



New Federal Policies Affecting Women's Equality: Reality Check

November 2006 - No. 8

CRIAW Fact Sheet

In 2006, the federal government made a number of important changes affecting women's equality provisions. In addition to cutbacks, the elimination of some programs and changes to others, some government equality commitments to action were stalled or reversed. The justifications for these measures were that women are strong, already equal, and don't need these policy supports. Although we have equality rights on paper, we need to do much more work to make these equality rights a reality for *all* women in Canada.

ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Facts:

- At every level of education, women in Canada earn less on average than men. For example, in 2003, women who are high school graduates earned 71.0 % of what male high school graduates earned for full-time, full-year work. Women with post-secondary degrees earned 68.9% of what their male counterparts did for full-time, full-year work.¹ Postsecondary education does nothing at all to narrow the wage gap between women and men.
- With student debt increasing and continued proposals of income contingent repayment loans, students with lower incomes after graduation (the majority of whom are women) may take much longer to pay off their student loans, and as a result pay more interest.²
- In terms of the ratio of male to female earned income (the wage gap), Canada ranks 38th in the world. The following countries are among the many with less of a wage gap between women and men than Canada: Switzerland, Cambodia, Kenya, the Czech Republic and over 30 others.³
- Canada ranks 25th in the world in terms of the representation of women in professional and technical occupations, after the United States, Barbados, Lithuania, Argentina and many other countries.⁴
- Even in female-dominated professions such as teaching, nursing, and clerical work, men still earn more on average. For example, in 2003, the average earnings for women full-time, full-year teachers were \$47,500 and for male teachers they were \$63,300. Women are also concentrated in the sales and service industries, in which they earn 55.7 % of their male counterparts' earnings for full-time, full-year work.⁵
- Times have changed. The cost of living, including housing, utilities, transportation and the cost of raising a child have risen dramatically. In 2004, 70% of women with children under 5 worked for pay, up from 37% in 1976.⁶ However in most families, women are still expected to be the primary caregiver, so they take more days of leave to care for sick and injured family members. In 2004, women missed an average of 10 days of work due to these commitments, whereas men missed a day and a half on average, not much more than in the late 1970s.⁷ In 2004, 15,300 Canadian women left their paid employment for personal and family reasons, well over double the

number of men who did so.⁸ This double standard in terms of who should do the bulk of the caregiving of family members adds stress to women's lives and leads to employers thinking of women as "not serious" about their work which can have an effect on pay and promotion. Any time spent away from paid work also has a lifelong impact on earnings and pensions.

- In addition, because of insufficient home care services coupled with longer life spans, many women are also devoting time to caring for family members in need of aid because of age or disability in addition to trying to keep themselves and dependents alive with paid work.⁹
- Since the cutbacks of the 1990s, fewer women than men qualify for Employment Insurance (EI) regular benefits.¹⁰ The changes also made it more likely that women earning higher incomes benefited from EI maternity and parental leave benefits, while making it less likely that women working part-time, young women and lower-income women qualified.¹¹

Women form the large majority of part-time workers in Canada, accounting for more than a quarter of the female paid labour force.¹² Although they are forced to pay into EI, they find it difficult to qualify for EI maternity and parental leave, as well as sick and unemployment benefits. The majority of minimum wage workers in Canada are women.¹³ They find it hard to live on 55% of their salaries, which is what EI offers, when even their full salaries for a full year of work still places them below the Low-Income Cut-Offs ("poverty line"). They are also forced to pay into EI while not being able to afford to take much leave, thus subsidizing the leaves of better-off workers.

- In May 2004, the federal Task Force on Pay Equity released its comprehensive report which addressed criticisms of current pay equity legislation. This legislation involves making very time-consuming individual complaints to the Canadian Human Rights Commission. Some of these have taken over 10 years to resolve at great personal expense. Current legislation greatly impedes women's access to economic equality.¹⁴
- In terms of affecting access to economic equality, gender interacts with other factors, such as race, ethnicity, language, place of origin, place of residence, disability, age, plus the amount of support girls and women receive from family and communities and many other factors. The following are Statistics Canada Census 2001 average income figures¹⁵:

- Average for all Canadian men: \$36,865
- Visible minority men: \$28,929
- Men with disabilities: \$26,890
- Average for all Canadian women: \$22,885
- Aboriginal men: \$21,958
- Visible minority women: \$20,043
- Women with disabilities: \$17,230
- Aboriginal women: \$16,519

- Do women make "choices" to be economically disadvantaged, particularly by having children? If every woman decided not to have children, the human race would be wiped out in one generation. We need to recognize the value of women's paid and unpaid work, as some other countries have done through concrete policy supports for women's economic equality.

