



Proposal for Support to Equality Seeking Women's Groups in Canada during the
COVID 19 pandemic

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by

The National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL/ANFD)

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The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW/ICREF)

and supported by the following national women's groups and allies:

Alberta Council of Women's Shelters

Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity

Canadian Council of Muslim Women

Canadian Women's Foundation

Canadian Labour Congress

Child Care Now

DaWN Canada

Ending Violence Association of Canada

The Equality Fund

Feminist Alliance for International Action

International Women's Rights Program

Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak / Women of the Métis Nation

OCASI-Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants

Pauktuutit

South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario

West Coast LEAF

Women's Legal Education and Action Fund

Women's Shelters Canada

Yukon Status of Women Council

YWCA Canada

YWCA Halifax

The COVID-19 Crisis

It is becoming increasingly evident the degree to which the COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that will have complex and disproportionate impacts on women and girls across Canada, particularly those that experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This crisis is highlighting and exacerbating existing forms of violence, discrimination and marginalization experienced by women and girls, in all our diversity.

In order to ensure that women and girls, their families and communities who need assistance most will be included in, and benefit from federal responses to the pandemic, it is imperative that there be a robust and systematic application of an intersection feminist analysis of the impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls, and of existing and potential policy and budgetary responses to it. The limited COVID-19 responses designed specifically for women, have focused entirely on the critical services that women's shelters and sexual assault centres provide. The focus on VAW/GBV is important of course, but represents a very limited and initial response.

We know that the federal government is committed to ensuring a GBA+ in all policy making and legislation, and we also recognize it was challenging to implement before the crisis, but now more than ever a GBA+ is essential. Equality seeking women's groups are uniquely positioned to make valuable contributions to the COVID-19 response. Our feminist organizations and networks have intersectional feminist analysis, policy expertise, front line experience working with and for women and much more that would make significant contributions to a gender responsive approach to COVID-19. Consultation, collaboration and coordination between equality-seeking women's groups and the government is more important than ever, if we are going to ensure no one is left behind because of COVID-19.

The situation of equality seeking women's groups in Canada

National women's groups and our provincial/territorial and local colleagues are already working together and alongside our allies on many fronts to support women across the country and advocate for a gender specific response to the pandemic.

However, even before the pandemic, ensuring the ongoing sustainability of some feminist organizations, and movements in Canada remained an ongoing challenge. Given the depth and breadth of the damage done to feminist organizations during the decade that many were defunded, many were still rebuilding and trying to stabilize.

Many feminist networks and organizations continued to struggle with funding and capacity gaps. Fundraising remains a particular challenge for many equality seeking women's groups in Canada, including those caught in the ongoing cycle of trying to cobble together short term project funding to continue to operate. The lack of support for marginalized women, including; women with disabilities, Indigenous, criminalized, racialized women, those with precarious immigration status, lesbian, bi, trans and intersex women and many others was and continues to be particularly acute. The COVID-19 crisis is further threatening our invaluable but already vulnerable sector.

We know that the federal government recognizes the importance of a strong feminist movement and the knowledge and expertise our sector brings to advancing women's rights in Canada, and that there has been significant project-based funding invested to strengthen our organizations, but the pandemic has radically altered the context in which we operate.

Carrying on operations remotely is very challenging for many women's groups,¹ including because:

- Staff are primarily (often exclusively) women, many of whom are experiencing double and triple burdens as they are expected to keep working from home and at the same time home school their kids, and provide full time care for children, parents/grandparents. Exhaustion, stress, depression and burnout are likely to follow;
- The staff members in violent relationships are no longer able to leave home to go to work and may be experiencing VAW;
- The precarious financial situation of many women's groups means there aren't laptops available for all staff members to take home and to use to carry out their jobs remotely;
- Salaries and benefits paid by underfunded women's groups are often low and as a result, some staff, especially those working part time don't own functioning laptops or have any separate or quiet space required to work at home productively;
- Many groups can't afford to pay for the costs of home internet for all staff, or increased long distance and data plan costs; this extra burden falls on individual staff members (many of whom are under-paid);
- Organizations with funding gaps may not have access to online platforms and software to facilitate communications and work with others;
- Most payments to staff, vendors, partners etc., are done by cheque because many of our financial control systems require double authorizations. Issuing payments by cheque is time consuming and very difficult and requires the involvement of several people (admin staff who prepare invoices and supporting documentation, management to review and approve payments, a book keeper to prepare cheques that must then be signed by two authorized signatories, (which may include board members). Getting cheques issued while practicing physical distancing and working remotely is extremely challenging. The alternatives are bank plans that allow for e-transfers to pay bills and staff but they are costly;
- Feminist consultants are an important part of the sector. They provide specific expertise and services as many women's groups have skeletal staff so they use project funding to hire feminist consultant to provide specific services. The slow down in delivery of project activities means feminist consultants can expect significant economic losses.

Unfortunately, the emergency funding announced to date does not respond to the particular situation of most equality seeking women's groups in Canada, including those that are reliant on project funding. Funded projects are in place, but challenges in delivering them have already begun and are expected to widen and deepen. If project funded activities are postponed or cancelled, project staff will need to be laid off, and project offices closed. However, because most project funded women's groups have not experienced an immediate loss of revenue, they are not eligible for emergency funding. Our project funding also does not cover the unforeseen costs resulting from the pandemic. As we had not factored

¹ This is a snapshot of just a few of the challenges many women's groups that rely on project funding are facing as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. A comprehensive review of the impacts of COVID-19 on women's groups is required.

in these costs in our project proposals, we are unable to make these investments without putting our project deliverables in jeopardy.

