



**OXFAM**

# FEMINIST PRINCIPLES

What they are and how they serve as a guidepost for our work

Produced collaboratively by Oxfam Canada staff  
September 2018

## Background

In 2006, Oxfam Canada (OCA) decided to strengthen its long-standing commitment to women's rights and gender equality by making these issues the strategic focus for all of the organization's work. We were pleased that OI put women rights at the centre of its work by including Gender Justice as one of the four goals of the Strategic Plan 'Demanding Justice 2007 – 2012' and re-affirmed this in the current Strategic Plan 'The Power of People Against Poverty, 2013-2019.

Since 2006, to ensure that we walked the talk on gender equality, we set about transforming not only our programming, but also our internal structures, culture and practices to be more inclusive and respectful of women and men in all their diversity. We knew that to truly transform power relations, we needed to address attitudes and behaviour, norms and culture. And that this applied to our internal dynamics as well as those of the communities and organizations with which we work in partnership and solidarity. This included an intensive gender audit process to assess where we were at and to guide us to where we wanted to be. Building on the recommendations, over the past 12 years, we have sought to integrate gender equality and women's rights into all our internal operations and ways of working as well as in our externally facing work: humanitarian interventions, long-term development, and policy and campaigning.

In the wake of the Haiti Crisis, OCA, like other affiliates, was pushed to deepen our own introspection. Regardless of the particular details of the crisis, the existential question arose of how an organization dedicated to gender equality and women's rights could find ourselves in such a position.

## Feminist approach as a process, not just an outcome

As practitioners, we all know that the devil is in the details, and that approach and intention can serve to both advance or undermine our stated goals. There can be programs intended to deliver aid to all people, but which inadvertently disempower women or do not appropriately address their need for access. We can be an organization dedicated to advancing women's leadership and decision making, but our structures and human resources processes can mean that the same advantages that exist elsewhere for men to prevail as leaders also exist in our own organization. Power and power dynamics are woven into our work at many levels: from how we engage with one other in our organization to the design of our programs and the lived experiences of people as these programs are implemented.

While OCA has made huge strides in our commitment to the rights of women and girls, we need to push ourselves further. We need to commit more fully to taking a **feminist approach** to our work. A feminist approach we believe means committing both to an **OUTCOME** (the advancement of the rights of women and girls), but also to a **PROCESS** (our ways of working, our program design and implementation, our policy and campaigning, and the values which underpin our decisions as staff and directors leading this work).

## But, what does it really mean to take a “feminist” approach?

OCA collaborated with other gender equality and women's rights organizations and activists in Canada to help shape the Government of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) launched in 2017. FIAP has created unique space for OCA to build on past work and to take leadership in putting a feminist approach to international assistance into practice. This, alongside the crisis in Haiti, **has prompted us to think more deeply about what it really means to apply a feminist lens to our own practice, how far we are already doing this in our work, and what more we need to do.** We have convened an ongoing discussion across OCA (Feminist Principles Working Group) to include voices from different teams and perspectives.

In doing so, we are continuing and adding to conversations that we have started or participated in across the OI confederation. This discussion on feminist approaches, feminist perspectives and feminist theory is taking place across Oxfam and with partners – from the GHT to the influencing guide, from the gender transformative leadership work to the feminist MEAL approaches. In every corner of the organization, we are working to wrap our heads around what it means to apply a feminist lens to work.

In many of the documents we read and discussed (referenced at the end of this document), one theme emerged: most of the time, explanations of HOW to do something made the assumption that people knew WHY that was a feminist approach. The values underpinning the approach were assumed, not stated. What we have attempted to do, therefore, is define those principles, to state them aloud, and to clarify what they mean, and what they look like when applied, in practice. Our efforts to experiment with taking a feminist approach is a continuous learning process and a long-term commitment to improving our ways of working and attempting to push our own boundaries of how we can do and be better.

We hope that this can be a useful contribution as the confederation works to advance our commitment to becoming a stronger, more clearly feminist organization in the way we approach all of our work.

