

Keynote Address at the Third Annual Birdsall House Conference on Women

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Introduction

Thank you for that kind introduction.

Let me begin by thanking Masood, Nancy, and the leadership and scholars of C-G-D for hosting this important event at such a critical time. To bring together this level of expertise in one place to discuss the links between women and girls’ reproductive choices and their economic empowerment - is one of the many reasons we appreciate working with the Centre.

Today’s conversations are an essential opportunity to highlight the evidence-base that demonstrates the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights FOR economic empowerment. What is clearer to me, to Canadians, is that we now understand that this link is more than just a correlation.

We now know that SRHR **leads** to economic empowerment. We recognize this in our Feminist International Assistance Policy and our rights-based approach to international development.

I’d also like to acknowledge the advice C-G-D provided in the lead-up to the Peacekeeping Summit Canada hosted in Vancouver last month and for your thoughtful input into Canada’s consultations on the Development Finance Institute, which will be operational in the coming months.

C-G-D and think-tanks like it are invaluable partners for us as we work toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030.

Achieving this goal will be no small feat.

- 700 million people living on less than \$1.90 a day,
- and even more women and girls facing life choices restricted by social and cultural norms, and economic barriers.

Working together to eradicate poverty in the 21st century means taking a closer look at what we mean by poverty. It isn't simply living on less than \$1.90 a day. It means looking and understanding poverty in terms of choice and opportunity.

Poverty is also unequal access to resources to achieve sustainable livelihoods. It is lack of capacity and resources to overcome and adapt to climate change. And for far too many women and girls, it is the denial of their agency and autonomy.

With often disproportionate family and economic responsibilities and burdens, the specific needs of women and girls are also under-financed. This ranges from contraception to nutrition, education and skills development, as well as targeted support in humanitarian settings.

This means that donors need to change their approach.

In Canada, we have done this through our Feminist International Assistance Policy which clearly establishes SDG 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) as our entry point for Agenda 2030.

And it is critical that we address the financing gap for achieving the SDGs—something that is estimated at 2.5 trillion \$ a year.

To do this, we need to think, work, finance, and deliver development differently.

As we establish new partnerships with non-traditional donors, like private sector businesses and investors, pension funds and philanthropic foundations, we need to make sure that SDG financing is based on a clear understanding of the different needs of women and girls, and the different gendered impacts of our policies.

Similarly, a gender-based analysis of development problems and solutions needs to inform our efforts to promote innovation in both developing countries and our partner organizations.

At the same time, these gender-based needs must be given due consideration in legislation, policies, and programs. This is especially important for financial inclusion as well as access to and control over resources.

In countries with a high birth rate, the distinction is significant.

Because make no mistake: it is impossible to support sustained poverty reduction when half the population is not able to decide about everything from family finances to contraception and education.

One of the most important ways we can reduce poverty and expand economic opportunities for all is to support the sexual and reproductive health choices of women and girls.

Obstacles to Empowering Women

As it stands, more than 150 countries have laws that actively discriminate against women.

More than 15 million girls are married before they turn 18. And 225 million women don't have access to the contraceptive method of their choice.

As a result, more than 25 million women and adolescent girls have unsafe abortions every year—an unacceptable and deeply avoidable outcome.

And shockingly, one in every three women experiences physical or sexual violence.

On the other hand, we know that when legal and social barriers that discriminate against women are eliminated (often through the efforts of women themselves), remarkable change happens: Women have better access to opportunities and assets, including capital.

They start businesses, get decent jobs. And they invest the profits in their families and communities.

When women are educated, they are able to make informed choices. Their lives change.

They tend to marry later, have fewer children, provide better health and nutrition for their families, and earn more income than women who didn't have the advantage of schooling.

But access to education needs to go hand-in-hand with access to sexual and reproductive health care services. We know this from our own experience in Canada.

