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# A Feminist Approach: Gender Equality in Humanitarian Action

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This Action Area policy provides additional guidance on what Canada aims to achieve through its humanitarian action as outlined in the Feminist International Assistance Policy. This policy guides Canada's humanitarian assistance programming, and advocacy and strategic policy efforts, through targeted and crosscutting approaches.

## Context

Canada has adopted a Feminist International Assistance Policy to reduce poverty and build a more peaceful, inclusive and prosperous world. Canada knows that promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls is the most effective way to achieve this goal. Canada's feminist approach is human rights-based and inclusive. It is strategic and focused, transformative and activist, and evidence-based and accountable.

In terms of humanitarian assistance, this means that Canada supports gender-responsive humanitarian action, which is needed to address the specific needs and priorities of people in vulnerable situations, particularly women and girls, to support their empowerment and to ensure that our aid has a greater and more lasting impact. By adopting a feminist approach, Canada is thus determined to respect humanitarian principles in the delivery of its humanitarian assistance by ensuring that this assistance appropriately meets the specific needs of people affected by a crisis. Canada knows that adopting a gender-responsive approach to humanitarian assistance also strengthens our entire humanitarian response.

When questions of gender equality are not sufficiently considered in the implementation of humanitarian action, the effectiveness and impact of humanitarian assistance diminishes. It can even be detrimental to the people we are trying to help. Insufficient consideration of pre-existing vulnerabilities means that humanitarian responses do not systematically or adequately meet the specific needs of women and girls. For example, when responses do not take the specific needs and rights of women and girls in displacement camps into account, such as safe places to wash and access to toilets, women are more likely to face sexual and gender-based violence, further undermining their security, dignity and well-being. Women also play a key role in their families and their communities. When they cannot meet their own basic needs, the entire community suffers. For example, when humanitarian responses include specific measures to facilitate women's access to food supplies, the level of hunger in households drops.

Although women and girls are disproportionately affected by conflicts and natural disasters, they also have the ability to contribute to humanitarian efforts and reduce suffering and, beyond humanitarian responses, to facilitate reconciliation, participate in peace processes and rebuild their communities. However, women and girls are too often excluded from the decision-making processes and their potential as agents of change is ignored. Yet, as they trigger social upheaval, crises also offer opportunities to change discriminatory social norms and power imbalances. Humanitarian actors need to recognise and seize these opportunities to contribute to changing unequal power relations and avoid reinforcing discriminatory social norms. Supporting women's rights groups during humanitarian responses gives women a stronger collective voice and enables them to lobby for their own priorities and for equal decision making. Men and boys can also be strong allies to promote and support women's rights and they need to be engaged to achieve sustainable gender equality.

Humanitarian actors, including Canada, are responsible for improving humanitarian practices in order to better identify and meet the specific needs of vulnerable and marginalized individuals. However, the implementation of gender equality policies and strategies has not sufficiently been integrated into the way humanitarian assistance is delivered. Humanitarian actors must remove systemic constraints and obstacles at every level and invest the necessary resources to ensure the full and systematic consideration of gender equality in all humanitarian interventions.

## Canada's priorities

As a recognized leader in humanitarian assistance, Canada works with other actors in the global humanitarian system to save lives, alleviate suffering and support the dignity of those affected by crises. Canada's International Humanitarian Assistance is intended to meet the needs of people affected by human induced crises and natural disasters, by supporting swift, coordinated humanitarian interventions based on humanitarian principles and needs.

### ▼ Canada's approach to humanitarian action

In accordance with its commitment to Principles and Good Practices of Humanitarian Donorship, Canada's humanitarian engagement is:

- **Principled:** Canada's humanitarian assistance supports organizations that adhere to humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.
- **Needs-based:** Canada allocates its humanitarian assistance funding to respond proportionately and appropriately to provide protection and assistance to crisis-affected populations.
- **Gender-responsive:** Canada's humanitarian assistance responds to the specific and intersectional needs and priorities of vulnerable and marginalized individuals, particularly women and girls, recognizes their knowledge and abilities, and ensures that they are consulted and are able to equally participate in making and implementing decisions.
- **Innovative:** Canada adopts a feminist approach and supports financial and other innovative partnerships and initiatives likely to have a greater impact for people in

need.

- **Timely:** Canada provides swift and early support in response to humanitarian emergencies to save lives, reduce needs, improve humanitarian outcomes and mitigate long-term impacts.
- **Coordinated:** Canada adopts a feminist government-wide approach that brings together diplomatic, humanitarian, development, and peace and security efforts, and collaborates with other humanitarian stakeholders to avoid duplicating effort and to maximize the effectiveness of implementation.