The calls for an Emergency Charitable and Non-Profit Sector Stabilization Fund are important, and we support these calls, and hope that women's groups will be included should this Fund be established. In addition however, targeted core funding is required for equality seeking women's groups.

The Ask: Core Funding for Equality Seeking Women's Groups

We applaud the funding allocated to women's shelters and sexual assault centres as an important first step. However, much, much more funding is required as this pandemic has the potential to threaten the survival of many feminist organizations and movements. Therefore, the injection of sector specific funding is imperative.

We appreciate the project funding that the Women's Program has made available since the 2015 federal election. It has given many groups important support to undertake specific activities and initiatives designed to advance women's rights in Canada. However, project funding alone was not sufficient before COVID-19 hit, and it certainly will not be enough in the face of the current crisis or for the rebuilding and recovery that will need to follow. Therefore, given the particular situation of women's groups, and the unique contributions we can make to advocating for and supporting a gender responsive approach to COVID-19, equality seeking women's groups in Canada are urgently calling for WAGE to provide core funding. Core funding will provide an important lifeline to avoid a collapse not only of individual women's organizations, but also of the sector as a whole.

For decades, women's groups and our allies have been advocating for a return of the core funding that was previously provided by the Women's Program.² Included in its 2005 report, the FEWO Committee's second recommendation was that the "funding to women's groups be revised by introducing a mix of core funding and project funding."³

Now more than ever, core funding for equality seeking women's groups is essential, and represents a high impact investment as part of the COVID-19 response.

The Mechanism: Converting Capacity Building Fund Grants to Core Funding

Given the diversities within and between women's groups, there may be a range of appropriate and strategic approaches that will be proposed by various feminist organizations and coalitions, and others that WAGE might develop to deliver a combination of both core and project funding to women's groups.

Converting the existing Capacity Building Fund (CBF) grants into core funding stands out as a principled, practical, and strategic way to quickly and easily provide funding that will have high impact on the sector. There are many benefits associated with this option including that:

² Until 1998, half of the Women Program budget was spent on program/core funding.

³ Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, *Funding Through the Women's Program: Women's Groups Speak Out*, May 2005, p. 8, available online at:

https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/381/FEWO/Reports/RP1861931/FEWO_Rpt03/FEWO_Rpt03-e.pdf.

- it represents a sector wide response that would provide core funding to the approximately 270 equality seeking women's groups working at the national, provincial/territorial and local levels that received CBF grant;
- as part of the CBF application process, WAGE already developed relevant criteria and screened applications from a wide range of women's groups. Therefore, this would ensure that core funding would be going to organizations that WAGE already determined:
 - o women's groups whose primary objective is to advance gender equality for women in Canada;
 - o have capacity gaps that require support;
 - o have adequate governance structures in place; and
 - o can contribute to a viable women's movement in Canada to effectively advance gender equality;
- it would be extremely time and cost effective to simply convert existing CBF grants to core funding, especially when compared to the time and resources that would be required to develop a new mechanisms to be used to deliver core funding;
- This would save WAGE staff a huge amount of time because:
 - o There wouldn't be a need to develop a new call for proposals, review applications, draft new contribution agreements, review regular progress reports. The time freed up for WAGE staff could be dedicated to supporting other COVID-19 responses;
 - o It would not require significant additional work by women's groups which are already stretched and struggling and would not have the capacity to complete a new funding proposal
- with some core funding in place, staff of feminist organizations can lead and contribute to COVID-19 responses;
- Given Canada's interest in co-leading the B+25 Action Coalition on supporting feminist movements and leadership, Canada can share with other countries their feminist approach to COVID-19 including the provision of core funding to equality seeking women's groups at F/P&T/I levels all across the country; and
- A similar approach could be considered to converting CBF grants provided to Indigenous organizations and CCF grants for LGBTQ2 organizations.

Converting existing project grants to core funding, provides an opportunity to provide stability to the sector using the funds that have already been committed to a wide range of groups. Additional funds that currently exist within the Women's Program but have not yet been committed, would be available both to provide core funding to additional equality seeking women's groups that did not receive a CBF grant, and to support COVID-19 related collaborations and innovations.

Equality seeking women's groups that did not receive a CBF grant will also need some stabilization in order to contribute to the COVID-9 response, especially organizations and networks of and for marginalized women, including; women with disabilities, Indigenous, criminalized, racialized women, those with precarious immigration status, lesbian, bi, trans and intersex women and other groups experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

This is a complex and quickly evolving situation and the economic and other impacts of COVID-19 on women across the country, and on our sector, are likely to be significant and last for some time.

Equality seeking women's groups need to not just survive but thrive in order to be able to advance the rights of women in all our diversity, during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

Conclusion

For many decades, equality seeking women's groups have led the fight to ensure that the rights of all women in Canada are respected, protected and fulfilled. The provision of core support at this critical time is essential for us to be able to continue playing this role, both during and in the aftermath of the current crisis. Appropriately resourced women's groups will be able to not just survive, but thrive, collaborate and work in cooperation with each other and our allies, to develop innovative, strategic interventions to COVID-19. We are ready, willing and able to demonstrate intersectional feminism in action, and advocate for responses that will help dismantle the many forms of systemic discrimination that women, their children, families and communities face, and drive transformational change across the country.

Core funding is the only funding intervention that will provide all equality seeking women's groups with appropriate support. Therefore we urge WAGE to employ multiple approaches to support women's groups, including but not limited to converting CBF grants to core funding.