

# *FROM SHARING KNOWLEDGE to Collective Empowerment*

*THE "GENDER IN PRACTICE" COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE*

*A path to women's empowerment  
for Quebec international cooperation organizations*

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The “Gender in Practice” Community of Practice,  
a path to women’s empowerment for Quebec international cooperation organizations

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## *Summary*

### *Background*

In 2009, a dozen international cooperation organizations (ICOs) in Quebec and Canada, with the financial support of the International Development Research Centre and the leadership of AQOCI's Comité Québécois femmes et développement (Women and Development Committee), created a Community of Practice (CoP) to respond to the challenges and obstacles to integrating the principles of gender equality (GE) within their own organizations

Two studies in 2008 demonstrated that despite some progress, it was still proving very difficult to overcome the inertia that surrounds the implementation of GE policies. Even with the presence of strong political will and commitment to the principles of gender equality, inadequate internal procedures and processes, the lack of specialized resources, capacities, tools and expertise were proving to be significant barriers to translating policy discourse into practice. These findings demonstrated the need for a collective forum like that of a "Community of Practice" to strengthen capacity and to mobilise organizations and practitioners around gender equality.

### *Why work together?*

Facing ever decreasing resources and staff, international cooperation organizations now operate in a very competitive environment and are under enormous pressure to deliver results. Despite this challenging context, the CoP was amazingly well received by a number of organizations, whose collective work came to benefit the entire international cooperation community. Above all else, the CoP was based on its members' strong commitment to gender equality firmly rooted in the recognition of the need to join forces for GE to be achieved.

### *The impact of the CoP*

The individual empowerment of CoP members contributed significantly to the success of the collective by creating a "mutually reinforcing virtuous cycle", which effectively strengthened the desire to collaborate. Synergies, mutual trust and respect, the free circulation of information and a true sense of ownership became inter-related forces, which together laid a solid foundation and allowed the CoP to play a dynamic and catalytic role in ensuring the greater institutionalization of GE policies within their organizations.

## THE MAIN RESULTS OF THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

*Institutionalization and decompartmentalization:* In many organizations, the concept of gender equality was effectively transformed from a vague and difficult to explain notion into a tangible concept. Staff members came to better understand how to apply GE principles in their work.

*The review of GE policies:* All member organizations updated their policies and action plans as a result of the work of the CoP.

*Producing GE tools:* The sharing and production of various tools, including two GE training kits for OCI volunteers and staff, provided much-needed French language resources on the integration of gender equality into programs and organizations. Training sessions for CoP member organizations and various other groups also contributed to building capacity on GE issues.

*Outreach and international recognition:* The CoP is recognized by the Réseau Francophone Égalité Femmes-Hommes (GE francophone network) of the International Organization of La Francophonie Organization (OIF), which enabled the CQFD and a number of member OCI's to share their expertise with various international tribunals, and particularly with the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and the OIF Sommet.

## Best practices

**CHALLENGE:** *Building trust*

**SOLUTION:** *A Collaboration Charter*

From the very creation of the CoP, there was a major effort to establish working principles. The highly competitive climate that prevailed between ICO's at the time, further exacerbated by funding agencies' policies and tendering processes, made the prospect of sharing experiences, tools and organizational challenges a thorny issue.

The Collaboration Charter included operating, governance and management procedures, as well as a confidentiality policy that placed special emphasis on intellectual property rights. The Charter made a valuable contribution to the development of a learning dynamic and a climate of confidence and trust that encouraged knowledge sharing, promoted rich exchange and discussion, and created conditions conducive for collective creation and innovation.

*CHALLENGE: Harnessing a diverse set of competencies*

*SOLUTION: To create an environment that supports the individual and collective empowerment of members*

The organizational culture and “savoir-être” that characterized the Community of Practice may be considered intangible assets, but they were nonetheless vital to its success. One of the CoP’s greatest contributions was the creation of a listening and learning dynamic that encouraged and valued a rich diversity of views.

Beyond formal tools and training, informal ties and collegiality came to characterize the community network. Peer accompaniment, mentoring, and members’ mutual support and sharing, encouraged them to promote the institutionalization of GE within their organizations and gave them tools and strategies with which to overcome internal obstacles.

*CHALLENGE: Addressing member organizations’ diverse priorities*

*SOLUTION: Self-help groups*

The Community of Practice began by organizing a number of self-governed joint workshops, particularly on gender audits and GE policies. These provided members with the opportunity to share knowledge and to update their skills. In parallel to these workshops, the CoP conducted a needs analysis that highlighted that priorities varied significantly between member organizations. A series of peer support groups were created in response to the many and diverse needs identified. Focused on monitoring and evaluation, institutionalization, and masculinity respectively, these peer support groups enabled members to dig deeper into and to progress more quickly on these issues.