As part of its approach, Canada allocates its humanitarian assistance taking into account levels of need, conflict intensity, displacement and food insecurity.

The increase in the number and intensity of armed conflicts, as well as the scope and frequency of natural disasters, exacerbated by the effects of climate change, has resulted in unprecedented humanitarian needs. Faced with the growing divide between humanitarian needs and available resources, along with the divide between the specific needs of women and girls and the resources allocated, Canada and the rest of the international community constantly strive to improve the effectiveness of the international humanitarian system, as can be seen in our Agenda for Humanity and Grand Bargain commitments. By encouraging more transparent, predictable and flexible funding and better-targeted assistance with more accountability toward the populations in question, the humanitarian system aims to more effectively meet the differentiated needs of those affected by crises. Comprehensive approaches that bring together development, peacebuilding and humanitarian efforts are also needed to achieve long term solutions for people affected by crises and ultimately achieve a more inclusive, peaceful and prosperous world.

#### ▼ Gender-Responsive Humanitarian Action in Comprehensive Approaches

Comprehensive collective efforts are needed to bridge the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and achieve long-term solutions for people affected by crisis. Within its life-saving mandate, humanitarian assistance can contribute to building an enabling environment for a more inclusive, peaceful and prosperous world.

Gender-responsive humanitarian action can play a key role by recognising the potential of women and girls as powerful agents of change and supporting their agency, empowerment and leadership. To contribute to building strong foundations for sustainable gender equality through gender-responsive humanitarian action, Canada:

- Supports gender-transformative humanitarian action, where and when possible, particularly through initiatives that address unequal power relations, and build resilience and self-reliance capacities;
- Recognises and supports existing local capacities, systems and structures, including grassroots organisations, women's rights organisations, as well as formal and informal health, education, legal and governance systems;

- Encourages long-term investments in livelihoods and inclusive access to employment for affected populations.

More progress must be made to change how we provide humanitarian assistance. Through its Feminist International Assistance Policy, and the Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action, Canada has improved the integration of gender equality considerations so that its overall humanitarian assistance better meets the specific needs of people affected by crisis. Canada has also increased the share of its humanitarian assistance that meets specific needs, such as sexual and reproductive health needs and those related to sexual and gender-based violence.

This policy lays out how Canada pursues its efforts to increase the gender-responsiveness of humanitarian action through targeted and crosscutting approaches in four key areas:

1. Humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law
2. Sexual and gender-based violence in the context of humanitarian crises
3. Sexual and reproductive health during humanitarian interventions
4. Empowerment of women and girls

The actions taken in these four areas contribute towards Canada's wider approach to humanitarian action to improve assistance to people in need during humanitarian crises.

This policy supports the overarching 2030 Agenda principle of leaving no one behind and contributes to fulfilling Agenda for Humanity and Grand Bargain commitments made by Canada to address and reduce humanitarian need, risk and vulnerability. The implementation of this policy is part of Canada's feminist approach to deliver transformational change to those most in need.

## **1. Humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law**

Humanitarian principles promote an approach guided by humanitarian needs, thereby requiring humanitarian action that fully meets the differentiated needs of women, men, girls and boys affected by crises. The humanitarian system does not systematically take into account poverty and pre-existing vulnerabilities linked to identity factors. In addition, widespread violations of international humanitarian law, including increased attacks against humanitarian actors and medical personnel, as well as the obstruction of aid, increasingly compromise humanitarian access and prevent humanitarian assistance from reaching those most in need.

To help address these gender equality issues, Canada:

- requires that all humanitarian initiatives it supports integrate into their design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, gender equality considerations with an intersectional approach including factors such as gender, age, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity, Indigenous identity and ethnic or religious affiliation, as informed by a gender-based analysis that focuses on human rights (GBA+);

- engages with humanitarian actors to increase system accountability in terms of gender-responsive humanitarian action, including in Canada's efforts to reform the system;
- promotes the integration of gender-based analysis in needs assessments and in humanitarian response plans and supports the collection and analysis of data disaggregated by sex, age and other diversity factors; and
- supports the implementation of gender equality policies in field operations, including by building capacity, coordination, knowledge and data, and by supporting research, innovation and evidence-based decision making.

To help preserve the humanitarian space, Canada:

- advocates at all levels for respect of humanitarian principles and compliance with international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international refugee law;
- promotes and supports greater accountability for violations;
- defends and supports unfettered and safe access for humanitarian workers, including medical personnel; and
- collaborates with humanitarian and other stakeholders to defend the rights of those who are most vulnerable and marginalized in times of crisis, including the right to access life-saving humanitarian assistance.