Current government policy:

- On Sept. 18, 2006, the federal government responded "no" to the recommendations of a multiyear federal Task Force on Pay Equity, as part of its response to the all-party House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women's endorsement of the pay equity recommendations.
- On Sept. 18, 2006, responded "no" to the EI maternity/parental leave recommendations of the all-party House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women. The committee recommended broadening EI maternity and parental leave coverage to include self-employed workers, and eliminating the two-week waiting period.
- Took all mention of "equality" out of the terms and conditions of the Women's Program and changed the rules so that women's organizations can no longer use federal funds to advocate for women's equality, including pressing for changes that will recognize the value and contribution women make to the paid workplace and in the home.
- According to the 1984 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, "child care is the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for mothers."¹⁶ Twenty-two years later, that ramp has yet to be built.

CHILD CARE

Facts¹⁷ :

- In 2005, 69% of Canadian men did some unpaid household work, including child care, cooking, cleaning, yard work, grocery shopping and taking out the garbage, compared with 90% of women. However, the number of hours they put in daily was very different: an average of 2.5 hours for men, and 4.3 hours daily for women. The total average workday counting paid and unpaid work has been increasing steadily for both women and men. The same study found that regardless of whether women had children at home, women were more time-stressed than men.¹⁸
- A recent study of child care in eleven Canadian cities found that not one had enough child care spaces or resources to meet the demand. Access to child care was extremely uneven across Canada.¹⁹
- Good quality child care in a regulated space can cost over \$1000 per month. In some provinces, there are a limited number of subsidized spaces available and in some provinces, even “fully subsidized” parents have to pay.²⁰
- Over 10,000 children are on the waiting list for subsidized child care in Toronto alone, up from 6,000 in the previous year.²¹
- It is no coincidence that the majority of social assistance recipients are women and children. In Canada half a million children with poor mothers are growing up on inadequate amounts of social assistance that do not cover basic needs.²² Canada has a high rate of child poverty in the industrialized world because we have less supports for women than many other countries. The proportion of lone parent mothers living in poverty in Canada is a social policy choice, not an individual one.
- The National Council of Welfare has documented the cost of poverty to all Canadians in terms of health, justice, work and productive capacity and child development. It discusses the urgent need for Canadian governments to invest in affordable, accessible, good quality child care, and adequately support parents.²³
- A 2006 cross-Canada poll found that most Canadians strongly favour significant federal investment in child care.²⁴
- Child care is not a “hand out”. It is estimated that the mothers of young children contribute \$53 billion of Canada's GDP, representing 5% of the total GDP. That is taking into account the monetary value of

their paid work, not the even greater value of their unpaid work as mothers of the next generation of Canadians. The European Union (EU) suggests European governments should spend 1% of the GDP on child care/early childhood learning, which they recognize as valuable for all children. Under the 2004 child care announcement, Canada would spend \$1 billion per year on child care and early childhood learning, representing less than 0.1% of the GDP.²⁵

- Even before the current cuts, an OECD comparison of 14 industrialized countries finds Canada at the very bottom in terms of spending on children aged 0 to 6 (less than 0.3% of GDP), far behind countries like Hungary and the United States.²⁶
- Child care is not a babysitting service. Good quality child care, whether provided by parents, other caregivers or both, ensures healthy child development and maximizes young children's intellectual, social, emotional and physical capacities and growth. Good quality child care has a positive impact on a country's economic development and stability, and not just a personal impact on the children and families involved.

Current government policy:

- The first act of the current government after taking office was to announce the cancellation of Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) agreements worth \$1 billion per year between the federal and provincial governments after 2006, even though the OECD recommended in 2003 that Canada “Strengthen the present federal/ provincial/ territorial agreements and focus them as much as possible on child development and learning.”²⁷
- Instead of a system more in keeping with other industrialized countries, the government announced that individual families with children under six would get a taxable allowance of \$100 per month to provide “choices” in child care, when \$100 per month does not replace the wages of any parent who wishes to stay home, represents a very tiny fraction of the actual costs of child care, and does not create child care spaces. In addition, this taxable \$1200 per year is counted as income, so some families may even lose their child care subsidy if the amount puts them over the threshold, which is different in every jurisdiction. Although this additional income may be helpful for some families, it is not a child care program despite its title “Universal Child Care Benefit”.

