

COVID-19 AND THE THRIVE AGENDA



INTRODUCTION

As COVID-19 continues to impact people around the world, we are seeing the troubling and inequitable effects of the pandemic on different populations. We know that the virus and the various responses to the virus have transformed the lives of many and that these impacts are not equal – women, girls, adolescents, LGBTQI2S+ people, people with disabilities, and many others, are particularly at risk due to the way COVID-19 has exacerbated existing gender and social inequities. That is why Canada and Canadian partners must ensure a **feminist response to COVID-19** in addressing this global health crisis.

In 2019, Canada's global health community came together under the **Thrive Agenda** to co-create and

endorse an ambitious ten-year vision for Canadian leadership on global health and rights. The Thrive Agenda leverages Canada's unique voice and global leadership to strategically drive progress and address critical, unmet needs to improve global health and strengthen human rights. It includes bold commitments to renew, accelerate, and lead with development interventions that increase Canada's global health impact. In June 2019, the Canadian government adopted this agenda and **announced** a bold and ambitious commitment to increase funding to global health and rights to 1.4 billion per year by 2023 and maintained through 2030.

WHAT IS A FEMINIST RESPONSE?

A feminist response is grounded in human rights and gender equality, with attention to the intersectional experiences of people and the deeply rooted systems of oppression that perpetuate inequality. A feminist response is integrated, comprehensive, and gender transformative. It recognizes the critical role of women's rights, LGBTQI2S+ and feminist movements and the need to centre the participation and leadership of these actors in the COVID-19 response.



The Thrive Agenda outlines the next stage of Canadian leadership on women's, adolescent and children's health and rights. It calls for action through Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy and the UN Sustainable Development Goals to chart a bold, integrated, and gender-responsive path toward 2030. Its key pathways include:

RENEW

Canada is urged to continue and enhance its work to strengthen health systems and protect progress on maternal, newborn and child health, while maintaining key linkages to nutrition, infectious disease, research and innovation, education, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), as well as supporting the unique needs of humanitarian contexts.



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ACCELERATE

This pathway includes building on Canadian leadership and programming on advocacy to empower rights-holders (particularly women and girls), create demand, better resource feminist and women's rights organizations, improve data and data infrastructure to help reach the most vulnerable, and provide a comprehensive evidence-based package of services to address the unique needs of adolescents to advance their health.

LEAD

This pillar recognizes Canada's ability to lead progress on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), an area where others are withdrawing, and global funding is severely at risk. By scaling up investment in the most neglected and stigmatized areas of SRHR (safe abortion; contraceptive care; advocacy for SRHR; adolescent SRHR, including comprehensive sexuality education; and SRHR in humanitarian settings), Canada can help fill critical gaps in women's and girls' health, unlocking progress and potential across all areas of development through targeted gender transformative approaches.

With its **Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP)**, Canada is well placed to support an effective and rights-based pandemic response that addresses the immediate, medium, and long-term needs of vulnerable and hard to reach populations. The Thrive Agenda similarly enables Canada to hit the ground running in mitigating adverse effects of COVID-19, while working towards the fulfilment of universal health and wellbeing.

By focusing on the accelerated implementation and ramp up of its 10-year commitment, Canada can help prevent the loss of gains already made, support a more resilient COVID response, and

firmly position itself as a leader in SRHR. We have highlighted below how the Thrive framework and the three pillars can be applied to guide COVID-19 response programming.

As countries respond to this global pandemic, we urge Canada to maintain its commitment to the Thrive Agenda and its feminist principles, while protecting the important investments Canada has made in health systems around the world.



RENEW

The **renew** pillar emphasizes the importance of continuing Canada's investments and leadership in health systems strengthening and disease prevention, and advancing the health and nutritional status of women, children, and newborns. COVID-19 has demonstrated the critical importance of the interventions under the **renew** pillar, as the pandemic increases pressure in both development and **humanitarian settings**. Where investments in health systems strengthening have shored up national and regional health services, facilitated **Universal Health Coverage (UHC)**, improved **infectious disease control capabilities**, and applied a gender lens to planning, responses are **better coordinated**, comprehensive and inclusive. Compounded by COVID-19, crucial attention is also being paid to the **potential indirect burdens of other infectious diseases**, malnutrition, and food insecurity. Non-governmental organizations are continuing to adapt programs that provide gender transformative maternal, newborn and child health, nutrition, gender-based violence, and food security support, exploring new digital channels and screening programs incorporating physical distancing, and helping to restore confidence in health

systems. It is critical that the rights of women and girls are maintained in these adaptations.

