive and collaborative

¹ NB OECD DAC released a report on [Development Financing for Gender Equality](#) in November 2024. The report shows limited gender equality focus in the humanitarian sector and the energy sector.

² See GAC, “Feminist Approach” https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/fiap_ie-paif_ie.aspx?lang=eng

approaches to policy development and implementation that reflect the perspectives and experiences of all members of society, particularly vulnerable/marginalized. The feminist approach enables localization and participatory approaches to development.)

Precise, Careful, Clear Language

The term feminist is deeply divisive within communities. Given the sensitivities around gender equality, participants lamented the need for self-censorship in populist, traditional and authoritarian contexts. The discussion stressed the importance of clear language – ensuring that you are precise in your selection of words, and aware of such sensitivities in your engagement with communities.

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy - FIAP

Participants discussed the legacy of the FIAP, including its efforts to provide funding to local women's organisations through the [10 year Commitment to Global Health and Rights](#). With the [Women's Voice and Leadership Program](#) and the [Equality Fund](#), Canada became the largest donor for women's advocacy, empowering local women's rights organisations and producing tangible [results](#), including the ability to quickly pivot and provide support during the COVID-19 pandemic among [other successes](#).

Workshop participants discussed the challenges of results based programming for gender equality – it can be difficult to capture shifts in gender norms, heightened capacity of women's rights organisations etc. We discussed the meaning of the word 'transformational' and the need for concrete evidence to illustrate that transformation. The FIAP did use new approaches to monitor gender equality, including the use of [key performance indicators](#).

As part of its feminist approach, the Government of Canada also ensured that gender clauses were integrated into trade agreements. [[Evidence](#) suggests that while important to advance gender equality in the economic sector, such gender clauses need to be accompanied by local engagement to address barriers to gender equality in trade/economy and realise the potential of these trade agreements.]

FIAP: The Only Game in Town

We discussed criticisms of the FIAP and debated if these criticisms were directed at the gender equality approaches taken through the FIAP, or the fact that the FIAP was the sole focus of Canadian development efforts. Many within the broader development community had the mistaken impression that Canada did not prioritise other areas of development such as governance and democratic development, economic growth (not related to women), engagement with the security sector, etc.

Balancing Norms and Action

In efforts to improve gender equality, we discussed the difficult balance between the need for advocacy to address gender norms and the importance of tangible actions (referred to as mechanisms – laws, education, economic participation, access to economic assets etc.). We discussed a ‘brick and mortar’ approach – where the focus on gender norms (mortar) is calibrated with tangible actions (bricks). Too much mortar, the wall cannot be built. Too many bricks, the wall is not stable.

Localised, Context Specific Approaches

Workshop participants underscored the importance of understanding the local context – its history and culture, and the values of that community. What are population attitudes towards gender equality? Efforts to promote gender equality needed to be carefully calibrated to the local context. When gender equality is framed as a Canadian value, it can be seen as incongruent with the values of the community.

We discussed the need to support the *fight* for gender equality but also to ensure advocacy worked to *persuade* skeptics – to grow the tent. Advocacy for gender equality at the local level is most effective when it is led by local voices who understand the local context. (The objective of the [Women’s Voice and Leadership Program](#).) We also need to better understand how to better persuade. Should we frame gender equality efforts less from the individual rights perspective and more as a ‘social good,’ important for the health and well-being of the community?

Bringing in Men and Boys

We discussed the critical importance of integrating men and boys within gender equality efforts. Although Canada has funded specific programs that target male attitudes towards gender equality, an analysis of the range of socio-economic challenges that face men are often absent from development frameworks. Men are not perceived as a vulnerable group, even when the data suggests differently.³

We discussed the challenges of integrating men/boys into development spending, including the power and ‘closed’ nature of women’s advocacy networks, the lack of research and advocacy for the development challenges facing men, and addressing the

³ A good example of the failure to understand male vulnerability occurred during [the selection of Syrian refugees to come to Canada](#). Single white men were not included as vulnerable, even though they were extremely vulnerable to forced recruitment into either the military or insurgent groups, and many male protestors were tortured and imprisoned.

fear among gender equality advocates that including programs for men and boys will dilute the focus and funding for women and girls.

Moving Forward

Given the potential for the FIAP to be phased out by a new government, participants questioned how we could compensate for the loss of the FIAP.

What would the end of FIAP mean for gender equality in Canadian policy? Is the gender equality ‘architecture’ within Canada’s development programming strong enough for gender equality to be mainstreamed into development? Could the new government provide an opportunity to apply lessons learned from the FIAP (see below) including the expansion of localized approaches?

Given the increase in security and defense spending, and the interconnectivity between security actors and humanitarian/development engagement in some contexts, how can we ensure security actors understand the importance of gender equality? We discussed how former NATO head Jens Stoltenberg described gender equality as (well-intentioned) mission creep, one of the factors that contributed to the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan.

“We achieved our original [counter-terrorism] objectives, but we also saw the cost of mission creep. Building a democratic and united Afghanistan with equal rights for all was a worthy goal, but it was too ambitious.”⁴

We discussed if and how the legacy of gender equality efforts ultimately failing in Afghanistan – a legacy that is [poorly understood](#) – might harm the integration of gender equality into future security sector engagements and post-conflict peacebuilding efforts.

Participants highlighted the importance of intersectional approaches as well as system approaches as tools to better understand how gender equality connects with economic and social systems in ways that shape development and security outcomes. These system approaches could help us understand what happens when we don’t consider gender in development?

We also discussed the importance of Global Affairs Canada going beyond advocacy groups and implementing agencies to re-engage with the academic community. Such an engagement must go beyond partnerships in specific development initiatives to foster

⁴ Jens Stoltenberg, “Reflections on a Decade as Secretary General” 27 September 2024. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2024/09/27/reflections-on-a-decisive-decade-as-nato-secretary-general/index.html>

research on broad development objectives including, for example, commissions and broad policy consultations.

We concluded by underscoring the importance of sharing case studies and stories of what works.

Resources:

Podcast on the Equality Fund: <https://equalityfund.ca/listen/>