

Confronting sexual violence in Quebec's international cooperation organisations

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How do Quebec's international cooperation organisations (ICOs) deal with gender-based and sexual violence? Basing their reasoning on a survey carried out in 2018 among forty of these ICOs, the five authors believe that the scope and ultimately the incentive value of the measures put in place are more than variable.

The #MeToo social movement has encouraged many who have experienced incidences of sexual violence in different areas of their lives – mostly women – to speak out. This unprecedented wave of allegations has revealed that, in spite of ongoing efforts and demonstrations by feminist and human rights organisations, this type of violence against women persists.

Any social situation is an environment in which sexual violence can occur. The field of international cooperation (IC) is no exception. It is therefore relevant to focus on the ways this social issue occurs in this specific context and what measures can be implemented to deal with it.

In this article, our assessment of sexual violence in the field of IC is based on data from two studies. The first is a quantitative survey conducted by the Quebec Committee for Women and Development (*Comité québécois femmes et développement* – CQFD in French), part of the Quebec Association of International Cooperation Organisations (*Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale* – AQOCI in French), which represents over sixty international cooperation organisations (ICOs) in Quebec¹. The results established a baseline for existing organisational policies and procedures used among its members to prevent and cope with sexual violence. The second was an analysis of the qualitative data from the research project « *Du plafond à la frontière de verre : comment institutionnaliser le genre dans les organisations de développement international et d'action humanitaire ?* » ("Glass ceiling to glass borders: how to institutionalise gender in international development and humanitarian aid organisations?"), led by professors Isabelle Auclair and Sophie Brière from Université Laval². The analysis highlights potential ways to address the issue of sexual violence in each specific context.

Placing the issue in context

Sexual violence is one piece of a much larger puzzle that includes several other types of violence, all exacerbated by the different forms of oppression (including sexism, racism and colonialism) that can occur in a given situation. Within the context of IC, surveys have provided insight into the incidents of sexual violence experienced by professionals in the sector. According to data provided by the Humanitarian Women's Network³, who surveyed 1,005 women in seventy organisations, 69% of respondents have heard male colleagues make comments about their physical appearance, including 6%

¹ We would like to thank AQOCI for sharing the data from the survey and Mounia Chadi, head of the women's rights and gender equality program, for her input.

² Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

³ Humanitarian Women's Network, Full Survey Results, 2016:
https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/hwn_full_survey_results_may_2016.pdf

on a daily basis. In addition, 55% of respondents were subject to sexual advances on a regular basis from male colleagues, 27% had been kissed and 22% touched without their consent, and 4% had been raped. The majority (68%) of respondents that had been subject to some form of sexual violence did not report it, and among those who reported it to their organisation, 47% said that nothing happened and 22% suffered negative professional consequences. This data demonstrates that the field of IC, just like the rest of society, is subject to a variety of power dynamics that lead to increased sexual violence. It also confirms the need to examine the alarming responses to this issue more thoroughly.

While international data on this issue are emerging, the data available for organisations in Quebec and Canada remains limited. Consistent with its policy for international aid for women, Global Affairs Canada (GAC)⁴ now requires Canadian international aid organisations to establish and enforce a sexual harassment policy. However, there is little empirical and qualitative data available about implementing strategies and concrete measures to prevent, build awareness of and cope with sexual assault. Yet this type of data is essential to develop a context-appropriate response. Further documentation and examination are needed in the future, and the next sections of this article provide an initial contribution.

Knowledge provided by the two data sets

The definition of sexual violence applied here takes into consideration a spectrum of acts ranging from harassment to physical sexual assault, highlighting the multiple and widespread gender dynamics involved in this type of violence⁵. Our analysis uses an intersectional feminist theoretical framework and is based on the concept of a violence continuum. A continuum allows us to go beyond a simple hierarchy of abuses to highlight the connection between different types of violence and systems of oppression⁶. For this analysis, we present two data sets. The first provides quantitative information about policies and codes of conduct related to sexual violence. The second focuses on the career paths of women working in IC and adds a qualitative component to our analysis of sexual violence.

Results from the survey among Quebec's ICOs

In 2018, to assess sexual violence, the AQOCI developed an organisational diagnostic tool for its members. This tool included an online survey with thirty-nine questions on prevention and how to take care of people who experienced some form of sexual violence. Forty organisations responded.

The results revealed that even prior to “the Oxfam scandal”⁷, some Quebec ICOs had already implemented policies and procedures to prevent and/or cope with sexual violence. Nineteen of them had already created a code of conduct that established clear rules and procedures for personnel and volunteers within the organisation regarding sexual violence. However, the extent to which these policies and practices are applied varied from one case to another. For example, eighteen of the codes of conduct provided a framework for intimate, romantic, and sexual relationships between a person in a position of authority and a person working under this authority, and eighteen of them too provided it between a representative of the organisation and an aid recipient. In addition, ten ICOs that responded to the survey indicated having a specific policy covering sexual violence while ten others reported being in the process of drafting or updating one, or having a procedure in place even though it does not constitute official policy.

