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Agency, Voice, Choice: Empowering Women in Post-Conflict Situations

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Issue

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy outlines a strategic vision for promoting gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. However, more guidance is needed before this vision can be made a reality. Canada should leverage its comparative advantage in policy dialogue and North-South partnerships in order to establish an operational definition of women's empowerment in post-conflict contexts that can be integrated across agencies. In line with this integrated approach, Canada should harness its relationships with local organizations in order to develop innovative programming responses to gendered inequality that are locally owned and establish conditions through which women and girls may empower themselves to act as agents of peace and development.

Background

An estimated two billion people around the world currently live in countries affected by fragility, conflict or violence (World Bank 2018). Women and girls suffer disproportionately in modern conflicts, from direct gender-based violence, economic marginalization and exploitation, and socio-political exclusion. Women are also severely underrepresented in local governance structures during transitional peace processes, which often prevent the gendered dimensions of conflict and insecurity from being recognized or addressed (Paffenholz et al. 2016). Because gendered inequalities, state fragility, and violent conflicts appear to be mutually reinforcing, women's social, economic and political equality is widely considered to be a key factor in long-term peace, equitable economic growth, and more transparent and accountable governance.

While myriad international agreements stress the importance of equality of rights and opportunities for women and girls, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, achieving the goal of global gender equality remains elusive. International progress in achieving Millennium Development Goal 3 to Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women was halting (Canadian International Development Agency [CIDA] 2011a), and the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 5 for Gender Equality has proven similarly slow. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recently concluded that, despite significant increases in funding in support of gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected countries over the past decade, gender inequalities "persist in all areas of social and economic life and across all countries" (2017b, 22). The implementation of United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security has been equally challenging as more than 120 UN member states have yet to adopt National Action Plans in support of the resolution, and women's participation in formal peace processes remains disconcertingly low (Peacewomen 2017; Kumalo 2015). Ultimately there has been more rhetoric than progress, in large part because violent conflict often reinforces patriarchal systems and mindsets. The rapidly shifting landscapes of modern conflicts also render it difficult for peace-building and development agencies to respond to the basic needs of women and other marginalized groups, let alone address deep structural inequalities.

Canada's Commitments to Gender Equality

Since CIDA authored its first "Women in Development" guidelines in 1976, Canada has cultivated an international reputation as a champion of gender equality in development programming (Tiessen 2014). CIDA's 1999 Policy on Gender Equality outlined a sophisticated approach to promoting gender equality by acknowledging that the role of development organizations is to support processes through which women can challenge the deeply ingrained socio-cultural norms, beliefs, laws, and policies that perpetuate their disenfranchisement (CIDA 1999). Over the past 20 years, the promotion of gender equality has been a core priority cutting across all of Canada's international assistance policies and programs, which has resulted in significant support for the advancement of women's rights and participation across a wide range of thematic areas (Global Affairs Canada [GAC] 2017a; Bytown Consulting and C.A.C. International 2008).

Despite Canada's pioneering commitment to gender equality, the absence of an integrated strategic plan for operationalizing gender equality as a crosscutting development priority has limited the coherence and sustainability of Canada's support in this area. CIDA's inability to clarify specific targets and responsibilities led to a reliance on self-motivated staff to pursue gender initiatives, leading to diminished attention to gender as a thematic priority throughout project life cycles (Bytown 2008; CIDA 2011b; GAC 2017c). Excessive centralization also impeded CIDA's communication with local organizations, reducing Canadian responsiveness to the needs and experiences of women on the ground and limiting opportunities for dialogue and consultation with key implementing partners (CIDA 2011b). Finally, CIDA's gender equality programming remained largely blind to the gendered dynamics of conflict, and to the particular needs, interests, and agency of women in fragile and post-conflict settings.

Canada's recently unveiled Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) has sent an important signal not only that "Canada is back" on the international stage, but that Canada is serious about identifying and addressing the interconnections between gendered inequality and global insecurity. The FIAP promises to increase the proportion of Canada's international development assistance directly targeting gender equality to 15 percent by 2021-2022, while at least 80 percent

