

A FEMINIST

ACTION AGENDA

FOR CANADA'S GLOBAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19



WHY THE WORLD NEEDS A FEMINIST RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is having the most profound impacts on those already experiencing poverty and marginalization, in Canada and around the world. As the virus spreads, the world's poorest countries – including those already experiencing high levels of conflict – will be hit hardest. In every country, the pandemic will exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Catastrophic health outbreaks have profound differential impacts due to the gendered social determinants of health. As the health crisis ripples out into the economy, families and social institutions, these gender dimensions multiply. Unless human rights and gender justice are prioritized from the onset in actions to combat COVID-19, gender inequalities around the world will be exacerbated, and hard-won gains will be rolled back. We cannot let that happen. Too much is at stake.

2020 was envisioned as a year to celebrate and make significant new progress on gender equality. Plans were underway to accelerate global efforts to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. COVID-19 has only underscored the urgency to resume these initiatives. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has warned COVID-19 is deepening existing inequalities – it is having “devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls” that could reverse the limited progress towards gender equality achieved over the past 25 years.

Gender inequality holds back progress on governance, human rights, peace, economic performance, food security, health, well-being, environmental protection, and social progress.² The security and stability of our countries is linked to the status of women, transgender, and non-binary people. This is why women's rights and gender justice must be at the heart of the global response to COVID-19.

CANADA'S ADDED VALUE

Canada is well-placed to play a leadership role in ensuring the global response to COVID-19 takes an intersectional feminist approach, with its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), Feminist Foreign Policy, National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security, Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) framework, and its strong commitments to human rights and universally accessible public services.³ The federal government has made feminist investments domestically; for example, the \$50M of funding to help women's shelters invest in personal protective equipment and social distancing protocols, to keep their doors open during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴

Internationally, the government's \$159.5 million in funding⁵ to support global efforts to fight COVID-19 is laudable – as is its decision, as part of the G20, to suspend debt payments for the world's poorest countries.⁶ We also welcome Canada's statements in support of human rights and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). However, much more is needed to address the unfolding crisis. The UN estimates developing countries will need \$500 billion in aid to face the health, social and economic impacts of the coronavirus.⁷ Significant new international assistance spending is needed from OECD countries like Canada. This aid must focus not only on saving lives but also on addressing the deep-seated inequalities and the roots of conflicts that make people – particularly women and gender-diverse people – in low-income countries so vulnerable in the first place.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN, GIRLS AND GENDER-DIVERSE PEOPLE

Women, girls and gender-diverse people around the world face specific risks, vulnerabilities, and challenges in the fight against COVID-19. Addressing them is key to an effective response and to upholding progress across every measure of development.



Women make up the majority of frontline workers: Women make up 70% of health care workers globally⁸ and put their lives on the line every day caring for those infected by COVID-19. Where health systems are weak and absent, women fill the gaps, often without financial support or protective equipment.



Women's jobs are hit hardest by COVID-19: Women are over-represented in the hospitality, retail and service industries that have been hardest hit by COVID-19. Many of these jobs are precarious, poorly paid and informal, leaving workers with no social protection to fall back on. Migrant women, sex workers and informal workers, in particular, have lost their livelihoods but are unable to apply for emergency government benefits, where available, because of the marginalized and/or criminalized nature of their work.⁹



Ongoing conflict and war impede local efforts to address COVID-19: While the UN Secretary-General has called for a global ceasefire, fighting in many war-torn countries continues unabated. This means local grassroots women's organizations are dealing with both the impact of ongoing conflict and violence and the challenges of containing a public health crisis while people are fleeing and hospitals are being bombed. Lack of water for proper hygiene, as well as access to basic medical supplies, is common in conflict-affected countries – increasing people's vulnerability to COVID-19.



Violence against women and girls, and sexual and gender-based violence (VAWG/SGBV), is increasing: Statistics from China, Italy, France and Brazil, as well as reports from partners in El Salvador and Bangladesh, show national rates of violence against women and girls and sexual and gender-based violence (VAWG/SGBV) have increased as much as 30% in the first weeks of lockdown.¹⁰ Some VAWG/SGBV services are being suspended in efforts to avoid spreading the virus, whilst others are suffering funding cuts as money is diverted to other COVID-19 related priorities.



Women's unpaid care work is higher than ever: Women's culturally and socially-constructed roles as primary caregivers mean they do three times as much unpaid care work at home than men.¹¹ With the virus spreading, women's care load is increasing significantly as schools and daycares close and family members become ill. When markets close, it is women who have to travel further to find supplies. It is often women who have to step back from paid work to take on additional caring responsibilities, a situation compounded by the lack of pay equity around the world.