Sincerely,

*Oxfam Canada's Feminist Principles Working Group*

# What feminist principles are and are not

By defining principles, we are working to create a framework that can guide Oxfam staff in their work. Much like Oxfam's existing Partnership Principles, a set of Feminist Principles would shape and guide approaches to our work – with partners, in our programs, our humanitarian work, our policy and campaigns as well as in our organizational culture and behavior.

In applying these principles, we cannot separate the internal and external. Organizational transformation (and all that entails) is equally as important as our externally facing work. We must lead by example and be perceived as having a legitimate role in spaces where gender equality and women's rights issues are addressed.

It would be a bold move for Oxfam to consider our core tenants as an organization as feminist. Of course, there is no one definition of feminist. What defines a feminist approach is ever evolving and should never, by nature reach a definitive conclusion. We can, however, use our experience to date as a starting point to create a common understanding for the organization. Below, we offer some principles to guide our practice. We can continue to reflect on their relevance and meaning over time.

These principles are aspirational. Simply put, these principles describe ways of working that prioritize power, participation, collaboration, contextualization, reflexivity, inclusivity and responsiveness. This way of working requires us to value relationships, invest in people, and reflect on our own practice, learning together and horizontal collaborations. We acknowledge that OCA is not currently approaching all of our work in this way. We also acknowledge that there are challenges to consistently and fully implementing them – challenges that may require rethinking current ways of working in INGOs and the aid sector more generally. We know too that putting feminist principles and values into practice requires strong individual, collective and organizational intention to align our approaches with feminist values, purpose and politics.

To be clear, we do not hold that taking a feminist approach means focusing exclusively on women and girls. Or, supporting only women's rights or feminist organizations. Our experience has taught us that working with a wide range to organizations to build their capacity to advance gender justice and other forms of oppression is an important strategy for achieving gender equality. We also know that working with men and boys is critical to challenging and shifting social norms that underpin gender discrimination and other forms of discrimination. Still, OCA has a long history of support to women's rights organizations. OCA believes that feminist and women's rights organizations are key change agents in realizing visions of gender justice in their contexts and need opportunities to grow their capacity to manage and sustain themselves. Feminist and women's rights organizations know their contexts and constituencies and are best placed to support programs and advocacy that address the root causes of gender inequality, particularly the stubborn and deep-seeded discriminatory social norms that value men over women and people of diverse sexual orientations, expressions and identities.

A feminist approach to us also means working on systems and structures that contribute to the marginalization and oppression of people. It does however assume that in order to achieve an end to poverty, we must put power and intersectionality at the heart of our work, and that a concerted concentration on women and girls will be needed in order to achieve full equality for the world's most disadvantaged and marginalized groups.

In terms of the principles themselves, we recognize that language and concepts overlap – for example power and reflexivity are cross-cutting across all principles. However, each concept requires explicit focus to ensure it is prioritized. We also acknowledge that the word "feminist" and the language contained in these principles are not yet accessible to everyone. We believe strongly that in order for the move towards a feminist approach to be

effective, there needs to be leadership and accountability at the highest levels. If these are not principles that are owned as core beliefs and promoted by staff at all levels, they risk remaining trapped on paper.

We are excited to receive feedback on how to improve and strengthen language to ensure these ideas can be owned and promoted by all Oxfammers.



Locals gather for the Santo Nino Fisherfolk Association meeting, Philippines  
-Aurelie Marrier d'Unienville



# Principles and Application

Below you can find the title of a principle, a short definition, and an example or two of how they could be applied to guide our work. The principles are in no particular order.

An additional annex can be found that contains language that is more extensive and more in depth information about OCA's assessment of how these principles are currently being applied (baseline) and our aspiration for each. This work is ongoing and will continue to evolve.

Also at the end of this document, you can find a list of all sources and internal documents that were referenced through the course of our discussions.



## Support Transformative Change

---

*Our approach seeks transformative change to redresses historical power imbalances between women and men.*

---

All Oxfam's work seeks to support transformative change. Approaching our work with a feminist lens means that we seek transformative change to redress historical power imbalances between women and men. We work to challenge and shift power relations and discriminatory social norms that devalue women and girls in all their diversity (and which impact negatively on men and boys, as well). This kind of change doesn't happen overnight. This means we invest in approaches that are long-term, sustainable and often require collective action and strategies that work towards changes at multiple levels: within ourselves, within households, within society and within institutions.