of bilateral assistance will be devoted to initiatives that integrate gender equality as a thematic priority (Government of Canada 2017). However, in many cases, programming that is directed towards gender equality goals can be relatively short term, posing a problem for ensuring long-term viability. Rather than implementing a multitude of policies, measures need to be established that would ensure the longevity of existing programs. The FIAP specifically addresses several of the operational shortcomings of CIDA's gender equality programming by explicitly acknowledging the importance of adopting "integrated approaches" — encompassing the whole range of Canada's diplomatic, trade, development, and security agencies — in order to promote gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The FIAP further articulates a commitment to taking "responsible risks" in order to improve the responsiveness of Canada's development assistance to the dynamic needs of vulnerable communities on the ground, a pledge that will be facilitated through the provision of $100 million to support Canadian civil society organizations in the development of innovative programming in partnership with local organizations, and an additional $150 million to support local women's rights organizations and movements in developing countries over the same period (ibid.). Although this language is encouraging, the specific steps Canada intends to take to meet these obligations remain unclear. The remainder of this brief outlines concrete policy options to assist Canada operationalize its recent commitments to ensure its gender equality programming will be conflict-sensitive, integrated, responsive and innovative. It highlights avenues to more effectively engage with, and support, grassroots women's organizations in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

The Nature of Empowerment

Canada's gender equality policy states: "Empowerment is about people — both women and men — taking control over their lives: setting their own agendas, gaining skills, building self-confidence, solving problems, and developing self-reliance. It is not only a collective, social and political process, but an individual one as well — and it is not only a process but an outcome too" (GAC 2017b). While this definition's central focus on enabling women and girls to take control of their own lives is commendable, empowerment has been conceptualized here at too abstract a level to be particularly useful as concrete policy guidance. This definition of empowerment does not fully capture what empowerment looks like in the context of

conflict-affected societies, nor does it articulate how, or by whom, empowerment might best be achieved in such contexts. A central paradox of empowerment, which the current definition sidesteps, is that the narrative of outsiders empowering disempowered women from the top down can itself be disempowering. The core challenge is thus to create the conditions in which women can progressively empower themselves as agents of positive and sustainable social change. In order to foster these conditions, more thought must be devoted to the question of how Canada's current definition of empowerment can be rendered actionable at the field level. What is needed is more practical guidelines and policy guidance informed by on-the-ground experience, regarding not only what empowerment means to women and girls individually and collectively — and how it might be measured in specific sectors (economic, political, and social) — but, moreover, how gender equality programming can be both conflict- and culture-sensitive.

Innovative Programming Approaches to Empowering Women and Girls

In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the capacity, credibility, and inclusivity of state institutions are typically low. Therefore, while long-term political goals in these contexts generally include establishing stability and fostering the development of legitimate and inclusive state institutions, smaller-scale efforts are needed to create opportunities for everyday women to empower themselves. Providing financial and technical support for locally legitimate women's organizations, over longer time-horizons than are typical in post-conflict programming, can help build channels through which local communities can constructively engage in dialogue with one another and with the state. Furthermore, promoting grassroots ownership of gender equality programming is crucial to creating platforms in which women and girls may empower themselves. Developing strong partnerships with local civil society organizations supports the agency of women and girls to contribute to and direct gender equality programming, and represents a more nuanced and sustainable mechanism for promoting women's empowerment, by ensuring programming is tailored to the needs of local, and often traditionally marginalized, women (OECD 2017a). Enhancing the capacity of local civil society organizations to collect and analyze data about women affected by conflict will also help solidify their role as sustainable vehicles for the long-term empowerment of women and girls.

While providing support for women's civil society organizations can help open up political space for women, in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, additional efforts are often needed to ensure the institutionalization of such inclusive platforms. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, Local Action Plans (LAPs) have been developed with civil society organizations to promote the localization of the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda. This has involved training led by civil society representatives and local officers, and creating safe spaces for economic empowerment (Babic-Svetlin et al. 2016). Significantly, inclusive local consultations and close collaboration among relevant actors increased the sense of local ownership in the initiative and resulted in active LAPs, while incorporating local civil society into monitoring and evaluation increased accountability in the short and long term. More municipalities are currently drafting LAPs to facilitate meaningful local participation in community-defined women's empowerment initiatives and increase community-based employment opportunities for women. Assisting other countries in developing and implementing LAPs can provide a means to improve in-country capacity to identify and respond to the fluid and context-specific connections between gender, conflict, and fragility at local levels by establishing institutional footholds for women to serve as active agents in shaping post-conflict peace building.

