Action Canada
for Sexual Health & Rights

# Foreign Policy Review Submission:

## SRHR as a foreign policy priority

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## SRHR as a foreign policy priority

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) must remain a core pillar of Canada's foreign policy and Official Development Assistance (ODA) investments. Canada's foreign policy review comes at a moment of deepening conflict, democratic backsliding, economic uncertainty and coordinated attacks on gender equality and human rights. To be effective, Canada's foreign policy must look beyond traditional security challenges and anticipate emerging threats to the global order. Today, escalating attacks on SRHR represent a significant and growing risk to geopolitical stability, demonstrating that Canada must respond by standing firm in its commitments and treating SRHR as essential to its foreign policy. These attacks are not isolated nor accidental, but rather they are mutually reinforcing elements of an organized, well-funded transnational anti-gender movement seeking to reverse hard-won rights, weaken democratic institutions and undermine multilateral cooperation.[i] The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) has recognized the severity of this threat by classifying anti-gender ideology violence and violent misogyny as forms of ideologically motivated violent extremism. CSIS has also assessed that violence associated with the anti-gender movement is almost certain to continue and warned that online environments in which sexism converges with other extremist grievances can mobilize individuals toward violence.[ii] These findings make clear that failing to confront the anti-gender movement would leave a significant gap in Canada's response to global instability. In this environment, SRHR cannot be sidelined or treated as a narrow health issue, rather it must be integrated as a cross-cutting priority across Canada's foreign policy, particularly its international development assistance. By sustaining predictable, rights-based ODA investments in SRHR, Canada can protect hard-won gains, strengthen the resilience of communities, uphold international human rights and advance durable peace and security, robust democracies, shared prosperity and sustainable development.

## The case for sustained investment

SRHR and gender equality are Canadian values that cannot be separated from economic or security policy. **Globally, SRHR services remain chronically underfunded, despite clear evidence demonstrating the positive impact of such services on human rights, poverty alleviation, economic prosperity and social stability. Every dollar spent on universal access to SRHR can generate up to $120 in benefits.[iii] Investments in family planning and maternal health alone offer returns of $8.40 for every dollar spent, driving reduced health costs, increased productivity, and improved educational outcomes.[iv]** Studies estimate that sexual and gender-based violence can cost countries up to 3.7% of GDP[v] and that accelerated progress on gender equality could increase global GDP by $13 trillion by 2030.[vi] **In this moment of global economic instability and fiscal restraint, investments in SRHR remain one of the most cost-effective interventions with outsized returns on investment.**

The 10-year commitment to global health and rights (10YC) is a proven strategic asset for advancing Canada's global diplomatic leadership and measurably improving the lives of the most vulnerable. Over five years, Canada's investments have strengthened health systems in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), fueled critical research, and demonstrated the social, economic, and health benefits of rights-based SRHR service delivery. It has empowered locally led women's rights organizations, fostering

inclusive legal and social environments for SRHR while galvanizing multistakeholder support for the health and rights of women and girls worldwide. For instance, Action Canada's Global Affairs Canada funded project *Rights from the Start* project, operating in four South American countries, averted 358,525 unintended pregnancies through contraceptive access, provided sexual and reproductive health services to 3,015,514 people, reached 225,711 individuals with comprehensive sexual education, and strengthened 28 laws and policies related to SRHR.

On a larger scale, from 2020-2023, Canada invested $177.46 million in family planning. According to the Guttmacher Institute, this funding is estimated to have the following impact:

| No. of women and couples receiving modern contraceptive care for a year | No. of unintended pregnancies averted | No. of unplanned births averted | No. of unsafe abortions averted | No. of women's and girls' lives saved | Cost savings in pregnancy-related and newborn health care for each additional $1 invested in family planning |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10,438,110 | 3,227,493 | 973,915 | 1,150,525 | 2,796 | 3.21 |

Canada's leadership through the 10YC has also set a global precedent for effective SRHR financing: predictable, multi-year, ring-fenced SRHR investments as the bedrock of resilient and sustainable health systems. The 10YC and Canda's feminist international assistance policy has made substantial advancements in how the world sees SRHR and has earned praise for its targeted approach on neglected areas including contraception, safe abortion, adolescent sexual health including sexuality education, and advocacy. Scaling back this commitment now would diminish the effectiveness of earlier investments, disperse expertise, interrupt services and partnerships, and increase the cost of rebuilding capacity in the future.

When women, girls and gender-diverse people can make decisions about their bodies, live free from violence, complete their education, participate in paid work, societies become safer and more prosperous. To retreat from SRHR is to forfeit the benefits already established through over a decade of commitments to global health and SRHR. Guttmacher's Safe Abortion Calculator shows that only 32% of abortions in 117 low- and middle-income countries are safe.[vii] Every CA$10 million reduction in Canada's international family planning assistance would deny approximately 623,000 people access to contraceptive services, and lead to 213,000 additional unintended pregnancies.[viii]

The consequences of retreating would have far reaching effects. Global health, human rights, security, trade and economic development are mutually reinforcing. Healthy populations are better able to complete their education, participate in the workforce, withstand conflict, climate shocks, pandemics and mis- and disinformation.[ix] Strong health systems reinforce institutional legitimacy and social protection systems needed for thriving democracies, secure futures and Canada's credibility internationally. A foreign policy that seeks stronger economies and security while deprioritizing the health and rights of the people who sustain those institutions is ultimately self-defeating.

## Canada is positioned to lead

Canada is uniquely positioned to champion gender equality and SRHR because it is not starting from zero. The 10YC, Canada's feminist approach to international assistance, Gender-based Analysis Plus, the

National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, and Canada's inclusive approach to trade already form a national policy architecture connecting rights, health, equality, peace and prosperity. Canadian institutions and civil society also hold deep technical expertise and long-standing global relationships. Research indicates that 79% of Canadians believe protecting SRHR is important domestically, 77% consider it crucial globally, and 80% agree that it should remain a national priority.

At a time when other donors are retreating, Canada can offer sustained expertise to strategically link development, diplomacy, trade and security without sacrificing human rights. This leadership will be credible only if it is applied consistently at home and internationally and backed by adequate resources.

## Supporting equitable partnerships and shared development priorities

Canada's foreign policy should reinforce the development outcomes financed through ODA. Global South governments and civil society are not simply implementers of Canadian priorities. Meaningful partnership begins with who defines the problem, sets the agenda and controls resources. Self-reliance must not become conflated with donor withdrawal. Canada should advance the right to development, supporting technology transfer, and support reforms of international financial systems that continue to create inequality. These reforms are directly related to the sustainability of Canada's international development assistance. Many Global South countries now spend more on debt servicing than they receive in grants and new financing, severely constraining the fiscal space available for essential public services such as health, education and social protection.[x] When debt obligations crowd out essential public services, development gains cannot be sustained through short-term projects alone. Canada's foreign policy should therefore address the structural constraints facing partner countries while ensuring that SRHR financing reaches locally led organizations and communities.

## Recommendation: Fully protect the 10-year commitment

Canada's foreign policy review should affirm SRHR as a cross-cutting foreign-policy priority and fully protect the 10YC, including its ring-fenced focus on neglected areas of SRHR. Protecting this commitment safeguards a strategic asset that saves lives, reinforces Canada's credibility and legitimacy and strengthens the human rights institutions needed to withstand global instability.

Retreating would nullify years of public investment and institutional learning at the moment where they are needed most. By fully implementing and building on the 10YC, Canada can respond to the growing anti-gender movement, preserve its hard-won expertise and remain a reliable partner in advancing human rights, security and sustainable development.

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