- Funds from the Early Learning and Child Care agreements could also be used for early learning supports for parents who stay at home as well as parents with part- or full-time paid employment, so that there will be fewer supports and options for all parents as a result of the elimination of the ELCC.
- Announced \$250 million in tax credits for employers and organizations who wish to undertake to create 125,000 child care spaces, however this is not due to begin before the 2007-08 fiscal year. These funds are also for capital costs only, not operating costs. This would replace the \$3.6 billion in federal funding that will not be spent through the ELCC for the provinces to provide early learning supports for parents, create child care spaces, fund subsidies and undertake any other early childhood learning initiatives.
- Will not look at ways that the EI program can mesh better with existing child care availability, as child care for kids under 18 months is harder to find. Refused to expand the EI maternity/parental leave program so more parents qualify and spend some time with their infants. Despite the surplus in the EI account, made no move to raise the benefit rate from 55% of earnings, so that lower-income workers can stay at home if they so choose.

HOUSING

Facts:

- Some women have to stay in physically and/or sexually abusive relationships just to keep a roof over their heads, and their children's heads. A number of studies emphasize the link between stable, affordable housing and women's personal safety and economic participation.²⁸
- Abuse in the home can drive women and girls into the streets, and lack of housing puts women and girls at further serious risk of physical and sexual violence and early death. One study found that 87% of homeless girls and women aged 12 to 19 in British Columbia had been abused.²⁹ The early death rate for homeless women is ten times that of women who are housed.³⁰ Any plan to reduce or eliminate violence against women *must* deal with the issue of creating safe, affordable, accessible housing.
- A Winnipeg study found that some low-income women had been sexually harassed by landlords.

They had no choice but to raise children in unsafe neighbourhoods in overcrowded and often infested conditions, and moved frequently to find lower rents, which disrupted their children's schooling and social supports. "Women who are Aboriginal, visible minorities, immigrants or refugees, disabled, senior or youth have higher levels of poverty, and therefore have more difficulties finding and affording suitable housing."³¹

- Some women's access to housing is further compromised by racism, mental or physical disabilities and conditions, immigration or refugee status, number or presence of children, and source of income.
- Canada signed the United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which guarantees in Article 11(1) a right to adequate housing.³²

Current government policy:

- On Sept. 25, 2006, cut Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) by \$45 million.
- On May 2, 2006 as part of the federal budget, announced a \$200 million reduction in federal contributions over the previous year toward creating new affordable housing through already signed agreements with the provinces and territories.
- Rewrote the terms and conditions of the Women's Program to remove "equality" and ban research, advocacy and lobbying, so Canadian women's organizations will no longer have the funds to independently monitor and press for Canada's implementation of UN charters and international human rights agreements.

LEGAL AID

Facts³³:

- Not every one has equal access to the law. In the early 1990s, the federal government capped its contribution to the provinces for legal aid, and subsequently cut it significantly in the mid-1990s. This filtered down into provincial cutbacks and restrictions about who could use legal aid and for what.³⁴
- "For women, the results [of legal aid cuts] have been devastating. Women's need for legal services is overwhelmingly in the areas of family or civil law — precisely where most of the cuts were made.

Without adequate legal representation, women are losing custody of their children, giving up valid legal rights to support, and being victimized through litigation harassment. They are spending endless days navigating a complex legal system — researching and preparing legal documents, appearing without a lawyer for highly charged divorce and custody cases, and agreeing to settlements that are not in their own or their children's interests."³⁵

- Legal aid cutbacks of the 1990s make it more difficult for women to get aid for family law cases, let alone the multi-year process of a Supreme Court challenge. Some of Canada's laws were written over a hundred years ago, such as the *Indian Act*. Although changes were made in 1985 which removed some of the gender discrimination, women and men are still not treated equally under the Act in terms of passing Indian status to their grandchildren, which leaves some Aboriginal people disenfranchised in their communities and unable to access housing and education.
- In its study of the availability of legal aid, the African Canadian Legal Clinic stated: "Lawyers are now faced with the dilemma of choosing who will be properly represented and be able to secure access to justice. The maximum seventeen hours of representation now allotted on many certificates are not enough for counsel to properly prepare and present a full case. The fact that disbursements are also not paid impacts on our community. One group participant recounted how a disbursement to secure an expert was denied to a woman in a custody case. Her lawyer could not shoulder the cost of the expert. The woman was not successful in her case before the court and her child was taken into care. Massive gaps in information in the African Canadian community regarding legal rights, coupled with the cultural insensitivity and ignorance on the part of many lawyers have led to inadequate representation for many individuals, or no representation at all."³⁶

Current government policy:

- Eliminated the Court Challenges Program, which reduces legal access to groups experiencing the effects of discriminatory laws.
- Did not use any of the \$13.2 billion surplus on legal aid, so lower-income women can better access family and civil law.
- The Minister responsible for the Status of Women claimed that there is no problem – that every woman in Canada is able to access her rights with a phone call.

