



Canadian International
Development Agency

Agence canadienne de
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GENDER EQUALITY & SUPPORT TO CIVIL SOCIETY: IN BRIEF

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- In order to be truly democratic, civil society organisations should be capable of representing the needs and interests of both their male and female members. A concern for gender equality is part of a broad social agenda, not just the responsibility of women's organisations.
- There is a need to look at the capacities of mainstream organisations to ensure that their activities involve and benefit both women and men, develop women (as well as men) leaders, and (where possible) promote gender equality.
- Although the women's movement in CEE has grown in recent years, organisations are still in need of resources and technical support.
- Additional legitimacy for gender equality and gender equality advocates can be encouraged through the involvement of these organisations in mainstream discussions, coalitions and activities.
- Discussions on gender equality issues should be conducted carefully with a sensitivity to the historical legacy and specific realities (see the column to the right).

Talking about gender equality in CEE countries

"There is considerable suspicion in the former communist countries about the whole idea of equality between women and men. There is resistance to the promotion of equality as such, which has historical roots and which must be taken into account in any dialogue on the gender aspects of development cooperation." (Englund, 1997: 45)

Although the independent women's movement in Russia is growing, it is still struggling. Feminism, for many, remains a suspect word. "When I told a friend that I was joining Woman's Light, she couldn't believe it," recalls Sasha Smirnova. "She said, 'How can you be a feminist? You have a fiancé.'" (Maughan, 1996)

1. WHAT ISSUES DOES A CONCERN FOR GENDER EQUALITY RAISE IN PROGRAMMES SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY?

A vibrant civil society is a key element in a democratic society. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are important actors. They articulate the needs and interests of citizens, work to hold governments accountable, lobby for change, carry out research, develop and mobilise constituencies and even provide direct services.

The NGO experience in CEE countries tends to be relatively new and somewhat fragile. Organisations are struggling to build their base, increase their capacity, establish their own infrastructures and define their roles. From a gender equality perspective, there are important issues relating to both mainstream organisations and organisations with a specific mandate to promote gender equality.

The situation of women's organisations and gender equality advocates varies throughout the region. The legacy of 'forced emancipation' of the communist era and the current economic crisis have meant that it is often difficult for organisations to establish a profile and legitimacy. Yet, recent years have seen significant growth in the women's movement and organisations working for gender equality.

This movement has many faces. Throughout the region women's organisations have campaigned against violence against women. For example, the Women's Rights Centre in Warsaw provides legal advice and assistance to women and trains police, judges, and prosecutors on issues of domestic violence. There are 'gender studies' centres in numerous cities. Professional women have formed alliances. Other organisations have also emerged. For example, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers gained international recognition for its opposition to the war in Chechnya.

Given the history of the women's movement in CEE countries, special care must be taken when exploring gender equality issues. Words and phrases may not mean the same thing to everyone involved in discussions.

For many women, 'equality' was a state-imposed condition that obligated them to enter the labour force and carry out all the household tasks.

In order to advance a discussion with partners and potential partners it is important to:

Do your research: Start the discussion from an informed position. Investigate issues before raising them in discussions. What gender equality issues are relevant to this sector and project focus? What issues have been raised by women's organisations active in this area?

Look for allies: Local advocates for women's equality are well placed to advise on key issues, information sources and other resources.

With growing access to the internet and electronic communication, many of these organisations have sites on the Web. See Russian Feminist Resources for information on women's groups in Russia and other CEE countries:

< <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/2533/russfem.html>>

A gender equality perspective is also relevant in support to other organisations. These organisations are important vehicles for the representation of women's interests and in building a constituency in support of gender equality. For example, trade unions should represent female as well as male members, environmental lobby groups should look at the impact on women and men of environmental problems, and poverty organisations should understand how women and men are affected by poverty and what strategies would assist all. The more that mainstream organisations advocate greater equality between women and men, the less likely it is that these issues will be seen merely as those of a 'special interest group.'

2. QUESTIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Supporting the development of a civil society that ensures that both women's and men's interests are represented and that promotes active participation by all people (women and men) can be supported through attention to:

- *Capacity of organisations to represent the needs and interests of both male and female members* – Do organisations recognise that their male and female members may have different needs and interests? Do they take the issues of both women and men on board and incorporate them into their policies, priorities and programmes? Are both men and women encouraged to develop an expertise in equality issues (instead of expecting only women to be active in this area)?
- *Capacity of organisations to broaden their membership base* – Do organisations reach out to both women and men and encourage them to become involved? Do organisations promote the participation of women and men in all aspects of their work or is there an informal gender division of labour with women responsible for some tasks or spheres of activity and men responsible for others?
- *Promotion of women leaders* – Do organisations encourage and facilitate women assuming positions of leadership? Do training programmes take into consideration the specific obstacles faced by women and employ strategies to increase their participation?
- *Capacity of equality-seeking organisations* – Is there provision for resources and technical assistance to organisations explicitly dedicated to gender equality? Are there opportunities for these organisations to link with like-minded organisations both regionally and internationally to learn from each other?
- *Women's organisations as resources* -- Are organisations with an explicit equality mandate drawn on as resources and brought into mainstream discussions? If they are used as a resource, are they compensated for their time and involvement (most women's organisations are still under-resourced)?
- *Elimination of gender stereotypes and biases, on the part of both women and men* – Do organisations work with both women and men to promote an understanding of gender equality issues and encourage women leaders? Are women and men both encouraged to work in non-traditional areas and broaden their skills?
- *Development of gender-sensitive participatory mechanisms* – NGOs often consult with and attempt to involve communities and individuals in specific initiatives or projects. Even with participatory mechanisms, special measures are needed to ensure that both women and men are able to participate. Without specific attention to gender divisions and power imbalances, community consultations can often result in only a narrow range of voices being heard.

Make the discussion concrete: Instead of saying, "we'd like to look at gender equality issues in this project," try "according to Canadian policy, it is important to try to ensure that both women and men benefit from this project. Can we look at how this human rights organisation understands women's human rights?" Or "If this organisation is going to attract a wide range of members, it will be important for it to understand the needs and interests of both women and men. Does it have the skills and knowledge to do that?"

Avoid jargon: Present your position in clear, everyday language. Ensure that everyone has a common understanding of terms.

Draw on national commitments to international conventions and agreements: The most important specific instrument that affirms women's rights is the United Nations *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. It has been signed by almost all the governments in the region. Governments have also agreed to implement the *Platform for Action* signed at the Beijing Conference in 1995. A new publication, **The Rights of Women**, details treaties and conventions on women's human rights.

Use a long-term approach: Begin the discussion from a position of mutual trust. Be patient, learn and gradually expand the discussion.

Sources:

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