Complementary interventions that provide a foundation for the **renew** pillar, as well as **accelerate** and **lead**, have also required quick, adaptive responses. Where **WASH interventions** (including menstrual health and hygiene) have been enabled and focused on the most vulnerable, including women and girls, **people are better protected** and **health facilities better equipped**. With **school closures** leading to more than **70% of the world's student population out of school**, educational programs are **adapting** to ensure that **learning continues** and critical adolescent-centred services including nutrition programmes, psycho-social support and more, continue to be accessible. The world is now aware of how vulnerable and interlinked health systems are, and the importance of comprehensive gender responsive **UHC**, nutrition, and food security interventions. Through the priorities listed in the **renew** pillar, Canada can continue global leadership on their advancement and protect a decade of investment.

ACCELERATE

A whole-of-society approach is needed to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and understand its differential impact on individuals. We know that the

secondary impacts of the pandemic will not be distributed evenly - women, adolescents and children are among those who will be most affected. Rapid **gender**

analyses and data disaggregated by – but not limited to – sex, age, **gender identity and sexual orientation** and **race and ethnicity**, is essential to achieving an effective and strong response to COVID-19. Building on Canada's reputation for driving progress on critical gaps for women, adolescents, and children, Canada is uniquely positioned to **accelerate** leadership and programming on advocacy for change, data for impact, and a comprehensive and gender responsive package of services for adolescent health.

Alongside vaccines and innovative diagnostic solutions, evidence based public health measures are needed to holistically address the pandemic. The interventions

under the **accelerate** pillar underscore the need to invest in national and local level SRHR programming, **feminist and women's rights movements**, as well as the leadership of women, adolescents, and people of diverse gender identities in global health spaces. For an inclusive and representative response and recovery, women-focused and youth-led organizations must be **funded** and meaningfully engaged in decision-making about their own lives and the communities where they live and work. These groups are well positioned to provide and leverage gender-disaggregated data to **promote feminist solutions for care in building a just recovery**.

LEAD

The **lead** pillar of the Thrive Agenda leverages Canada's unique voice and global reputation to drive progress on sexual and reproductive health and rights, with a special focus on the most neglected areas of SRHR (identified as access to safe abortion; contraceptive care; advocacy for SRHR; adolescent SRHR, including comprehensive sexuality education; and SRHR in humanitarian settings). **By focusing on historical and emerging funding gaps and underserved areas, Canada can accelerate progress on SRHR and further strengthen synergies between existing programming in gender equality, education, nutrition, protection, gender-based violence, and health.**

COVID-19 has already impacted the provision of essential SRH services around the world, with health

systems stretched to their limits, travel restrictions limiting access to services and commodities, and resources – including staff, supplies and equipment – being diverted. While these issues require immediate attention, we urge Canada to continue under the Thrive Agenda's lead pillar in prioritizing SRHR as a COVID-19 response and development priority.

Canada's leadership on SRHR remains critical in its immediate and long-term response to the COVID-19 crisis, as we see existing challenges in these areas exacerbated by the pandemic and face new threats and barriers specific to the neglected areas of SRHR.



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SRH services are essential and lifesaving. With predictions that COVID-related disruptions to supplies and services could result in **47 million women without access to modern contraceptives, up to 7 million additional unintended pregnancies**, and an additional **three million unsafe abortions and 28,000 maternal deaths**, demand for SRH services will only increase. A sustained feminist and long-term approach is essential to addressing these immediate needs and advancing SRHR.

While Canada has **voiced its support** for SRHR as an essential part of the COVID-19 response, more leadership is needed to counter how COVID-19 is being used to limit access to SRH services and **politicize issues** including abortion and the **rights of gender diverse people** around the world. Moreover, at this

time of heightened inequality, women, **adolescents, LGBTQI2S+ persons, people living with disabilities, displaced people**, and other disadvantaged groups, are **disproportionately being impacted by COVID-19 related barriers to SRHR** and will likely be the last groups to receive a vaccine. These disparities highlight the **need for ambitious and rapid progress towards UHC**, to which SRHR is an **essential element**. To address these inequities and prevent backsliding on hard-won gains, Canada must continue to lead on SRHR – in both its immediate and long-term response. With its **Feminist International Assistance Policy** and **commitment to the health and rights of women and girls**, Canada is well placed to fill these gaps and address critical, unmet need.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has presented new challenges and barriers to human rights, global health, and development. The pandemic has exacerbated prevailing inequities and barriers, putting any gains made in gender equality and the rights of women and girls at risk. From the onset, Canadian organizations and partners have pivoted to respond to the pandemic. As the impacts become more clear and as inequalities continue to deepen, the **Thrive Agenda presents Canada with an existing, pioneering opportunity to build back better, in a truly feminist way, and encourage the global community to do the same**. We call on Canada to lead and support Canadian organizations and Canadian-funded partners to accelerate and maintain their commitment to the Thrive Agenda and its feminist, rights-based, intersectional, and integrated approach, in their immediate and long-term responses to the global pandemic.

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