



***Women's Equality:
It's time for a political and societal shift in the right direction***

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When the House of Commons reconvenes on January 26th, 2009 Canadians will be met with the prospect of a minority Conservative government led by Stephen Harper, a coalition government, or another general election. Whatever the result, it is essential that our politicians' shift their present thinking and futile lip service towards gender disparity and finally begin to take real action to advance the equality of women as outlined by Section 15 of the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

There is no question that Canada is facing unique challenges not only with our Federal leadership, but also within the present economic climate. Difficult choices will have to be made; why not strive for new approaches. Albert Einstein once said that "in the middle of difficulty lies opportunity." Today we are faced with that possibility. As a society we can make a monumental shift in our thinking and approach to issues on inequality not because change is fashionable, but because it is necessary.

Although the equality provisions of *Charter* were enacted nearly 25 years ago, Canada's record towards gender equality remains dismal. Despite, Canada's constitutional commitment and decades of work by equality seeking organizations, women's inequality remains deeply rooted and systemic. Women and children in this country make up over seventy-five percent of all those living in poverty. One in four women has experienced criminal violence from her domestic partner. One in seven families is a sole support family headed by a woman, and fifty-seven percent of these families live below the poverty line.

These numbers are so alarming that twice in the last five years; the United Nations has expressed concern over women's inequality in this country.

In reviewing Canada's legal commitments as a state signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW), the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women called upon Canada in 2003 to make funds available for equal-rights legal cases in all jurisdictions.

The committee further recommended that Canada expand affordable child-care facilities, accelerate efforts to implement equal pay for work of equal value at the federal level, and eradicate the excessive discrimination against aboriginal women. The Committee's recent report on Canada in the fall of 2008 reiterated these deep failings in Canada's equality agenda and emphasized that cuts in social assistance plans in many provinces have had a negative impact on the rights of vulnerable groups of women, such as single mothers, aboriginal women, Afro-Canadian women, immigrant women, elderly women and disabled women.

Over the years, both Liberal and Conservative governments have made promises to advance women's equality in this country, only to later renege in the name of economic feasibility or political expedience.

The most recent example was in 2005, when equality organizations, including the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) saw the federal and provincial governments working together on a deal for provincial universal day care. We were hopeful that progress was finally being made. During that year's election, both the present Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition expressed support for women's equality. Indeed, Stephen Harper sent a letter to the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, pledging his support of women's human rights and acquiescing that Canada must do more to meet its international obligations to women's equality. "If elected," Harper wrote, "I will take concrete and immediate measures, as recommended by the United Nations, to ensure that Canada fully upholds its commitments to women in Canada."

Despite such declarations, later in 2005, the Federal government cancelled the child care and early learning agreements with the provinces, replacing it with the woefully inadequate \$100 per month child care benefit [please check name of the program]. \$3.7 billion was cut from programs for Canadian children, which would have provided support for Canadian working parents, especially working mothers.

Pay equity has still not been secured, And the government continues to ignore the 2004 recommendations from the federally appointed Pay Equity task force to move towards a "proactive pay-equity system" even though Statistics Canada reported last March that the average annual pretax income of women aged 16 and over from all sources - including employment, government transfers, and investment income - was \$24,400, nearly \$15,000 less than men of the same demographics. With such disparity, Canada's gender pay gap now ranks an embarrassing 17th among 22 OECD countries.

Continuing this regressive trend, when flush with an almost \$14 billion surplus in 2006, the government slashed a number of important programs, including 43 per cent of the operating budget of Status of Women Canada and the funding for the Court Challenges Program. A program praised by the United Nations bodies as a best practice in the human rights field because it gave Canadians real access to using equality rights.

The eradication of that program was followed by the closing of 12 of the country's 16 'Status of Women Canada' offices. If women's equality fared so dismally in a surplus, Canadians concerned about equality should fear what equality programs will face in a recession.

Today we are in a gender equality crisis. Canada's record on equality remains marred. We persistently fail to live up to the equality guarantees to women contained in CEDAW and each day women continue to be set back, put down and pushed aside. Kofi Anan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations once said that "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance." If we are a country that prides itself on tolerance and equality, the time to take action is now. Regardless of what party or parties take power in the coming weeks in Canada, Canadians should be assured that our legal commitments both nationally and internationally to the substantive equality of women will be met. Some simple steps provide a good beginning; developing and fully funding a Universal Day Care program, working with the provinces to ensure adequate social assistance rates for vulnerable women, proactively guaranteeing pay equity and reinstating the Court Challenges Program, should be core components of that agenda.

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