SRHR services are harder to access: As health care systems falter under the pressure to treat COVID-19 patients, essential sexual and reproductive health care are harder to access and funding and services are being diverted to COVID-19 related priorities. COVID-19 related disruptions could leave 47 million women in low- and middle-income countries unable to use modern contraceptives, leading to a projected 7 million additional unintended pregnancies.¹² Anti-rights movements, moreover, are already using the pandemic as an excuse to roll back hard-won sexual and reproductive health and rights.¹³ For example, Poland, which already restricts abortion, has introduced legislation to further restrict abortion access, while people are unable to engage in mass protests against the proposed legislation due to social distancing policies.¹⁴



Women and LGBTI human rights defenders are at risk: Many governments such as Colombia, Iran, the Philippines and Syria have implemented militarized measures to curb the pandemic. Lockdowns, curfews, roadblocks, street policing and surveillance all put women and LGBTI human rights defenders—who were already at great risk—at increased risk for repression. For example, Carlota Isabel Salinas Péres of the Organización Femenina Popular, a grassroots organization in Colombia, was murdered while complying with stay-at-home orders; her attackers, therefore, knew where to find her. While some governments, such as Iran and Syria, have released certain prisoners to contain the spread of the virus in prisons, women political prisoners have not been released—placing them at high risk for the virus.¹⁵



Sorely-needed medical aid is blocked by sanctions: Despite the plea from the UN Secretary-General, Canada continues to impose sanctions on 20 nations, including Lebanon, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Nicaragua and Yemen. This puts many of the world's most vulnerable people at risk, preventing life-saving medical and other humanitarian aid from reaching them. As the UN leader noted: "Let us remember that we are only as strong as the weakest health system in our interconnected world."



The effects of COVID-19 on women are often invisible: Further complicating all of these factors is the absence of sex/gender-disaggregated data. If we are to address the gender differences and inequalities in the pandemic and craft appropriate responses, robust data are needed to provide a clear and complete picture of what is happening.

THE 5-S'S: PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE CANADA'S FEMINIST LEADERSHIP ON COVID-19

SOUTHERN-LED

Women and gender-diverse people are particularly affected by COVID-19 and are at the forefront of defending hard-won rights that risk being rolled back during this pandemic. Local feminist actors are often best suited to do work that addresses the specific needs and challenges experienced by women and gender-diverse people, while also challenging entrenched gender norms. As established and trusted members of their communities, they deliver assistance quickly and in culturally appropriate ways. They help move beyond 'one-size-fits-all' interventions and tailor assistance to particular communities.

Despite the central role women's rights actors play in addressing gender inequality, they are among the most poorly funded civil society organizations worldwide. COVID-19 is making this problem worse, with donors channelling most COVID-19 response funds through UN agencies where resources do not trickle

down to feminist movements. While these multilateral institutions do important work, this way of funding has the potential to result in a bottleneck, making it impossible for the COVID-19 response to reach scale fast enough. Funding more grassroots decentralized action would make it possible to reach more people in more places, and therefore be more effective.

The response to COVID-19 will be highly dependent on local and national actors since international travel is restricted and global logistics are fragmented. This is a key opportunity to make lasting progress towards meeting localization commitments. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted why this can't wait any longer.

Given the strong gender impacts of health outbreaks like COVID-19, women and gender-diverse people must be part of decision-making around the response. Prioritizing Southern women's voices and collective leadership will not only save more lives but also set us up for a healthier and more equitable future.

EXAMPLES OF HOW **WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS ARE SHIFTING THEIR WORK TO FIGHT COVID-19:**

The **Equality Fund's** partner in South Sudan is actively seeking resources for women who work in the markets handling food, who are the primary breadwinners for their families, and who do not have access to information about COVID-19.

In Lebanon, an Equality Fund partner has adjusted its work to distribute pertinent health information to marginalized groups, including communities and camps that are hosting refugees from Syria. While they have suspended in-person field activities, they found that many of the Syrian refugee women with whom they work have adequate access to the internet. They have been able to distribute official health resources in this way.

Another Equality Fund partner in the DRC is using community radio to inform hard to reach communities about public health priorities and measures.

In Burma, **Inter Pares** partners acted quickly to increase their public health activities such as building handwashing stations, distributing soap and creating educational materials like posters, radio announcements and even short videos.