### Living this Approach

Oxfam Canada, Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights and InterPares (in collaboration with 50 civil society organizations) led a learning process that sought to develop a deeper understanding of a feminist approach to International Assistance. This process clarified that a feminist approach must seek to address root causes of structural inequalities and transform systems of power.

**Read more:** [https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/file\\_attachments/a\\_feminist\\_approach\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/file_attachments/a_feminist_approach_-_final.pdf)

Our policy and campaigning work focuses on tackling structural inequalities that entrench gender inequality and limit women's rights. Our *Shortchanged* campaign addresses the unequal economics of women's work is essential to closing the gap in earnings and opportunities between women and men, and between rich and poor.

**Read more here:** <https://www.oxfam.ca/shortchanged-report>



## Recognize Power and Privilege

---

*Our approach shines the light on patriarchy which is a system of power that maintains the unequal division of power (and privilege) between men and women all across the globe.*

---

Our work recognizes that lack of power and privilege are key determinants of poverty. Applying a feminist lens to our analysis of power, we shine the light on patriarchy which is a system of power that maintains the unequal division of power (and privilege) between men and women all across the globe. Building on lessons learned from the history of the women’s movement, we add an intersectional lens to our gender analysis of power and privilege, that is, one that takes into account intersecting inequalities based on indigeneity, ethnicity, race, age, sexual identity, ability, and class, among others. We also acknowledge our “positional” power we hold as an INGO and are attentive to how we hold power in the spaces we inhabit. Within our organization, we are aware of how power dynamics privilege certain voices and actors and work to create more equitable organizational cultures.

### Living this Approach

Recommendations in our annual *Feminist Scorecard*, which rates the Canadian governments progress on gender equality and women’s rights at home and abroad, are informed by our analysis and understanding of power and privilege.

**Read more:** <https://www.oxfam.ca/turning-feminist-promises-into-progress>.

Our work on gender budgeting is another example of how we understand and act to address power and privilege. Central to our gender budgeting work is demanding that the parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance give more opportunities to women’s rights organizations to testify before them. We also engage with women’s rights organizations in our lobby work with MPs.

**Read more:** [https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/federal\\_budget\\_2018\\_briefing\\_paper\\_building\\_a\\_economy\\_that\\_works\\_for\\_women\\_web.pdf](https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/federal_budget_2018_briefing_paper_building_a_economy_that_works_for_women_web.pdf)



## Put Women's Rights Actors at the centre of our work

---

*We place women's rights actors at the centre of our work, strengthening their organizations, amplifying their voices, and supporting their projects.*

---

We believe that collective action is a keystone to transformative change. Strong and resilient feminist and women's rights organizations and movements are the key drivers of change for gender equality and women's rights across the globe. The impact of their collective action is supported by evidence. We place women's rights actors at the centre of our work, strengthening their organizations, amplifying their voices, and supporting their projects. We will not fund or support activities that displace, undercut or overlook women's organizations and movements. Many of our partners share our feminist principles and indeed are feminist leaders and we will work with other organizations to foster understanding of how a feminist lens can strengthen their work on gender equality and women's rights.

### Living this Approach

For more than a decade, OCA has funded and supported the organizational strengthening of feminist and women's rights organizations with a participatory organizational capacity building process. We are currently working to redesign these resources as explicitly feminist organizational capacity strengthening tools.

**Read more:** <https://www.oxfam.ca/our-work/publications/power-of-gender-just-organizations>

OCA has articulated how Canada can support the leadership of women's rights actors in humanitarian action. Local and national women's rights actors play an important role in humanitarian action. As established members of a community, they are well placed to deliver assistance quickly in a crisis and understand the needs of women in that context. In order to best respond to the realities of communities on the ground, and support long term, sustainable transformation, it is necessary to have in place policies and approaches that span development, humanitarian and security work from a feminist perspective.