Each group’s work developed autonomously with unique outcomes, from the production of a guide for integrating gender in the program cycle, to a series of workshops directed at engaging men in gender equality by working on the concept of masculinity. The third group focused on peer accompaniment in order to reinforce GE mainstreaming at the organizational level (institutionalization).

The impact of these peer support groups extended beyond the group members, to feed back into the larger Community of Practice. This feedback-loop between the groups and the collective increased awareness and equipped ICOs to deal with new themes and issues, to reflect on their practices and to incorporate new tools and ideas into their work.

*CHALLENGE: Addressing the complexity of the institutionalization of gender equality*

*SOLUTION: To foster ownership of GE principles*

Stakeholder participation in the gender equality policy planning process fosters vitality, a sense of ownership and generates the commitment needed for effective implementation (See Cop Technical Paper - GE Policy). Institutionalizing GE cannot be addressed as a discrete and disconnected task, nor relegated to the staid framework of an action plan. It needs to be seen as a living, evolving and long-term process linked to an institutional vision that supports and fosters an organizational dialogue. Likewise, the action plan cannot be written in isolation, it requires the input and support of the entire organization.

The process of developing a gender equality policy, or of undertaking a participatory gender audit, can be a crucial turning point in mobilizing a team or an organization around GE. Participatory processes help to demystify concepts and also enable the participants to take ownership over the ideas involved, and in doing so strengthen individual commitment.

A gender audit can successfully guide the development of a GE policy and the creation of an effective action plan. AQOCI adopted a participatory approach to its gender audit and conducted the entire exercise in a participatory manner, which significantly strengthened staff, management and board commitment to gender equality, both as a policy and in practice.

### *To acknowledge and build on existing foundations*

Incorporating gender equality into an organization's mission, and ensuring alignment with the organization's overall values, are both key factors in gaining approval and the collaboration of staff and senior management. It is also crucial that the organization's existing accomplishments in areas of gender equality be recognized, while instilling an atmosphere of learning and dialogue.

### *Budgeting: A vital concern*

Budgeting for the financial resources needed to work on gender equality is essential, particularly as it relates to human resources. The organization must provide staff with the time and resources needed to do fulfill their GE mandate. Proactively and consciously making the necessary resources available demonstrates that gender equality is a priority for the organization. It also reduces the risk of employee burn out, as staff are not forced to advance gender equality above and

beyond their regular work duties. As In the case of Equitas, 50 days per year were included in an employee's work plan for implementing and following up on its GE organizational commitments, a strategy that led to considerable progress.

### *Tool: The Socratic Wheel*

As an alternative to costly and time consuming gender audits, the CoP adapted a SAS 2 tool to undertake participatory organizational assessments quickly and in a cost effective manner. A simple survey categorised a series of GE related questions according to different organizational and programmatic aspects of the organization's work. The compiled answers were then transferred into the Socratic wheel, a visual portrait of the organization's level of institutionalization. Members were invited to complete the survey and the Wheel exercise in a workshop with their colleagues, partners and managers.

The Socratic Wheel exercise is an effective and light tool for demystifying the concept of gender equality institutionalization. It enables participants to better understand the various factors involved in institutionalisation and the steps needed to put these into practice. Also, by favouring participatory evaluation and analysis, it effectively strengthens the group's commitment to gender equality. Such collective processes have consistently enhanced members' involvement and commitment to promoting gender equality within their own organizations, in their programs, and in their work as individuals.

In addition, the Socratic Wheel exercise can very easily be tailored to each organization's particular reality. Some members adapted it to deepen their analysis of other GE issues. For example, Equitas' organizational assessment also included an analysis of LGBTQI concerns, which were subsequently included in the organization's gender equality action plan.

*CHALLENGE: Translating policy commitments into practice*

*SOLUTION: Identifying targeted and realistic actions*

AQOCI's participatory evaluation process allowed staff and board to identify a number of short-term actions such as:

- Introducing the principle of the male-female co-chairmanship of its Board of Directors, a decision that demonstrated its public commitment to gender equality, gave women access to decision making powers, and increased the visibility of women's voices in public representations and events.
- Including a standing GE item on the agenda of each of its board meetings and devoting one meeting per year to follow up on the GE action plan.



### *Decomartmentalizing GE: From staff reflections to individual commitments*

The Socratic Wheel exercise, which facilitated a collective GE evaluation by the team and members of the Board of Directors, also encouraged staff to identify and integrate GE issues into their work plans, and for these items to be subsequently added the organization's overall plan of action. These processes helped break down silos and share responsibility for gender equality objectives, which initially rested solely on the shoulders the GE specialist. GE thus became a shared commitment.