Staff at Likhaan Center for Women's Health in the Philippines (another Inter Pares partner) are translating World Health Organization recommendations and updates into Tagalog, and have created posters and flyers. Community mobilizers are distributing the information materials in their neighbourhoods and talking to people about preventive measures. Likhaan has also made the new resources available for other local health organizations to share.

In Guatemala, **Oxfam Canada's** partner Asociación Nuevo Horizonte has responded to the crisis by adapting its local radio communications campaign in Chisec, Alta Verapaz to focus on messages to vulnerable Indigenous women facing violence in the home during COVID-19 confinement.

Oxfam's partner in Bangladesh, Mari Naitree, is providing food, non-food items and public health information to domestic workers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This group is highly vulnerable during this lockdown period due to lack of income, safety, food and healthcare.

SUSTAINABLE

The COVID-19 crisis will have long-term and far-reaching impacts that will require sustainable funding for women's rights and LGBTI rights organizations and social movements taking part in the response. Yet, these very organizations are facing unprecedented financial uncertainty as grants get cancelled, donations decrease, and anticipated revenues from events fail to materialize. With many organizations already operating on shoestring budgets, often without core funding, there is a real risk these organizations will not survive the crisis.

A feminist approach to COVID-19 must ensure quality funding for these organizations. This means funding that is long term, flexible, and predictable, allowing Southern organizations to define their approaches and priorities. Such funding should cover core costs, such as the overheads necessary to sustain an organization such as rent and equipment. Currently, women's rights and LGBTI rights organizations report that funding is usually tied to specific objectives and activities and is often short term. The lack of quality funding makes it difficult to build and maintain capacity and develop institutionally, as organizations are unable to offer long-term job security to staff and sometimes have to scale back when there are funding gaps, losing trained staff and cutting back on programs and service delivery.

Feminist funding should flow through different funding mechanisms to ensure access for a variety of groups, including unregistered groups and coalitions. This should include funding through partnerships with women's funds, feminist international development organizations based in Canada, and INGOs, but also through southern-based regional funds and consortiums which bring together organizations with complementary skill sets.

STANDALONE

While gender analysis and responses must be mainstreamed throughout all COVID-19 response efforts, standalone programming is essential to addressing every dimension of the pandemic's impact on women, girls and gender-diverse people. Standalone funding creates the space for programming that addresses women's rights holistically and supports women to work on issues they prioritize. Core women's rights issues, like child and early forced marriage (CEFM), sexual exploitation and abuse at the hands of health workers and security personnel, sexual violence during crises, intimate partner violence, unpaid care work, safe and sustainable livelihoods, social norms change work, women's leadership and political participation, and the most neglected areas of SRHR (identified as safe abortion, advocacy for SRHR, comprehensive contraceptive access, and adolescent SRHR including sexuality education) can only be adequately addressed with specific, targeted programs and initiatives. Standalone funding is also needed to properly address LGBTI rights issues, including barriers in accessing healthcare, harassment and violence.

SAFETY AND RIGHTS

As states undertake extraordinary measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, there is a risk that some governments will impose and justify disproportionate restrictions on civic space and fundamental human rights that will have long-term impacts. Some restrictions to human rights may be imposed during the pandemic but they must never be discriminatory, and they must be necessary, legitimate, proportionate, time-bound and no broader than strictly required. Some rights, including the right to life and the prohibition of torture, should never be restricted. Any constraints on human rights

must be strictly adhered to, reassessed on an ongoing basis, and lifted or eased as soon as possible.¹⁶ All states must put in place robust oversight measures to strengthen human rights protections and guard against potential human rights violations during the current public health crisis.¹⁷

Vulnerable communities such as women and LGBTI human rights defenders face even greater risks than usual when they are forced to stay home since opponents know where they are and can easily target them. Protection measures are also more difficult to implement in these circumstances. For example, in Mexico, police withdrew police protection to women human rights defender Clemencia Adelaida Salas Salazar because of social distancing regulations.¹⁸

Furthermore, as the (predominantly male) security sector is mobilized to enforce emergency measures, women's rights and safety are at risk. In many countries, there is potential for human rights violations, including gender-based harassment, intrusive physical examinations at checkpoints, and extortion.

HUMAN SECURITY

Particularly worrisome are the impacts of COVID-19 on women in conflict countries where active combat and other forms of military engagement prevent a coordinated, resourced and effective public health response to the pandemic. As the global community turns inwards, countries may decrease peacekeeping, disengage from international mediation and

peace processes, and deprioritize the inclusion of women in peace processes. This leaves communities vulnerable to new eruptions in violence, and women community leaders double-burdened with providing frontline support to those impacted by conflict while trying to help communities prevent local outbreaks of COVID-19.