▼ Canada supports humanitarian actors that adhere to the humanitarian principles

**Humanity:** Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.

**Neutrality:** Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

**Impartiality:** Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.

**Independence:** Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to where humanitarian action is being implemented.

These principles provide the foundations for humanitarian action. They are central to establishing and maintaining access to affected populations, whether in a natural disaster or a complex emergency, such as armed conflict.

## 2. Sexual and gender-based violence in the context of humanitarian crises

In humanitarian crises, the collapse of social structures and lawlessness combined with pre-existing gender inequalities increases the risk of exposure to sexual and gender-based violence. As well, human rights are disregarded, and women and girls become particularly susceptible to rape, child, early and forced marriages, infanticide and sexual exploitation. In many armed conflicts, men and boys, particularly adolescent boys, are also the targets of sexual violence. These acts of violence, in violation of international humanitarian law, are often deadly, and if the victims survive, the physical and psychological after-effects prevent them from accessing essential and immediate assistance and, along with their communities, from being able to heal in the long term.

In order to ensure that overall humanitarian action integrates or supports prevention, mitigation and response strategies for sexual and gender-based violence, Canada:

- supports the supply of medical assistance, including sexual and reproductive health care and psychosocial and economic assistance, to survivors as well as the establishment of safe places;
- supports awareness activities, including activities to involve men and boys;
- strengthens human capacity and techniques in terms of prevention and mitigation of and response to sexual and gender-based violence;
- continues its efforts to strengthen the field implementation of prevention and response strategies for sexual and gender-based violence through its leadership, including in the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies;<sup>1</sup>
- fosters complementarity and coordination with development and peace-building efforts to strengthen protection against gender-based violence and the accountability of perpetrators, including through support for independent, impartial investigations and evidence gathering;
- champions the rights and dignity of women and girls within global humanitarian forums, arguing for the integration of prevention and response measures for sexual and gender-based violence into every stage of humanitarian intervention; and
- works with humanitarian actors to strengthen safeguarding against sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly to increase system accountability.

### **3. Sexual and reproductive health during humanitarian interventions**

In humanitarian crises, women's and girls' access to reproductive health services is often interrupted, which exposes them to unwanted pregnancies in difficult conditions and increases the risk of unsafe abortions and maternal death. Women affected by crises have a higher risk of miscarriage, premature delivery, childbirth-related complications and infertility. Providing sexual and reproductive health services in the context of humanitarian interventions helps save lives by addressing problems related to unwanted pregnancies, obstetrical complications, sexual and gender-based violence, sexually transmitted infections and a multitude of reproductive complications.

In order to ensure that global humanitarian action integrates or provides the full range of services related to sexual and reproductive health and rights, Canada:

- works to improve access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services during emergencies, in particular for women and adolescent girls;
- strengthens technical capacities and knowledge, in particular, with regard to sexual and reproductive health, emergency obstetrical services and neonatal health, contraception, abortion and post-abortion care, and the treatment of sexually transmitted infections; and
- advocates for the systematic integration of complete sexual and reproductive health services into humanitarian interventions.

## **4. Empowerment of women and girls**

Women and girls are powerful agents of change in their communities and are the best positioned to identify their needs and the best ways of meeting them. However, in an emergency, their contribution to the humanitarian decision-making process is often ignored. Moreover, current humanitarian practices do not systematically take into account the context and sociocultural obstacles women and girls face, such as limited access to education, in times of crisis.

Therefore, such practices cannot ensure the full participation of women and girls in humanitarian processes. The voices and the leadership of women and girls affected by crisis are undervalued and underused in humanitarian interventions.

In order to ensure that humanitarian action takes women's and girls' voices and their potential into account, Canada:

- supports and promotes humanitarian initiatives that systematically encourage and support the leadership, participation and decision making by women and girls in humanitarian action, including by involving men and boys;
- strengthens women's leadership in humanitarian action and supports the expertise and capacity of women leaders and local women's organizations;
- supports innovative approaches that empower women and girls and advance gender equality through humanitarian action, including by removing obstacles to quality education;
- influences the humanitarian system at every level to systematically ensure the participation, leadership and empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian processes; and
- fosters complementarity and coordination with development and peace-building efforts to ensure the active participation of women and girls and their empowerment.

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## **Footnotes**

- 1 The Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies, launched in 2013, aims to mobilize collective action from various partners (e.g. governments, donors, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, local civil society, and women's rights organizations).
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