



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK

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Canada's International Assistance Policy, National Action Plan and its positive impact on women peace and security

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WRN spoke with Beth Woroniuk, co-founder and coordinator of Women Peace and Security Network-Canada (WPSN-Canada) with over 25 years of experience. She has provided policy advice, conducted evaluations, developed training and designed tools for UN agencies, bilateral development organizations, NGOs and others. Her particular interests include gender dimensions of evaluation; women, peace and security; and the dilemmas and challenges of gender mainstreaming. We were excited to speak with her about Canada's new Feminist International Assistance Policy, upcoming WPS National Action Plan and its positive impact on women peace and security.

What are your hopes for the new Feminist International Assistance Policy and what that means for Canadians and also those women around the world?

I find it very exciting, I think this is a real opportunity to change the way Canadian international assistance is focused and delivered. It is absolutely amazing to see in the policy document how gender equality and women's rights both stand alone as the first priority but also how the policy sets out that programming in all areas should also work towards these goals. I am particularly excited that there is a commitment to women's organizations. The Canadian government says it will direct 150 million Canadian dollars over five years to women's organizations. This is quite a change. Previously only a small percentage of Canadian assistance was going directly into the hands of women's organizations. If the policy is implemented, and if they are able to move forward, this could be very exciting. It really could boost the resources available for the women's organizations doing such important work.

We have seen a feminist foreign policy (example Sweden) that has received backlash on the international stage and even at home- what has the reaction been or what do you think will



happen with the Canadian policy?

The reactions have been mixed, we have had organizations that have seen the potential and are excited. However there were broad reactions which could be termed 'cautiously optimistic.' A number of the organizations noted the positive elements in the policy document but they raised questions about how it would be implemented. For example while the policy has a clear focus on women's and girls' rights, our last federal budget in February of this year did not include any new money for international assistance. We are looking at a nearly all time low percentage of GDP going to international development. Many people asked how the new policy is going to be implemented if there are no resources. They were particularly discouraged because a few days before the international assistance policy was released, we had the new defense policy announced which did include a 70 percent projected increase in defense spending. So a lot of questions were raised. If the government is willing to spend money on defense but not on international assistance, what that really says about overall priorities?


Secondly many critics are questioning the capacity of Global Affairs Canada to actually implement the policy. The policy calls for new ways of working and new ways of approaching risks. We all know that bureaucracy is very difficult to change and generally reluctant to take chances.


There is another group that is actually very small. But there are small pockets of opposition to the new policy. We have heard some revealing inside Global Affairs Canada and amongst some Canadian development NGOs. I think that this opposition should be expected. When you try to change gender inequalities and hierarchies, there will be resistance from some.

As we wait for Canada's new C-NAP to be renewed one of your recommendations is this:

Address the inter-related nature of domestic and international WPS issues. Global realities consistently highlight the growing interconnectedness of states. Issues such as conflict-related migration (especially refugees), violent extremism, illegal flows of weapons, human trafficking, and epidemics have both domestic and international dimensions. Thus, the C-NAP cannot only be an externally facing document. – **Q: In your opinion what would be the most pressing and important example of an inter-related WPS issue you see right now?**

Well, first of all we want to get the Canadian government to acknowledge this inter-relationship because historically the national action plan was only an external document so even if they take a small step in this direction it will be very positive. We flagged number of issues to them in consultations. One issue that relates to human security is the situation in Canada of the missing and murdered indigenous women. It is a huge problem. Native women's organizations have documented cases close to 1200 indigenous women and girls have gone missing or have been murdered in the last decades. Many members of our network feel this should part of Canada's women, peace and security national action plan since it is such a security crisis for a group that is





subjected to racism and discrimination. Therefore, even though it is not part of an armed conflict many of our members believe that it is an important human security issue that should be addressed and included in Canada's national action plan.

Another point: we have started discussions on how the Canadian government approaches radicalization and violent extremism. Today the work that is being done in Canada does not seem to have a gender lens or approach. Many of our members believe that a gender approach to CVE is not just important in Canada's foreign policy. It should also be integrated into the overall approach to how the Canadian government approaches radicalization leading to violence inside Canada as well.


When we talk about addressing root causes of conflict in a country like Afghanistan for example, how do you think Canada can contribute? What efforts do you think Canada is willing and able to make on the ground to address some of the ongoing protracted conflicts that can potentially make a huge positive impact in the lives of women and girls?

One of the key issues that we have been stressing with the Canadian government is the importance of listening to women and girls. Their insights should be considered when trying to understand a specific context. It is really important to learn what women's priorities are and what their solutions are for local crises. I think Canada has a role to play in strengthening these organizations bringing profile to their voices. In the case of Afghanistan, I think the Canadian government can help bring the perspective of Afghan women to international discussions. We know that if there is going to be peace and security in Afghanistan, it has to be a peace that works for boys and men, women and girls of Afghanistan. What the Canadian government is actually willing to do, we'll have to see.

How do you see the South Asian Feminist movements and what positive role do you think networks like the WRN can play?

One of the key priorities that Network members have been consistently highlighting to Members of Parliament as well as Global Affairs Canada is the importance of supporting women's organizations and movements. We think that it is absolutely crucial to Canada's international policies. We are hoping to see a very strong profile for this type of action in Canada's new National Action Plan on women, peace and security.

I think networks like the Women's Regional Network are extremely important. They offer spaces for women to reflect. We often need time and a process of consultation to hear different voices and to develop common positions and to learn and to develop a shared analysis. This takes time. Networks like the Women's Regional Network are very important in the whole process of bringing women together and getting their views out there in publications, in dialogues with the





embassies, and discussions with different political actors. These are important roles for a network like WRN to play.

It would be very good to increase the exchange of information among networks such as WRN and WPSN-C. Members of our Network are determined to hear the voices of women involved in building peace. The WRN could help us bring those voices to Canadian NGOs, parliamentarians and others. It would be great to have members of WRN participate in some of our events. We could try to be more creative and make good use of technology such as video conferences. I look forward in the future to more exchanges and better communication between our two networks.

What inspired you to be human and women's rights advocate and do this amazing work that you have been doing? You have done a lot since the beginning of your career up until now, if we ask you to tell us about one work of yours that you admire the most what would that be and why?

First of all I think I became a feminist in my teens when I have heard all along "oh you can do anything you put your mind to." Then as I started high school and university I realized that was not completely true. I faced challenges and obstacles that I didn't see my male colleagues encountering. In my twenties I was living and working in Nicaragua and it was a very interesting moment because it was the first Sandinista revolution and there was a lot of talk about social change and equality. There was also this really interesting discussion happening with the women's movement in Nicaragua. Many women were struggling to see how women's rights fit within the broader political process. Furthermore, I saw that inequalities here in Canada are linked to inequality around the world. I have learned so much from women struggling for justice in other countries and that is really important for those of us in Canada. There is a lot to be learned globally around the way women organize for their rights. It is one issue that no one country has the answers. Inspiration can be found in numerous parts of the world.

On the second part of your question, one of the things that I am proud of is forming the Women, Peace and Security Network-Canada. We are a volunteer network. We do not have any budget, resources or staff, yet over the five years we have been able to develop publications and raised the profile of WPS issues. We have participated in policy dialogues with government leaders. I am really proud of the way Network members have pitched in and given their time, their ideas and insights to help us shape Canadian policy on this important issue.

