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OPINION

Investment in women and gender equity expiring just when it's needed most

With the federal budget nearly upon us, there is no better time for this feminist government to show up for our sector.

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In 2015, the then-newly elected federal government boldly declared itself a “feminist” one. Leaders of many gender equity organizations across the country — including ours — felt a sense of optimism we hadn’t felt in decades.

We had just lived through a decade of decimation. Some organizations were forced to shutter, creating huge gaps in essential services that no one else could fill, and others barely scraped by, held together by duct tape and passion. We now dared to dream that our work contributing an intersectional feminist lens as well as front-line experience to the creation and reform of laws, policies, and programs would be seen for the essential, lifesaving work it is. We held out hope that this newly minted feminist government would not leave us behind.

In many ways, this hope has not been misplaced. In 2018, the federal government committed \$100 million over five years for feminist organizations to build capacity to carry out our important missions. Collectively, we support people in our communities whose gender-based inequities are exacerbated by colonialism, systemic racism, ableism, ageism, classism, and other interconnected factors that inhibit their inclusion. We engage in feminist advocacy, law reform, policy analysis, research, education and front-line service delivery to improve the lives of women and gender-diverse people.

Over 250 organizations — including the ones we lead — received capacity-building funding. We invested in long-term sustainability, including strategic, fundraising, and operational planning. We hired, trained, and supported thousands of staff members, engaged thousands more volunteers, responded to and addressed gender-based violence in communities, supported the most vulnerable members of our communities and responded to and advocated alongside the women and gender diverse people who use our services.

We did all this and more while weathering an unprecedented global pandemic, pivoting and adapting to new conditions, sacrificing our own internal growth to respond to the immediate and urgent needs of our communities and providing ongoing advice to the federal government as it did the same. All of this was done by a highly gendered but underpaid workforce that experienced high levels of burnout.

Now, on International Women’s Day, feminist organizations across Canada find ourselves days away from the crucial 2018 capacity-building investment in the feminist sector expiring with no commitment that funding will be renewed or replaced.

At the same time, we face a looming recession, a growing global backlash against the rights of women, trans, and non-binary people, and an inflationary environment with more people relying on our services and fewer people able to donate or volunteer. The result? A sector that is facing the prospect of devastating cuts to programming and staff at the exact moment when we are needed the most.

With the budget nearly upon us, there is no better time for this feminist government to show up for our sector. Our organizations play a critical role in providing thought leadership and making our country more equitable and just across economic, social, and political life.

Dozens of women's and gender equity seeking organizations and our allies have been [highlighting the urgent need](#) for renewed capacity-building investment in our sector. We are seeking a mere fraction of the funding provided to other sectors.

Investment in Canada's feminist sector is a preventative measure that ensures we are building the strong and well-resourced communities we all need. Investment in the feminist sector not only ensures crucial direct services are available for women and gender-diverse people who need them.

It also drives the development of initiatives like the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, contributes to greater gender equity in housing, employment, foreign policy, immigration, health care, and the legal system, and employs women and gender-diverse people to drive that change.

So, what is a "feminist government?" The mandate letter for the Minister of Women and Gender Equality and Youth holds an answer: it "sustain[s] historic Government funding to women's organizations and equality-seeking groups ..."

We hope this "feminist government" will follow through on its commitment to our sector. Because when we flourish, so does Canada.

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