The pandemic has raised important questions about what makes us secure. It is time to renew discussions of human security. Arguably, military stockpiles are of little use while there are shortages of Personal Protective Equipment, soap and disinfectant.

Early on in the COVID-19 crisis, UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued an appeal for an immediate ceasefire in all corners of the globe to “reinforce diplomatic action, help create conditions for the delivery of lifesaving aid, and bring hope to places that are among the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.” This call was a recognition that the pandemic is having profound social, economic and political consequences, including relating to international peace and security.

The call has been endorsed by an ever-growing number of Member States, including Canada, but much more needs to be done to ensure the call for a ceasefire translates into the stoppage of conflict on the ground. Peace and the cessation of violence is a prerequisite for effective public health responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS¹

Ensure women's rights and gender justice are at the heart of COVID-19 global response and recovery measures by:

- Applying a gender lens/GBA+ to all international economic stimulus and recovery policies and packages;
- Establishing meaningful consultation processes with women's rights, feminist, and LGBTI groups – during and following the pandemic – to strengthen intersectional analyses as part of recovery plans;
- Ensuring 15% of all Canada's international COVID-19 response initiatives have gender equality as the principal objective;
- Investing in capacity building (within GAC and in bilateral/international partners) to ensure regular documentation and analysis of sex/age/gender-disaggregated data;
- Providing transparent and regular reporting on COVID-19 response initiatives and how GBA+ has influenced program design.

Increase women's rights and feminist movements' resources and leadership by:

- Providing a 1-year top-up of unrestricted funding and/or additional funding flexibility to agencies implementing the Women's Voice and Leadership Program, to safely sustain their programming and strengthen emergency responses;

- Increasing funding for local women's rights and LGBTI organizations through the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives and to women and gender-diverse people in conflict-affected countries through Canada's peace and stability program;
- Launching a new program to support women's peacebuilding organizations (recognizing many of these organizations are pivoting to provide COVID-19 support) during the 20th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 in October 2020;
- Investing in women's funds globally to quickly disperse emergency funds to local women's rights, youth and LGBTI organizations, and to establish longer-term funding relationships going forward;
- Launching the "Canada Equality and Inclusion Fund," the first tranche of the new funding for global LGBTI human rights, as soon as possible – adapting it to ensure it can be used to respond to the impact of COVID-19;
- Ensuring, whenever possible, funding to women's rights and LGBTI rights organizations and feminist movements is core, flexible, and multi-year;
- Announcing a standalone initiative to expand digital access and digital security for women's rights organizations and feminist movements;

¹ These recommendations are a compilation of ideas from the contributing organizations. They have not all been officially endorsed by each organization.

- Opening spaces for the participation of women's rights and LGBTI rights organizations in discussions about pandemic responses. Encouraging national governments to work with, and alongside, local activists when responding to COVID-19 and building longer-term recovery plans;
- Emphasizing, in multilateral and bilateral discussions, the importance of local, community-based responses to COVID-19 and other public health emergencies;
- Continuing to support programming with a specific focus on women's rights, LGBTI rights, and feminist movements that had been planned pre-COVID-19.
- Supporting rural women's movements that are at the forefront of a response to the nexus between gender equality, climate change and food security.

Prioritize VAWG/SGBV and SRHR programming in COVID-19 response by:

- Recognizing and maintaining VAWG/SGBV and SRH services, including safe abortion, as essential services – and addressing barriers to access (e.g. via telemedicine, comprehensive cost coverage and the easing of administrative and legal barriers);
- Developing strategies to address or mitigate shortages in SRH supplies/commodities (e.g. contraceptives, medical abortion, menstrual products, etc.);
- Integrating SRHR into COVID-19 responses, but also funding and sustaining comprehensive, standalone SRHR programming, particularly in neglected areas such as adolescent SRHR, comprehensive sexuality education, comprehensive contraceptive care, safe abortion care, advocacy for SRHR and SRHR in emergency settings;
- Providing standalone funding for VAWG/GBV programming, particularly initiatives shedding light on the risks of increased child and early forced marriage, sexual exploitation and abuse at the hands of health workers and security personnel, sexual violence during crises, and intimate partner violence;
- Supporting programming and research by young feminist organizations, especially forward-looking initiatives that explore future innovative ways of responding to the increase in VAWG/GBV in crises and pandemics, including changing social norms;
- Ensuring Canada supports the strengthening of accessible, universal, public healthcare systems in the Global South.

