**REPORT**

**Roundtable on Canada’s Leadership on Gender Equality and the Rights of Women and Girls**

**10 May 2016 in Ottawa**

**External participants in attendance:** Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights (Sandeep Prasad), Amnesty International (Beatrice Vaugrante), the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (Julia Sanchez), CARE Canada (Gillian Barth), CECI (Claudia Black), Comité québécois femmes et développement (CQFD)/ AQOCI (Anne Delorme), Inter Pares (Rita Morbia), Match International Women’s Fund (Jess Tomlin), Nobel Women's Initiative ( Liz Bernstein), Oxfam Canada (Julie Delahanty), Oxfam Quebec (Denise Byrnes), Plan International Canada (Caroline Riseboro), and the Women Peace and Security Network Canada (Beth Woroniuk).

**Internal participants in attendance**: Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau, Hannah Button (Ministerial advisor), Sarah Fountain Smith (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Global Issues and Development Branch), Nancy Smyth (Director General, Social Development Bureau), Richard Arbeiter (Director General, Office of Human Rights, Freedoms and Inclusion), and Lilian Chatterjee (Director General, Social Development Partnerships).

**Event Summary:** May 10, Ottawa- Minister Bibeau hosted a roundtable with thirteen Canadian stakeholders active in gender equality and the rights of women and girls to discuss a way forward on Canada’s agenda in this area. Stakeholders expressed their support and enthusiasm for Canada’s renewed approach and commitment to gender equality and emphasized key issues for consideration including: the importance of supporting women’s rights organizations; balancing social with economic/political interventions; ensuring rights-based and empowerment approaches; engaging men and boys; strengthening data on gender equality; ensuring a stand-alone thematic priority on gender equality along with cross-cutting approaches; and backing up strong political statements and commitments with funding, capacity strengthening and implementation.

**Introductory Remarks**

* Minister Bibeau opened the discussion by saying that she is deeply committed to the empowerment of women and girls globally, and intends to make it an overarching priority for Canada’s international assistance moving forward.
* She welcomed participants’ views on how to improve our approaches to gender equality and build on Canadian strengths. She sought input on what to prioritize, Canada’s comparative advantage, which mechanisms to use and in what areas we could achieve the most meaningful results.

**Summary**

The discussion focused around three topics: (i) taking stock of what we have learned about advancing gender equality and identifying areas for improvement; (ii) moving forward the Agenda 2030 strategy for advancing gender equality; and (iii) opportunities to advance Canadian leadership on gender equality and the rights of women and girls. Key themes and recommendations are summarised below.

**Building on our historical leadership:** Canada has a strong historical base to build on from its early days as a leader on “women in development” and its efforts to help evolve international thinking and practice towards a gender equality approach. Canada has historically supported women’s grassroots organizations around the world, working simultaneously with government through national women’s machineries, to eliminate discrimination against women, promote their participation in social, political and economic spheres, and advance their land, labour and reproductive rights, for example. We need to equip ourselves with staff and resources to allow us to build the networks and credibility to advance gender equality issues in a variety of fora. Canada has the opportunity to again set international standards and guidelines on gender equality for others to follow.

**Rights and empowerment**: Stakeholders strongly welcomed an overarching priority on women and girls but underlined the importance of focusing on their rights and empowerment, which includes seeing them as agents of change, and addressing root causes of persistent inequality (e.g. legal discrimination, harmful social norms limiting opportunities, unequal power relations).

**Support and funding of women’s rights organizations and movements:** The need for long-term, core funding and capacity building for women’s rights organizations and movements at local and regional levels was raised repeatedly. These organizations are key allies who should be consulted not only on women’s rights issues but on all development challenges. Efforts must also be made to protect defenders of women’s human rights who are increasingly being threatened. Supporting women’s national machineries (e.g. the counterparts of Status of Women Canada in other countries) is a key complementary strategy in building the movement.