**Read more:** <https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/a-feminist-approach-to-localization.pdf>



## Honour context and complexity

*Our approach brings a feminist analysis to context, highlighting the need for context-specific strategies when working gender equality and women's rights*

Applying a feminist lens to our work brings into focus the complex interplay among individual, household, community, and societal factors that influence and shape how gender power relations and social norms operate in different contexts in which we work. We respect that our partners understand their contexts better than we do. We do not offer one-size fits all solutions. We see our role as supporting partners to surface and strategize on ways to work on gender equality and women's rights that are appropriate for their contexts.

### Living this approach

OCA has developed a theory of change and set of principles to guide its program design, implementation, governance, program management, monitoring, evaluation, learning and knowledge generation with a feminist lens as we step up our commitment to shifting power to local women's rights organizations who know their context and offer the best investment in achieving long-term, sustainable change.

*Women's Voice and Leadership – Co-creating, Innovating, and Shifting power, forthcoming, September 2018.*







# Celebrate diversity and challenge discrimination through an intersectional approach

---

*Our approach embeds an intersectional lens in our feminist analysis to highlight people's multiple identities and ways in which these shape the power they can (or cannot) exercise.*

---

Intersectional analysis is central to feminist theory but we know we have a long way to go to putting it into practice. Intersectionality takes into account the diversity of people's identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of discrimination they face as well as the power they can (or cannot) exercise. . It also challenges us to expand our understanding of gender beyond binaries (woman/man, femininity/masculinity). We recognize and celebrate the diversity of all identities. At the same time, we seek to understand how multiple aspects of identity (race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, and religion, among others) intersect to create people's particular "frame" or way of seeing the world, and people's particular experiences of oppression and discrimination. As we bring an intersectional lens to our work, we are more vigilant about how our own frame is affecting how we interpret the experiences of others, what we see and don't see, and what we value as relevant or not. Our analysis is more thorough because it is more inclusive; our strategies reflect the interests and aspirations of the people we work with, in all their diversity.

## Living this approach

Internally, we have an active staff diversity and inclusion advisory committee.

In our communications, we deliberate in illustrating diversity, and ensure the people we work with are not represented as one-dimensional or as victims without voice and agency. See Creating Spaces' communications strategy: <https://oxfam.box.com/s/oymoj5dn8ods48jxf9ahemi9ya5qmcp2>

Our programming and policy analysis is increasingly informed by an intersectional approach, and we are actively seeking to improve this. For example, work we are doing on taking a feminist approach to women's economic empowerment seeks to push those working in this space to go beyond women's entrepreneurship to look at the intersectional factors that affect women's capacity to benefit from economic opportunities. Understanding how race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, caste, ethnicity, age, religion, first language, country of origin affect women – e.g. as migrant workers in urban settings, domestic workers who migrate to another country, low caste workers with no assets, women from culturally conservative societies – influences the extent to which women can participate in the economy in a productive way is critical if women's economic empowerment policies and programming are to benefit women in all their diversity.

**Read more:** [https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/federal\\_budget\\_2018\\_briefing\\_paper\\_building\\_a\\_economy\\_that\\_works\\_for\\_women\\_web.pdf](https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/federal_budget_2018_briefing_paper_building_a_economy_that_works_for_women_web.pdf)



## ‘Nothing about me without me’

---

*Applying a feminist approach to working with partners and communities, means igniting agency and ensuring that women and their organizations are included in decision-making processes in all matters that affect them.*

---

We acknowledge that our partners, and the communities they work with, often hold the knowledge they need on how to best transform their lives. Agency is an individual or group’s ability to make choices, and to transform those choices into desired outcomes. Feminist agency includes principles of autonomy, choice, empowerment and meaningful engagement. Applying a feminist approach to working with partners, means ensuring that women and their organizations are included in decision-making processes in all matters that affect them: from program design to choices about advocacy work to communications. And, really **listening** to their voices and positions – even if it means we sometimes need to step aside. We know that this is only possible if we rethink some of our systems and processes for how we make decisions about programming, humanitarian work, and advocacy and campaigns.