Incorporate care analysis in the COVID-19 response to reduce and redistribute unpaid care responsibilities by:

- Expanding cash transfer programs to get more money into the hands of women. For example, offering cash for unpaid care work or to women who had been working in the informal economy and are unable to access government supports;
- Supporting access to personal protective equipment for those providing frontline care;
- Providing hygiene kits and ensuring adequate access to water and sanitation (for example subsidizing water for low-income families) to relieve women of the time burden of meeting higher water/sanitation needs;
- Supporting programming and advocacy around care provision, to redistribute unpaid care within households. This could include subsidized support for community care cooperatives, paid child and family care, childcare support to frontline workers, paid paternity leave, etc.;
- Highlighting the importance of investing in the care economy in international and bilateral discussions.

Support respect for human rights and protect women human rights defenders and LGBTI rights defenders during pandemic responses by:

- Leading the development of a global strategy, as proposed by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, for the promotion and protection of women and LGBTI human rights defenders to ensure the safety of defenders during the pandemic and beyond;
- Pressuring national governments to release political prisoners (many of whom are women human rights defenders) as they are at high risk of human rights abuses and COVID-19 infections as the virus flourishes in crowded conditions;
- Speaking out in multilateral fora and bilateral discussions on the importance of human rights and respect for women and LGBTI defenders and encouraging states to adopt robust oversight measures to strengthen human rights protection and guarding against potential human rights violations;
- Providing financial resources to local and regional organizations that work with and support defenders – both for urgent action and long-term work;
- Supporting local or grassroots women's rights, youth and LGBTI organizations to monitor and document security-sector action, militarized responses, and access to justice;
- Recognizing and investing in the 'holistic/collective care' strategies of women and LGBTI rights defenders;
- Addressing impunity for human rights abuses linked to COVID-19 responses, with a focus in conflict-affected contexts.

Support national and global initiatives prioritizing human security over militarized solutions by:

- Taking leadership in advancing the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire, and promoting a feminist approach to all ceasefires (see box on this page);
- Shifting money from military expenditures to health care, social protection and economic recovery. This could include transforming arms and defence sector manufacturing to invest in alternative energy, civilian aircraft and shipping, fire-fighting equipment, and food distribution.
- Heeding the recommendation of the UN Secretary-General to waive sanctions imposed on countries such as North Korea, South Sudan, Venezuela and Iran. This will ensure important access to essential health supplies, medical support and other important humanitarian assistance to marginalized civilians during this time of COVID-19, and beyond;
- Accelerating the implementation of Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security by increasing human and financial resources and diplomatic leadership.

FIVE FEMINIST PRINCIPLES FOR A MEANINGFUL CEASEFIRE:

- » **Ensure the full and meaningful participation of women and civil society groups**—as well as religious, ethnic, or other marginalized groups—in the negotiation, management and monitoring of the ceasefire.
- » **Hear and act on social, economic, humanitarian priorities**—and not simply be limited to the priorities of conflict parties.
- » **Prioritize full and non-discriminatory urgent access to services for survivors** of the full continuum of violence against women, girls and members of LGBTQI+ communities, and identify steps to prevent and respond to this violence using survivor-centred, trauma-sensitive and stress-informed approaches.
- » **Commit to developing practical measures to ensure the sustainability of the ceasefire** towards building a permanent peace, including setting concrete goals for the next stage of the peace process and negotiating a peace agreement.
- » **Reallocate military expenditure to fund local civil society-led efforts to lead the way in recovery, reconciliation and reconstruction.** As funds have been pulled, paused and/or redistributed during this pandemic, the future of many women and civil society groups is now at risk. Redirect military expenditure to responding to the pandemic, with specific, targeted allocations to local, women-led organizations.

- 1 <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/put-women-and-girls-centre-efforts-recover-covid-19>
- 2 <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-first-political-order/9780231194662>
- 3 <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2020/04/human-rights-implications-of-covid-19.html>
- 4 <https://globalnews.ca/news/6778731/coronavirus-womens-indigenous-assault-centres/>
- 5 <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2020/04/canadas-support-for-international-efforts-to-fight-the-covid-19-pandemic.html>
- 6 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-g20-countries-agree-debt-freeze-for-worlds-poorest-countries/>
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- 9 https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/pressreleaseandstatementarchive/2020/april/20200408_sex-workers-covid-19
- 10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>
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- 12 <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital>
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