“THREE STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT”

Facts:

- Women are sometimes charged with spousal assault, even if they were the ones who called the police and/or acted in self-defence. However, the consequences of spousal assault are very different for women and for men. According to Statistics Canada women are far more likely to be seriously injured, fear for their life and actually die as a result of spousal violence.³⁷
- Almost three quarters of women serving federal sentences in Canada have a history of being physically abused prior to incarceration, and over half had experienced sexual abuse.³⁸
- Aboriginal women are much more likely to have been sexually and/or physically abused than non-Aboriginal women, and are eight times more likely to be killed by a spouse. "The victimization of federally sentenced Aboriginal women prisoners includes sexual and physical assault, emotional and psychological abuse prior to their imprisonment. There are numerous historical abuses suffered as a result of residential and mission schools, foster care and adoption, the lack of equal access to training and employment not to mention the societal oppression experienced generationally, resulting in inter-nalized oppression."³⁹
- Many women in prison have low literacy skills, a problem throughout the prison system. Correctional Service Canada reports that "Approximately 54% of inmates entering CSC institutions test at lower than Grade 10 literacy levels and approximately 79% do not have a High School Diploma."⁴⁰
- Aboriginal women are even more over-represented in Canada's jails than Aboriginal men. Aboriginal women represent 2% of the Canadian population, 29% of prisoners in federal women's penitentiaries, and 46% of maximum-security federally sentenced women. The Custody Rating Scale was designed for men.⁴¹
- Canada's Correctional Investigator reported in October, 2006, "While the federal inmate population in Canada actually went down 12.5% between 1996 and 2004, the number of First Nations people in federal institutions increased by 21.7%.... Moreover, the number of federally incarcerated First Nations women increased a staggering 74.2% over this period."⁴²

- “Crime rates are declining, yet the numbers of women being imprisoned is increasing. In fact, the fastest growing prison population worldwide is women, particularly racialized, young, poor women and women with mental and cognitive disabilities. The escalating numbers of women in prison is plainly linked to the evisceration of health, education, and social services.”⁴³

Current government policy:

- Proposed an American-style “three strikes and you’re out” law to jail certain offenders indefinitely. Those particularly affected would include Aboriginal women with addictions or histories of abuse who have acted out in violence and have inadequate access to healing.
- Cut adult literacy programs so more adults will not be able to find jobs.
- Criminalize the poor and mentally ill rather than ensuring access to affordable housing, incomes, training, and support.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Facts:

- In Canada, women make up 50.4% of the population,⁴⁴ but only 20.8% of seats in the House of Commons.⁴⁵
- According to the United Nations, Canada ranks 30th in the world in terms of the representation of women in Parliament, behind Sweden, Norway, Rwanda, Trinidad and Tobago and many other countries on every continent.⁴⁶
- The current governing party in the House of Commons fielded the fewest women candidates in the general election of 2006: 10% of its candidates were women.⁴⁷
- If political participation were simply a matter of individual choice or biological imperatives, the participation of women in politics would be equal in every country. In some countries it is zero or nearly zero, in others, such as Norway, it is almost equal to men’s. In the 1970s, 15% of Norway’s parliament was made up of female representatives. Norway actively took measures to increase the representation of women. It is now about 40%.⁴⁸ Women’s political participation is a social policy choice that countries as a whole make.

- Women’s organizations help women experiencing sexual harassment, assault and economic inequality and advocate to change the policies that create the conditions in which violence and economic inequality take root and flourish, both of which lessen some women’s political participation.

Current government policy:

- Undercut women’s economic equality, so women have less money to run for office.
- Undercut child care so women with children have less time to participate in political life.
- Cut funds for adult literacy programs, so no one with low literacy skills can fully participate in society.
- Cut Status of Women Canada’s by \$5 million, which represents 40% of this federal agency’s administrative budget, because “women are already equal”.

Endnotes

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Acknowledgements:

This fact sheet was written by CRIAW Research Coordinator Marika Morris. CRIAW acknowledges the financial contribution of the Women’s Program, Status of Women Canada.

The ideas expressed in this fact sheet are those of CRIAW and do not necessarily reflect those of the Women’s Program, Status of Women Canada.

This fact sheet was produced by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW). You can obtain a copy on our website at www.criaw-icref.ca. Copies are also available from CRIAW at 151 Slater Street, Suite 408, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5H3 Canada. Phone: (613) info@criaw-icref.ca. Aussi disponible en français.