**CHALLENGE:** *Integrating GE into programming*

**SOLUTION:** *A new guide on mainstreaming gender equality into the program cycle*

The members of the “programming, monitoring, evaluation and learning” peer group decided to come together to produce a new tool kit. This experience of co-creation and knowledge sharing reinforced their spirit of collaboration and allowed them to build on the expertise of other CoP members and colleagues.

For SUCO, the issue essentially became one of continuing to “democratize” the task of integrating gender equality into the organization in order to avoid compartmentalization. Making the GE theme as accessible as possible reduced the responsibility of the GE specialist and empowered other members of the programming unit to integrate GE into the organization's projects and programs.

Participation in the peer group allowed Carrefour to equip its team members and to facilitate the harmonization of the GE approach within its various teams.

**CHALLENGE:** *Working with and on men*

**SOLUTION:** *To develop strategies adapted to the context*

Working on masculinity implies viewing men as potential strategic allies in the promotion of gender equality. The approach of “working with and on men” does not replace or compete with traditional GE objectives, but rather must be inscribed in a broader strategy to transform gender relations and achieve greater equality and justice. By approaching masculinity this way, member organizations were more open to integrating the concept into their program strategies. For the Léger Foundation, the user friendly framework and tools that the CoP brought to the table were seen as offering people concrete instruments with which to make a real difference in projects and in its relationship with partners.



We also witnessed a clear evolution in thinking about gender equality and the role of men within programs and among partners in the field, particularly with respect to notions of male identity, and on the of sharing domestic work.

For example, CECI anchored its work on masculinity in the broader context of women's empowerment, without necessarily placing the two notions in opposition to one another. The organization believes that it is possible to increase men's involvement in childcare and education, or their involvement in household tasks, by working with them to build awareness around the need to change their involvement in these areas and to gradually transform their role. The program strategy of male peer to peer training has demonstrated significant results in bringing forward positive models of masculinity.

*CHALLENGE: Valuing our partners' experience*

*SOLUTION: Sharing best practices*

Webinars have proven themselves a very effective method for interacting with partners in the field and for learning from their experiences, recognizing their expertise and fostering a better understanding of their context and the challenges they face.

## *Conclusion*

The CdP experience demonstrated that the institutionalization of GE must be the result of a dynamic collective exercise, a process that supersedes the individual and thus must be reflected at all levels. Collective processes are at the very heart of the Community of Practice, which fostered both collective ownership and individual accountability for gender equality.

Beyond policies and programs, all aspects of the organization must contribute to promoting GE, including political will, decision-making structures, financial resources, and particularly organizational culture. While conducting an assessment of this complexity can appear daunting, the CoP has mapped out various processes and created a number of light tools that can stimulate collective reflection and strengthen GE practices, without demanding an inordinate investment of resources.

## *Perspectives*

Since its inception, the CoP has acted as a lever for gender equality at multiple levels: institutional, collective and individual. It has enhanced the authority, credibility and voice of those responsible for promoting gender equality within their organisations. CoP members have gained confidence and new skills, drawing from a collective space for reflection and inspiration they have come to rely on. The CoP underscored and upheld the principle of gender equality in our work, and acted as an unrelenting reminder of its importance. On a personal level, the CoP forged friendships and contributed to the creation of a dynamic new network.

## *Existing and emerging challenges*

CoP member organizations operate their international cooperation programs and activities in an increasingly volatile context, with greater vulnerability to the impacts of climate change natural disasters, conflict, war and political crises. It is essential organisations working for gender equality show creativity and develop new approaches if we are to adapt the evolving needs and changing realities of work in the field.

The fight for women's rights and against the structural causes of inequality is more relevant than ever. The depoliticization of gender issues is gaining prominence in the international cooperation field, with a marked trend for more mechanical, technical and bureaucratic approaches. The CoP made it possible for members to re-focus on feminist analysis, including the assessment of intersectionality, status, political and legal context and the power relationship between women and men. The cross cutting approach must still be redesigned and specific programs must be funded to focus more strongly on women's empowerment and transformational change.

The institutionalisation of gender equality among partner organisations and the strengthening of dialogue with partners remains a top priority. New approaches are needed to better and more directly integrate partners from the global South in the CoP's learning community. What strategies can be designed to forge strong ties to field, to best support collective analysis, knowledge sharing, and the co-creation of innovative practices to better address gender equality issues? Many members work in the same regions and countries, how can we facilitate on-site and optimise new technologies to create a South-South and South-North learning dynamics? Such a process will allow us to influence one another, to showcase Southern practices and perspectives, and to advance our ultimate goal of building a more just and equitable world.