### Living this Approach

We are working through our programming on Women’s Voice and Leadership, to revisit the Partnership Principles from a feminist lens as work with women’s rights and feminist organizations to shift power. Women’s Voice and Leadership – Co-creating, Innovating, and Shifting power, forthcoming, September 2018.

In our policy and campaigning work, we seek to partner with women’s organizations and create spaces and opportunities for women to speak truth to power. For example, the W7, held in Ottawa in April 2018 in the lead up to the G7, brought together a diverse group of feminist activists from across Canada, G7 countries and the Global South. The event was about co-creating recommendations for the G7, and presenting them to power holders, including the Prime Minister and several cabinet ministers – and ensuring that it was feminist activists who delivered these messages and recommendations. **Read more:** <http://w7canada.ca/>

We acted as the Secretariat in the 2015 Up for Debate initiative, which brought together feminist and women’s rights organizations and movements from across Canada, asking political parties for a leaders debate on women’s rights in the lead up to the 2015 federal election. We are currently working with these allies on a similar initiative in the lead up to the 2019 federal election. Read more: <https://www.oxfam.ca/upfordebate>

In our communications, we endeavor to use first person quotes and stories told by women themselves, rather than us to tell the story on their behalf. We have strengthened our partner relationships by ensuring that they review and approve any content collected from programs.



## Do no harm

*Our approach to risk assessment, protection and safe-guarding at all times takes into consideration how gender norms create inequalities of power that disadvantage women and girls, including women staff.*

We acknowledge that our work is difficult and carries a degree of risk in implementation – for program partners and for Oxfam staff. Bringing a feminist lens to the concept of “do no harm” means that we adhere to ethical practice and standards of implementation, evaluation, research as well as communications, at all times taking into consideration how gender norms create inequalities of power that disadvantage women and girls, including women staff. Our risk assessment tools are developed with a feminist lens. We implement, and regularly monitor, robust protection, safeguarding policies and procedures, and independent complaints procedures that take are accessible to women and girls in communities in which we work. We acknowledge, as well, that the concept of “do no harm” applies to our own internal cultures and practices, inspiring us to build just cultures within our organization and to prioritize self-care and well-being among staff.

### Living this approach

We adhere to OI confederation policies and guidelines and continue to explore what it means to take a feminist perspective to safeguarding that surfaces, visible, hidden and invisible power.

OCA developed a set of research guidelines for working on VAWG and GBV integrating a feminist approach based on international best practice guidelines for feminist research.

We are working harder to reflect on the concept of ‘do no harm’ as it applies to our own self-care and wellbeing. We had our first Self-care Day for Staff in March 2018.



Sukitha Kumarapala buys fruit and vegetables at the local shop, Sri Lanka  
-Abir Abdullah / Oxfam



## Balance Learning and Accountability

*Applying a feminist lens to MEAL means that we support program partners to take the lead in MEAL practices, while building their capacity to do so.*

Balancing learning and accountability is not easy. Power relations often determine how efforts are invested (i.e. upward accountability to donors – including Oxfam). A feminist approach to MEAL challenges us to shift these power relationships and to engage program partners directly in defining change, its measurement and metrics and why this information is relevant to the change they want to see. And, wherever possible, supporting program partners to take the lead in MEAL practices, while building their capacity to do so. In our MEAL approaches we acknowledge that change towards gender equality, particularly social norm change, takes time, and that there may be set-backs and backlash which our methods need to be able to capture and document. We continue to ask the question “accountability to whom” and invest in approaches to accountability that prioritize mutual and social accountability, trusting that shifting power to women and their organizations will build their capacity and commitment to accountability for their work. This principle applies equally to our efforts to balance learning and accountability within our internal organizational practices.



Kabul female boxing team, Afghanistan  
-Abbie Trayler-Smith/Oxfam

### Living this Approach

OCA has instigated and led conversations across the confederation and externally on what it means to bring a feminist lens to MEAL. Most recently, this thinking and practice has been consolidated in guidance on bringing a feminist lens to evaluation of SHRH programming.

