



Canada's global feminist leadership matters

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For those of us trying to end the most egregious effects of extreme poverty and bring human dignity to everyone, feminism is not just smart politics, it is smart global development.

Ottawa, Ontario – February 4, 2019 – A year-and-a-half in, Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy is providing a strong vision for Canadian aid.

While critiques about programming and funding are well-founded, the policy positions Canada as a women's and human rights leader at a time when rising populist governments and the United State's reinstatement of the "Global Gag Rule"—which limits funding to non-U.S. organizations that do any work related to abortion—threatens these rights around the globe.

Now, more than ever, women need support to make their voices heard.

The Canadian government's feminist leadership has made Canada a donor of choice. CARE Canada has witnessed growing interest from colleagues throughout CARE International and other international NGOs to engage with and support feminist policies and programs.

But it is worth noting that this shift started before the current government came into power.

Canada has been a leader in ending child and early forced-marriage since co-sponsoring the first UN resolution on the topic in 2013. The Harper government then made a significant programmatic investment to put an end to child and early forced-marriage.

The policy builds on this and the work done by Canadian NGOs in the area of women's rights, but shifts from previous Canadian government policies relating to women's sexual and reproductive rights. It's a sad fact that more than 50 per cent of maternal deaths in Sub-Saharan Africa are the result of unsafe abortions.

International Development Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau has consistently brought up the importance of access to safe and affordable abortion services, which are desperately needed.

Indeed, Canada's feminist policy's greatest influence has been on work related to women's sexual and reproductive rights. Its evidence-based policy has been welcomed by many Canadian civil society organizations and international partners. CARE has been working hard to support the policy's objective through its partnership with the Government of Canada on women's voice and leadership and women's health programs.

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy is also shining a light on other neglected areas of health including adolescent sexual health, sexual and gender-based violence and sexual orientation. It places LGBTQ2 rights firmly as a development issue, whereas previous soft diplomacy approaches kept this issue mostly in the closet.

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Increasing gender equality in societies is a formidable task. Yet, the policy opens doors for a women's empowerment organization like CARE to champion women's rights. For instance, our Southern Africa Nutrition Initiative in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, is improving woman's right to food through a woman-centred approach. Over three years, CARE aims to work with more than half a million people to build local knowledge and capacity for sustained change. FIAP is the catalyst for these advocacy efforts, allowing us to focus on women's rights at all levels of policy and programming in these countries.

To be sure, many questions around the policy's implementation remain. Canadians will need to continue to hold Global Affairs Canada accountable to its commitment to deliver the aspirations of Canada's Feminist International Policy. And to see real results, we need these commitments to gender equality to continue well beyond the next electoral cycle.

Yet, for those of us trying to end the most egregious effects of extreme poverty and bring human dignity to everyone, feminism is not just smart politics, it is smart global development.

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