The empowerment of women and girls remains a major global challenge even in countries unaffected by conflict and political fragility, as reflected in the slow progress made thus far towards the achievement of SDG 5 on Gender Equality and the promotion of women's rights (United Nations 2017). In light of this halting progress, the United Nations Secretary-General has asserted that "more vigorous efforts" must be taken to "counter deeply rooted gender-based discrimination that often results from patriarchal attitudes" (ibid., 8). Critically, policy makers must increasingly realize that gender equality initiatives cannot focus solely on women if they are to be both successful and sustainable. Many of Canada's existing programs and policies on the empowerment of women and girls, including the FIAP, focus primarily on women, with little to no commitment to addressing male behaviour. Neglecting the male population runs the risk of leaving unchallenged hyper-masculine norms that continue to perpetuate gender discrimination (United Nations 2008). By encouraging male participation in female-centric programs, female empowerment and peace on a

society-wide level is more likely to be sustained. In turn, the most sustainable way to promote male participation is through engagement with male youths, particularly during childhood and adolescence, and the educational system is one of the strongest institutions through which gender norms and stereotypes can be challenged and transformed (Fayoyin 2004). Curriculum reforms aimed at educating boys about appropriate social behaviours and shifting prevailing attitudes towards women will result, over time, in generational adaptations to existing norms. This can help to reduce violence against women, challenge traditional gender roles and eliminate harmful practices such as forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

Male participation in gender-empowerment initiatives could also be encouraged through advocacy campaigns and the sponsorship of healthy relationship programs. Such advocacy campaigns can draw on influential community members to promote changing gendered stereotypes towards women. Through healthy relationship programs, similarly, men can be encouraged to question traditional gender hierarchies and to approach issues such as family planning and violence against women from the perspective of male ally-ship.

Recommendations

GAC needs to work with its core stakeholders to create a clear definition of women's empowerment that can be effectively operationalized in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. By adapting and refining its current definition of empowerment to reflect the specific connections between fragility, gender inequality and conflict, GAC should develop an operational framework on the empowerment of women and girls that is sensitive to the dynamic social, political and economic realities of conflict and post-conflict situations. This definition needs to be actionable and transparent in order to be effective in the long term.

Canada should establish mechanisms, especially around accountability, to ensure that its commitment to women's empowerment is articulated coherently across all of its policy frameworks addressing gender, conflict and fragility, and is translated consistently down to the field level. All of Canada's policy frameworks — especially the Policy on Gender Equality — should be updated to reflect the government's commitment to empowering women in fragile and conflict affected contexts, and to include

specific accountability mechanisms to ensure that gender equality is prioritized across departments and down to the field level. This could include developing accountability mechanisms or periodic assessment requirements to ensure that country offices in fragile and conflict-affected contexts are responsible for comprehensively integrating gender equality indicators and gender-based analysis into all stages of development planning and implementation, as well as ensuring that grassroots consultations guide the policy development and implementation process. The development of such accountability and consultation requirements will help ensure that Canada's policy commitments to gender equality are prioritized and effectively translated into field level operations, especially in conflict-affected contexts.

GAC should work alongside relevant governments — and within the context of relevant international frameworks — to further elaborate quantitative and qualitative measures in order to assess progress towards gender equality goals. The tools and instruments Canada employs to assess the efficacy, responsiveness and cultural appropriateness of existing policies and programs need to be refined and elaborated. Operationalizing empowerment in meaningful ways is dependent on developing clearer indicators of what gender equality programming is designed to achieve within specific contexts of political fragility and conflict, and how to measure these objectives. The establishment of consistent yet flexible indicators, in collaboration with representatives of local women's civil society organizations, would help ensure that all programmatic interventions are designed not only with clear, measurable outcomes in mind, but also in ways that are sensitive to the value of inclusion in both the development and implementation of specific initiatives. It is essential that such measures be consistently monitored in consultation with local partners in order to allow for rigorous evaluation and ongoing evaluation of lessons learned.

GAC should encourage the localization of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and promote the development of LAPs through existing women's civil society organizations. GAC should harness existing civil society partnerships to develop participatory and consultative mechanisms through which local women are able to draw on their own institutional and cultural knowledge. This platform would be an avenue for local women at the community level to define and prioritize

their everyday security concerns and to exercise agency towards their own empowerment. This will enhance the capacity of locally legitimate civil society organizations to define their own priorities, thereby increasing the flexibility and sustainability of gender equality and peace-building programs, rendering them more responsive to local needs and promoting the inclusion of women in key decision-making roles. By building capacity at the grassroots level, LAPs help to establish locally owned and culturally sensitive advisory and programming mechanisms that are sustainable and not dependent on ongoing donor engagement.

Canada should support and engage with local communities (including men) and local education systems to promote advocacy and awareness of gender equality during post-conflict reconstruction processes. Through advocacy campaigns, the sponsorship of healthy relationship programs, and by supporting curricular reforms that aim to socialize school-age children in ways that challenge conventional gender hierarchies, the Canadian government can contribute to the long-term process of breaking down hyper-masculine social norms which often stand in the way of advancing women's interests in conflict-affected contexts.

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