



We want a world that respects women's rights

Even our own country has a spotty record when it comes to equality

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If you are a woman on this planet, you are more likely to be poor, more likely to be a victim of violence, more likely to be voiceless and more likely to be exploited. You are less likely to have access to education, services or corridors of power.

This reality – and the power dynamics that create and sustain it – is the central challenge we face in making poverty history. On International Women's Day tomorrow, it's important that we critically examine our progress toward that goal.

When we look at those who earn less than \$1 a day globally, 70 per cent are women. Of the 80 million children who aren't in school, most are girls. Every day, 1,400 women die needlessly in pregnancy and childbirth. One in five women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime. Women are overrepresented among the 8,000 people who die every day as a result of the AIDS pandemic, mostly in the world's poorest countries.

More than half the world's food is produced by women, rising to 80 per cent in many developing countries, yet tradition, laws and discrimination mean many women cannot own land, access credit or control the fruits of their labour. It is women and girls who have first felt the brunt of climate change as they spend a growing number of hours each day walking ever farther to fetch water and firewood.

Oxfam works with courageous, creative women around the world who are making a real difference to this grim picture – supporting women farmers and factory workers to defend their rights and improve their incomes, helping stop the spread of HIV and AIDS by ending violence against women, promoting women's leadership in peace-building and in preventing and responding to humanitarian crises made worse by conflict and climate change.

These groups are not only working to increase women's access to resources and the tools they need to support themselves and their families and communities. They are working as well to tackle the policies and practices of governments and corporations that deny women their rights and benefit from their unpaid or underpaid labour – changing laws, improving public services and enforcing protection for workers.

They also strive to change the beliefs and behaviours that undermine women's equality – in the bed, in the home, on the streets and in the legislature and courts. This entails a transformation not only of the attitudes and actions of individuals but also a shift in our culture and norms as a society.

In every case, this work is grounded in women's rights. It's not about charity. It's not about political correctness. It's not just that the impact is likely to be much greater when you secure women's participation in planning and implementing change.

It's that until respect for women's rights is central to who we are, how we treat each other, how we organize markets and production, and how we choose to govern ourselves, the prospects for making substantive and sustainable progress in ending poverty and injustice are doomed.

As Canadians, we pride ourselves on the progress we've made to recognize and promote women's rights and equality among women and men. But our record is spotty at best. Women in Canada, too, are more likely to be poor, earn less than men and find themselves the victim of violence. The horrific experience of the disappeared women of Vancouver, Edmonton and elsewhere haunts us.

Women with whom we work in Zimbabwe, in Guatemala, in Ethiopia can't quite believe that in a country as rich as Canada we have women in aboriginal communities and elsewhere across this country who can't exercise their right to access basic services. They wonder how they can overcome huge barriers in their own countries when they see a country such as Canada stepping back from its obligations to ensure women's rights are respected.

The removal of equality from the mandate of the Status of Women department, the gutting of its budget and the closure of most offices sends a chill down the spines of women around the globe who are committed to ending discrimination. Equally disturbing is the prohibition on federal funding to support advocacy and campaigning on women's rights. These actions, after eliminating the Court Challenges program that played such a key role in protecting women's and minority rights, send exactly the wrong signal to the world about Canada's commitment to promoting full respect for women's rights.

When combined with the reversal of the national child-care program and other actions, it seriously undermines Canada's progress toward meeting its obligations under the United Nations Convention to

Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

We want a world in which women affirm their own power and their ability to stand up and speak out. We want a world in which women's work is acknowledged and fairly compensated. We want a world in which women's authority matches their responsibilities, and their rights are respected and celebrated.

To achieve this vision, fundamental changes are needed. And in that process, Canada should be showing leadership. Nothing less should be good enough.

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