We also know this through research. Studies in Indonesia demonstrated that local access to family planning helped girls stay in school for almost a full extra year. These interventions were **three times as effective** to keep girls in classrooms, compared to investments made in the quality of their education.

We need to do everything we can to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect.

I mentioned girls for a reason: Adolescent girls are often overlooked. They face multiple forms of marginalization based on both their gender and age.

When their needs are ignored, they are less able to access sexual and reproductive health services and make informed choices. This leads to devastating consequences.

If we can help reach these girls, we can begin to interrupt a vicious cycle of poverty and oppression.

Our government wants to see women and girls fully involved in decision-making, so they can shape the services, programs and policies that affect their lives.

Yet women and girls continue to be left behind, both economically and socially, and even more so, in areas where there is conflict.

It is not accurate to think of women's rights in opposition to other rights. When anyone has their rights violated, regardless of their gender or any other aspect of identity, we all lose. When hundreds of millions of women are left behind economically, we all suffer, we all lose out on the promise of a more prosperous world.

Women and girls are leaders, workers, investors, innovators, entrepreneurs, and peacemakers. We need to better support them as they seek social and economic opportunities.

But it's not as simple as offering a loan or entrepreneurship training.

Unless we address the unequal distribution of family and community responsibilities as well as the lack of real choices available to women, we cannot expect to see lasting results.

I firmly believe that a woman's *fundamental right* to economic empowerment must include her *fundamental right* to choose in all areas of her life.

As the United Nation Population Fund – UNFPA - demonstrated in their 2016 State of the World Population Report, if we can change a 10-year-old girl's reality to one of choice, the future of the world will be very different indeed.

Our Policy

In Canada, the desire to forge a more inclusive, prosperous reality for the world's poorest people has forced us to rethink our approach to international assistance.

I started my job as Minister of International Development with a commitment to re-design Canada's approach to international development.

Based on evidence from consultations with more than 15,000 stakeholders from 65 countries—including C-G-D—we launched *Her Voice Her Choice*, Canada's new Feminist International Assistance Policy in June of this year.

It reflects and supports the Agenda 2030 to end poverty and leave no one behind.

The key objective of this new policy is to eradicate poverty and build a more peaceful, inclusive, and prosperous world.

And we believe that empowering women and girls is the most effective way of doing this, grounding our efforts through SDG 5 as a means to achieve the SDGs.

For this reason, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is the first of six, inter-related action areas for Canadian international assistance. The others are:

- Human dignity;
- Growth that works for everyone;
- Environment and climate action;
- Inclusive governance; and
- Peace and security.

Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is integrated into all of Canada's programs, including humanitarian support.

Within five years, Canada will devote at least 15 % of its bilateral international development assistance to initiatives that DIRECTLY target gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

And by 2022, we will ensure that 95 % of Canada's bilateral international development assistance will either directly target or integrate gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

To understand the scope of this change, you need to understand what our starting point was. Only 3% of our programming directly targeted gender inequality and roughly one third of all of our projects did not take into account gender equality or analysis.

And as you know, supporting women's empowerment begins with supporting organizations that champion women's rights.

That is why we are supporting local women's organizations through the new \$150 million *Voice and Leadership* initiative. Local organizations not only advocate for women's rights and access to justice, but also for women's participation in political and economic life.

Women and girls need a political voice, so they can raise public awareness and change the debate. Women and girls can help their governments and communities to understand the root causes of conflicts, and find solutions that protect the rights and interests of *everyone*.

Which brings me back to the importance of reproductive choices.

SRHR

For Canada, the link between gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights is fundamental. These rights are essential for the enjoyment of all other rights.

Women's autonomy and opportunity to seize their full potential begins with the right to control their own bodies.

So, in addition to integrating gender equality and women's empowerment across our entire policy framework, we also make an explicit link between SRHR and each of our action areas.

Sexual and reproductive rights and health are much more than simply a ‘health’ or ‘women’s’ issue. Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy recognizes these rights and opportunities as critical for economic development, progress in education, inclusive governance, effective humanitarian action, and peace and security.

