

Women's rights



Background Briefs
Development issues and efforts

The issue

Women's rights are powers and freedoms claimed for women and girls of all ages in all societies. In some countries, laws or customs guarantee these rights. Other countries ignore or suppress women's rights. Societies deny women's rights when men and boys have powers and freedoms that women and girls do not have.

Issues around women's rights include such things as a woman's right to control her own body, to vote, to hold public office, to work for equal and fair pay, to own property, to get an education, to sign legal contracts, and to have equal rights as a marriage partner and parent.

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution to guarantee equality for women; 161 countries signed and approved the resolution. Of those, 44 said they would not put certain parts of the resolution into effect. Several countries in the Middle East did not sign the resolution.

Many girls and women still do not have equal opportunities to get rights permitted by law. In many countries, women may not own property or inherit land. In some countries, male family members will kill a female family member if they believe she has "dishonoured" the family in some way. In some societies, fathers arrange marriages of their very young daughters to older men. Even in countries where girls go to school, an education does not mean jobs are available to them.

In various countries around the world, women produce between 50 and 80 percent of all food

grown. Yet many are unpaid. It is difficult for women to get loans to buy equipment since many societies still think men are the ones who should have the responsibility for business dealings. Many women who often work outside of the home are also responsible for most or all of the household work and child care. Worldwide, two out of three poor adults are women.

The road to promoting and protecting women's rights

Women make up for more than half of the world's population. The United Nations declared the ten years between 1976 and 1985 the United Nations Decade for Women. At the end of the decade, however, women still performed two thirds of the world's work, yet earned one tenth of its income and owned less than one hundredth of its property.

The world's economy is becoming increasingly globalized. Many governments are unable to meet the needs of their citizens. One important trend is increased poverty for women. Migration and changes in family structures also place extra burdens on women. This is especially true for women who provide for several dependents. We cannot eliminate poverty only through antipoverty programs. It will take democratic participation and changes in economic structures for women and men to have equal access to resources, opportunities and public services.

An important part of Canada's international

development plan is protecting the rights of women and girls. Canadians are working with others to develop innovative strategies to overcome the root causes of women's poverty, violence against women and the power imbalances between men and women. The necessary social, cultural, economic and political changes will only happen gradually.

Projects to promote and protect women's rights

Studies show that investing money in programs that promote and protect women's rights brings both social and economic gains. Investing in adolescent girls also breaks the cycles of poverty that go on from generation to generation. This results in long-term benefits for reducing poverty.

Canadians, through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), financially support many projects around the world to promote and protect women's rights.

Reducing gender bias in the justice system: In India, CIDA funded a project that revealed widespread misunderstanding on the part of judges about women as victims of violence. The project set in motion a movement to introduce reform in the justice system throughout South Asia.

Supporting microcredit loans: In Bangladesh, CIDA supports the Grameen Bank in its program to grant small loans to the very poor. Most of the loans, which are around \$50, are given to women. The microcredit loans, along with training in basic business methods, help the women start small businesses. The loans not only raise the family's standard of living, but also benefit the women in other ways. The women improve their social standing and gain knowledge and confidence to take a more active role in social and political activities; 98 percent pay back their loans in full.

Funding "hidden" schools: During the time the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, CIDA provided funds so girls could continue their education. The schools had to remain hidden because the teachers and families faced harsh penalties if they were caught. Now, CIDA is working with CARE Canada to establish primary education in over 100 public schools in Afghanistan. They also provide courses for teachers, school supplies and construction of classrooms.

Stopping domestic violence in Bolivia: Six out of ten women in Bolivia suffer from domestic violence and lack a safe place to stay. With support from CIDA, the Centre for Promotion and Integral Health (CEPROSI) built a shelter for these women. Women and their children can stay at the shelter for three months. They have access to doctors, lawyers and social workers while they regain their self-esteem and plan for their future.

Including women in markets: In a project called "Through the Garden Gate," CIDA and the Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) helped more than 2000 women develop home-based gardens. The gardens allowed them to grow fruits and vegetables to improve the family's diet and earn income at local markets. To date, they have grown more than 500 000 kg of vegetables.

Find further information about:

- CIDA's work in promoting and protecting women's rights at <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/acdi-cida/ACDI-CIDA.nsf/eng/FRA-61142438-PLF>
- CIDA's work in improving the lives of girls and women in Afghanistan at <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/acdi-cida/ACDI-CIDA.nsf/eng/NAT-36111441-M38>
- United Nations projects for women's rights at <http://www.unwomen.org/>.



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