How specific these documents are regarding the definition of sexual violence varies. A few ICOs provide clear definitions of sexual violence (n=10) and sexual exploitation (n=8). When it comes to education, training is rarely conducted on a regular or systematic basis. For thirty-four ICOs that responded to the

⁴ The department of the federal government of Canada in charge of diplomatic and consular relations as well as international trade, and which leads Canada's international development and humanitarian assistance [Editor's note].

⁵ Manon Bergeron *et al.*, « Violences sexuelles en milieu universitaire au Québec : Rapport de recherche de l'enquête ESSIMU », Université du Québec à Montréal, 2016.

⁶ Isabelle Auclair, « Violences de genre et stratégies de résistance », in Charmain Levy and Andrea Martinez (dir.), *Genre, féminismes et développement. Une trilogie en construction*, Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 2019, p. 231.

⁷ Sean O'Neill, “Minister orders Oxfam to hand over files on Haiti prostitute scandal”, *The Times*, 9 February 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/top-oxfam-staff-paid-haiti-quake-survivors-for-sex-mhm6mpmqw>

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survey, sixteen confirmed that their organisation did not provide such training. Even though sexual violence is closely linked to power structures, the majority of training provided was for workers (n=10) and interns (n=13) rather than for people in a position of authority. In addition, seventeen organisations replied that they either had one internal expert or worked with an external resource. Finally, only one organisation replied that they had a dedicated budget to deal with this issue.

When it comes to providing support to victims and survivors⁸, as well as handling complaints, eleven organisations provided access to medical care and sixteen offered access to reliable psychosocial care and support, whereas only twelve provided witnesses with access to this type of support. In 64% of cases, the procedures in place to handle sexual violence abided by Canada's and Quebec's legal requirements; 64% focused on survivor needs; 40% provided support in cases where survivors needed to travel to another region or country to receive the necessary care; and 12% allowed them to take paid leave after the facts. Fifteen organisations explained in their policies how to report or file a complaint, but only seven had a specific procedure in place to launch an investigation. Among them, five allowed for an objective investigation, and two had measures in place that guarantee confidentiality. None called for the involvement of a competent external investigator, for a thorough review of all relevant documents, or for all the information provided to be recorded.

The survey drew attention to the fact that few policies covered how to report or file a complaint and that as late as 2018 several ICOs still did not provide any training on sexual violence. Since then, tools and training have been provided to bolster the capacities of member organisations. The toolkit developed by the AQOCI to handle sexual violence includes fact sheets about sexual violence that occurs in the field of IC, tools and best practices for preventing and reporting sexual violence, training, and exposing this type of violence⁹. These are important tools for the work currently being conducted to reduce the level of violence that, as explained in the next section, persists.

Results from research on women's careers in international cooperation

Taking an intersectional point of view, this research sought to document and to provide a better understanding of the key issues and challenges faced during a career in IC. Individual and group interviews were conducted with 237 people (administrators, human resources managers, and practitioners working in several countries). While the goal of the research was not to systematically document incidents of sexual violence, information about these incidents proved essential. While analysing the results, we identified several key aspects of sexual violence, especially the need to adopt a zero-tolerance approach; to develop a collective strategy to combat sexual violence; and to mobilise the necessary resources and expertise.

Individuals interviewed deem it essential that ICOs adopt a zero-tolerance approach and culture regarding discrimination, violence, harassment, and the abuse of authority. First-hand accounts condemn the ongoing culture of toxic masculinity that is still heavily based on the "humanitarian Rambo" fantasy. This culture is a systemic aspect of a much larger context that downplays sexual violence and reproduces systems of oppression. A woman working as a humanitarian professional explains, "at some point, I informed the headquarters. They told me, 'this is your first time as mission leader, you're still learning. Just know that this is normal behaviour on a project.'"

The normalisation of acts of harassment and sexual violence has been reinforced by what participants refer to as "the culture of silence" that makes any form of whistle blowing difficult. Even though the policies and codes of conduct are relevant and necessary, they need to be further developed, circulated, and applied through an approach that fosters structural change. These comments by a gender specialist summarise the issue:

⁸ Using the terms "victims and survivors" makes it possible to highlight the power to act and the resilience of survivors, but without denying the violent and marked nature of sexual violence (AQOCI, 2019; CALACS, 2017). The isolated use of one term or the other being often criticised, the Centre for assistance and the fight against sexual assault (*Centre d'aide et de lutte contre les agressions à caractère sexuel* – CALACS in French) reminds us of the importance of privileging above all the word that the person concerned prefers.

⁹ AQOCI, « Violences sexuelles dans le secteur de la coopération internationale », <https://aqoci.qc.ca/violences-sexuelles-dans-le-secteur-de-la-cooperation-internationale/>

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“For me, the gap is that no real [work] is being done to change the culture. In other words, each time an incident occurs we renew the [safeguarding] measures. All of a sudden we put new measures in place and state, ‘you’ll see, it won’t happen again,’ but it will happen again and again over the next ten years because we never work on making cultural changes.”