**Read more:** [https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/beyond\\_the\\_technical\\_and\\_towards\\_the\\_transformational.pdf](https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/beyond_the_technical_and_towards_the_transformational.pdf)



## Support knowledge for transformative change

*Our approach to knowledge generation acknowledges that the processes by which knowledge is produced, disseminated and used can be either transformative of gender and power relations or uphold existing power relations.*

We acknowledge that the creation, dissemination, and use of knowledge are all political processes. Research agendas, research methodologies, knowledge generation and views on what counts as evidence are all gendered. The processes by which knowledge is produced and used can be either transformative of gender and power relations or uphold existing power relations. A feminist approach to knowledge generation means that we seek to support processes through which knowledge is co-created and co-owned with partners and allies (rather than extractive or exploitative). Research for and knowledge generation from Oxfam programs, humanitarian work and advocacy and campaigns must be driven by our commitment to dismantle patriarchal structures and systems that oppress everyone – women and men alike – and be relevant and useful to our partners and allies in their work to transform imbalances in gender and power.

### Living this Approach

OCA through its efforts to bring a feminist lens to program design and implementation, is promoting spaces and mechanisms for knowledge co-creation, and use, by women and their organizations and communities. One example is from Creating Spaces, where knowledge emerging from research and MEL process are created with communities and used by communities to promote their own interests.

Read more: <https://www.oxfam.ca/creatingspaces>

*Forthcoming paper on a Feminist Knowledge System.*



Drought response in Mauritania  
-Pablo Tosco/Intermon Oxfam



## Commit to organizational transformation

*Applying a feminist lens to our work as an organization means that we cannot legitimately work to promote gender equality and women's rights unless we show leadership in what it means to be an organization living its feminist values.*

Our commitment to gender equality both in our externally facing work and in our internal organizational practice rests on our knowledge that we cannot legitimately work to promote gender equality and women's rights unless we show leadership in what it means to be an organization living its feminist values. This means putting these values into practice in how we model transformative and feminist leadership within our own organization. This also means putting these values to work the way we celebrate diversity, ensuring that all voices are valued and heard in our internal processes. It also means being reflexive about our positional power as an INGO in our interactions with other stakeholders and, as individual staff, confronting the reality that we each experience positional power differently within our organization based on our gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, education, class, etc. We also believe that organizational transformation, including shifting gender-related attitudes and norms, is accelerated when we support the creation of spaces for reflective practice— at the individual, team and organizational level and commit to investing time and resources to this.

### Living this Approach

OCA took its commitment to walking the talk on gender equality seriously by undertaking an intensive, external Gender Audit in 2007-2008, which guided the organizational culture change process. We recognized that gender is not simply a programmatic issue and that it truly impacts the entire organization (HR policies/ staff recruitment are critical, as well as financial allocation, budgeting, procurement). We have engaged in numerous internal reflection processes, including applying our Organizational Capacity Assessment Process for Gender Justice to our own organization.

As of April 2018: the staff composition is approximately: 80% women staff; 70% women managers; 60% women directors (80% of permanent directors are women). We have clear induction procedures for staff, various internal committees such as: the feminist principles working group; a staff diversity and inclusion advisory committee, and internal safeguarding committee. Gender training is mandatory for all staff and we have added training on diversity and inclusion, disclosure and safeguarding. We update key policies regularly: Gender Policy 2008, updated 2016, No Harassment/ No Violence Policy in the Workplace, Child Protection Policy, Whistle Blowing Protection, Accountability Policies (i.e. Conflict of Interest, Complaints, Evaluation), Oxfam Code of Conduct. More than a decade on from our Gender Audit, there has been a tipping point. The “what” as the focus isn't part of the discussion and rather we discuss “how” can we live these values (including pushing the boundaries on feminist principles); what are the best strategies to do so.

**More information** on the Gender Audit is available here:

[https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/file\\_attachments/walking-the-talk-on-women2019s-rights-summary-report-of-the-oxfam-canada-gender-audit\\_1.pdf](https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/file_attachments/walking-the-talk-on-women2019s-rights-summary-report-of-the-oxfam-canada-gender-audit_1.pdf)