As part of our feminist approach, Canada has taken concrete actions to support the full range of sexual and reproductive health services and information.

In March of this year, we committed 650 million \$ to sexual and reproductive health and rights over three years. This support will increase women’s and girls’ access to comprehensive sexuality education, contraception, family planning, safe and legal abortions, and post-abortion care.

It will also support partners who are helping to prevent gender-based violence and harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation and cutting.

Our aim – just like the theme of your event today - is to address the relationship between women’s reproductive choices and women’s economic empowerment.

SRHR and Women’s Economic Empowerment

We want women and girls everywhere to have control over their own bodies. To be able to decide if, when, how many, and with whom they have children...and to get the education to develop their full potential and participate significantly in development in their communities.

We are also committed to addressing unpaid and undervalued work and the disproportionate burden of care shouldered by women around the world—addressing these persistent inequalities, will have a transformative impact on economic growth.

And we need to find other ways to help women who are denied their human rights or who live in situations of conflict, where risks to their livelihoods threaten to undo the gains they make.

Canada is deeply committed to improving women’s and girls’ social protection and access to decent work, and to helping them become more resilient.

This is especially true for the growing number of refugees and displaced people today.

Recently, I was in Bangladesh talking to Rohingya refugees. I met with them at the border with Myanmar in informal settlements and sitting side-by-side with their host communities.

The women I met told me about the horrors they were going through...the murders, rapes and houses on fire they had witnessed, the 10 to 12 days it took to get to the border. They were starving, traumatized, and many had been sexually assaulted along the way.

These women and girls need safe environments and psycho-social support.

In a situation like this, we must not lose sight of long-term development planning, and not focus only on immediate humanitarian assistance. What is also painfully clear is that the specific SRHR needs of women and girls are often overlooked during humanitarian crises such as this.

Pregnancy and childbirth are particularly dangerous for women and girls during humanitarian crises. It is estimated that under these types of conditions, 500 women and girls die every day from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth. In line with our policy, we now ensure that our humanitarian funding includes provisions for supporting SRHR.

We also use our voice and influence within the humanitarian system to raise the importance of this targeted support with other donors and partners.

Improving our Effectiveness

So, in our new Policy, we explicitly acknowledge the importance of doing things differently and doing things better.

As we adjust and expand our programming to better serve women and girls in developing countries, we know that we must also look inward, and improve our effectiveness as a donor.

That means building feminist approaches to innovation and learning into our mechanisms and our partnerships. It means innovative financing, engaging with new partners like the private sector, and adapting longstanding strategic partnerships including with research institutions.

The Canadian government is committed to supporting evidence-based decision-making, - and an important contribution to that process is gender-informed research.

Through partners like C-G-D, and Canada's International Development Research Centre, and others, we want to support research that is anchored in knowledge of local needs and the cultural, social and political dynamics that affect the reality of women and girls.

To continue to make progress, it will be important to provide concrete evidence and to gather support and momentum toward transforming the social norms holding women back.

Canada's new Policy is grounded in inclusion. It is not simply a policy about women and girls.

Our Policy is also an opportunity to engage men and boys. Their role is critical for our efforts to change social and cultural norms, especially in relation to power dynamics and issues of consent surrounding sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Conclusion

Colleagues, we know that women and girls already contribute to the economic well-being of their families, communities and countries. And we know the importance of girls and women being able to make reproductive choices.

Now we are purposefully linking these two realities.

The evidence that reproductive choices have an enormous impact on the life choices young women make has never been more compelling.

I want to thank the Centre for Global Development for bringing together researchers and practitioners who want to tackle this essential issue in support of advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls. These discussions are essential for shaping wider global conversations on economic development and influencing the policies that matter most to people's lives.

I look forward to working with this community to inform Canada's evidence-based Feminist International Assistance Policy and its implementation in the years ahead. Thank you.