This difficulty to create transformative changes within the international cooperation organisation culture is due in part to the lack of career support strategies, which should include various dimensions including working conditions and environments free from violence. This leads us to point out the need to develop a collective strategy for dealing with sexual violence.

While each situation has its own specific context, this strategy covers a common issue and should involve every stakeholder within the international cooperation ecosystem. This includes donor organisations, non-profits that represent ICOs, the ICOs themselves, specialists in academia, etc. According to several participants, it is important for these stakeholders to participate in the creation and implementation of concrete solutions that establish the right framework. As one gender consultant mentioned:

“If we put mechanisms in place that make it easy and risk-free for women to report inappropriate behaviour, then it becomes much more [difficult] for a man to behave in a [reprehensible] manner. He is going to say to himself that making certain comments and behaving inappropriately is not worth the risk because he knows that he will be admonished.”

Adopting a collective strategy does not mean implementing the same model everywhere. All policies, action plans, and measures applied need to take into consideration each different situation. The context varies by region, organisation size, the type of aid provided, available resources, and the inequalities that lead to exacerbating the violence.

Results from the research confirm that a collective and context-specific strategy should include both prevention and case management. Certain aspects should be handled by the ICOs while others could be shared. According to one manager we met, although prevention is the responsibility of the organisations and is in line with their values, the issues of managing complaints, monitoring them and supporting survivors pose a problem if these dimensions are left to the discretion of each organisation, since not all organisations have the same resources.

To bring about the desired changes through the action plans and tangible measures that result from collective and context-specific strategies, it is imperative to gather the right technical and financial resources. To do this, the results demonstrated that certain stakeholders (donor organisations, non-profits, and ICOs) have complementary responsibilities.

GAC sent a stern message by requiring organisations to establish a policy that prohibits sexual harassment and violence. In spite of certain initiatives¹⁰, the technical and financial support provided by donor organisations has proven insufficient to address this requirement. Due to the issue’s complexity, these two types of support are not enough to provide a complete solution but can contribute to structuring the fight against sexual violence. In addition, non-profits are doing important work to consolidate and represent the needs of ICOs. However, they require the means to pursue their commitments and contribute to developing services to support ICOs and their workers.

In the fight against sexual violence, ICOs need to make sure that the issue is handled across the board and that all personnel within the organisation are made aware of, trained on and understand their responsibilities. Research reveals that managing sexual violence more often than not falls upon human resources, which does not always possess the necessary training. Developing the right skills and expertise to be recognised as an expert on the topic is essential. In this sense, organisation administrators along with gender equality experts often play a key role in strategies to fight sexual violence, as long as they are endorsed by the organisation.

¹⁰ For example, at the centre of expertise Digna, funded by GAC and managed by Cooperation Canada: <https://www.digna.ca>

Potential research topics

Within Canada's current context, where sexual harassment policies are required, efforts are clearly being made within ICO to deal with the issue. Moreover, several challenges remain for ICO, especially in terms of technical and financial resources to establish a specific policy as required. Their approach should involve context-specific organisational initiatives, as well as collective strategies where different stakeholders each have a role to play. In addition, further research is necessary to collect context-specific data on the subject and propose measures appropriate to each situation. These data should take into account different types of oppression and how they can lead to sexual violence toward traditionally marginalised social groups, including women. With this in mind, research on the issue should continue to better document the experiences of those who have been subject to, witnessed, or told about sexual violence, and the organisational practices and measures that should be put in place.

Translated from the French by Darin Reisman

Biographies

Isabelle Auclair • Isabelle Auclair holds a PhD in anthropology. She is the current tenured faculty member running the Claire Bonenfant Chair on Women, Knowledge and Societies and professor in the Department of Management at Université Laval (Quebec), where she teaches courses on feminist approaches and methodologies, equality, diversity, and inclusion issues in the workplace, as well as the integration of an intersectional feminist analysis for managing international cooperation projects. In addition to teaching, she is involved in a wide variety of research projects, including those that focus on the crossroads between systems of oppression and the violence continuum, most notably with regard to forced migration.

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Stéphanie Maltais • Stéphanie Maltais holds a PhD in International Development from the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa (Canada). Her thesis focused on the management of health crises in fragile states, with a case study on the Ebola epidemic in Guinea. Stéphanie is a lecturer at the Faculty of Business Administration at Université Laval (Quebec), where she teaches the Master's in International Development and Humanitarian Action. She also works as a research professional at Université Laval, the École nationale d'administration publique and the University of Ottawa on different projects including Covid-19, women's careers in international development and humanitarian action, and neutral assessments within the Canadian federal civil service. She is the editorial coordinator for the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* and a member of the Scientific Council of *Humanitarian Alternatives*.

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