Stakeholders raised the success of previous regional and country level gender equality funds but also encouraged Canada to be bold and innovative when looking at financing mechanisms, citing the Netherlands FLOW (Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women) grants as an example and proposing a national funding instrument to support organizations of different sizes. While the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) was seen as a mechanism to support gender equality initiatives, its small-scale and short-term nature was viewed as insufficient for the significant and long-term needs of women’s rights organizations.

**Balancing social interventions with political and economic empowerment**: Based on key lessons from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), stakeholders also urged going beyond framing efforts around social issues (such as health) to a broader call that includes women’s economic and political empowerment – promoting opportunities for livelihoods and participation in the economy of their countries, political participation and inclusion in governance at all levels – government, civil society and business, as well as legal access to address areas such as discrimination and violence. The current emphasis on the “health and rights of women and girls” should be broadened to reflect this, as well as structural issues such as gender norms.

**Gender Equality as a stand-alone priority is critical:** Multiple stakeholders raised the importance of targeted gender equality programming and the need for a separate and dedicated thematic pillar to ensure sufficient attention and funding. This is key because we still see that women and girls are not benefitting from development as they should. Women’s rights champions worked very hard to ensure that the international community would adopt a stand-alone goal on gender equality in Agenda 2030. They emphasized the need for a dual approach—gender equality as a stand-alone priority as well as a cross-cutting one across other development priorities.  Several stakeholders gave examples of how investments in targeted gender equality programming resulted in their local partners being more effective in addressing gender issues in an integrated fashion across sectors.

**Strengthening efforts to achieve gender equality results across sectors:** Gender equality should be a key lens through which we examine development challenges. We need to develop our expertise and bring a gender equality focus to our work across sectors (e.g. climate change, humanitarian assistance, sexual and reproductive rights, pluralism, access to justice, etc.).

**Transforming harmful gender norms:** A number of stakeholders raised the need to work at changing harmful gender norms at the societal level. This needs to be done beyond the project level by influencing governments and institutions including health, education and justice systems. The need for comprehensive sexual education in schools was cited as an example. To bring about this kind of fundamental culture change, we must invest in the advocacy and power of local organizations.

Participants underlined the importance of ***engaging men and boys*** as champions of change and redefining “masculinity.’’ There may be opportunities for Canada to participate in international campaigns that promote male engagement and exemplary masculinity models that do not include violence, including in policing and peace-keeping functions. Some participants advised that we must be careful in our efforts to engage males to not drain power and resources from women’s organizations.

**Leadership on equal representation of women in decision-making:** Given the champion role of our Prime Minister in setting up gender parity in Cabinet, Canada could accelerate efforts to promote political participation of women as well as their leadership in global governance structures including the UN.

**Leave no one behind:** Stakeholders flagged the important commitment of the 2030 Agenda to “leave no one behind.” In this context, we need to step up efforts to support adolescent girls. We also need to pay attention to women and girls in fragile contexts. It was underlined that there is a major implementation gap in commitments and action/funding to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda based on the recent global study to commemorate the 15th anniversary of UNSC resolution 1325. Participants again reinforced that support to women’s rights organizations and movements in conflict and post-conflict situations is critical to this agenda, citing experience in DRC, Burma, and Syria.

**Better statistics, data, and evaluation:** The importance of data and evidence to support results and delivery was a recurring theme. We need to invest in measurement of progress on the rights of women and girls and ensure evaluation findings are being integrated in Agenda 2030 implementation.

**Strong political commitments must be backed with commensurate funding, staff capacity and accountability:** Political leadership is key, and stakeholders welcomed recent strong statements and commitments on gender equality but stressed the importance of ensuring resources (both human and financial) are in place to back these commitments. The Department needs to be equipped to respond to this growing priority area and have the accountability structures in place to deliver.

**Closing Remarks**

* Minister Bibeau thanked all participants for a productive and rich discussion.
* She reiterated that her key focus going forward will be on the empowerment of women and girls. While each consultation raises new questions, she welcomed the continued engagement with Canadians to define the best way to shape our mutual agenda in this area.

Photos of the roundtable were posted on social media.

<https://twitter.com/mclaudebibeau>

For additional details on the roundtable, please contact Tamara Sequeira, Deputy Director, Gender Equality Policy.

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