

Together for Women's Security

A Conference convened by the Governor General of Canada
Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean
September 9, 10, 2010

Challenges and Strategies

Remarks by Shelagh Day

Your Excellency, thank you for inviting me to this meeting, and thank you for your genuine commitment to women's security in Canada and around the world. Canada has been most fortunate to have you as our Governor General.

I have hard things to say this morning.

I did not think that we could move so far backwards so fast. The neo-liberal restructuring of the last fifteen years has affected women in so many profoundly negative ways. It has taken some time for women to absorb just how deeply antithetical it is to the value of egalitarianism, as well as to the rights to equality, security of the person and an adequate standard of living that Canada has embraced by ratifying international human rights instruments. In 2010, the neo-liberal erosion of the foundations of women's equality – strong social programs and investment in the “care economy” – is now paired with the overt hostility to women's human rights of the current administration.

Canadian women have developed some common understandings over the last forty years of activism. Not the thin, formal version of women's equality, but the full, fat version of equality, which we call ‘substantive’, has material conditions at its center. This version of equality, which the Supreme Court of Canada says it embraces, commits us to looking at women's real conditions, and asking whether women experience equal outcomes. In the language of international human rights, that means that social and economic rights are an integral part of the “substance” of substantive equality, and inseparable from it. Women who are the most materially disadvantaged, many of whom are Aboriginal, racialized or have a disability, do not enjoy equality and their sexual autonomy, security, political participation, and liberty are all constrained.

The fat version of equality cannot be delivered by a stripped down version of the state, which is understood to deliver freedom by its absence. It requires attentiveness, action, and spending by governments to create conditions of equality for women, not withdrawal from social policy, and deference to the market, which has been the pattern of recent years.

The general erosion of social programs and social protections has negatively affected both men and women. But it has particularly harsh impacts for women

because social programs give tangible reality to the right to equality. They level the playing field by turning illness, unemployment, childbirth, single status, old age into affordable – or at least not catastrophic – incidents of being human, or female. For women in particular, social programs have been fundamental creators of equality, Income security programs soften our economic dependence on men, and health care, home care, child care, have shifted some of the burden of care-giving from individual women's shoulders to the state, permitting us to move in greater numbers into paid employment and higher education.

The erosion of social programs also has also negatively affected women in particular because it accompanies the failure of government policies to address ongoing employment inequality for women and the continuing unequal division of paid and household labour.

Here is the briefest snapshot of women's inequality:

- in 2007 the average earnings of women working full-time, full-year were 71.4% of those of men;
- 60% of all minimum wage earners in Canada were women in 2008;
- even after transfers and tax credits, 20.9% of single parent women were poor in 2008 (compared to 7% of single parent men) as were 17.1% of unattached senior women (compared to 12.1% of men); poverty rates for Aboriginal women - including Indian, Metis and Inuit women, women of colour, immigrant women, and women with disabilities are even higher;
- only 39% of unemployed women receive EI benefits compared to 45% of men (down drastically for both since 1989);
- regulated child care spaces existed for 18.6% of children 0-12 in Canada in 2008.¹

Women in all social groups face inequalities compared to men, but there are also significant differences among women, and the impacts of social program erosion hit racialized women, aboriginal women and women with disabilities hardest.

How far backwards we have moved because of provincial and federal government withdrawal from social policy was demonstrated to me again recently when the Poverty and Human Rights Centre undertook a canvass of those doing front line work with women in British Columbia. Front line workers described a

¹ International measures of inequality between women and men in Canada are worth noting. Canada now ranks 25th out of 134 countries on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index 2007 Canada. Online at: http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/ggg07_canada.pdf) and 74th out of 155 on the United Nation's new Gender Disparity Index (Human Development Report 2009: Canada, Table 2. Online at: http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_CAN.html).

'vicious circle' of bad policies and abandonment, a circle which women may enter at any point, and for different reasons. But once a woman enters the vicious circle, however it happens, the likelihood of other harmful events in the circle occurring is greatly increased.

The connected events described by front line workers include: male violence, lack of adequate housing, welfare that is insufficient to meet basic needs, lack of access to legal aid, child apprehension, and depression/addiction. For many women in British Columbia, these events are caused by, and are a consequence of, both sex and race discrimination. They are difficult to escape, especially without significant supports.

One participant described the vicious circle for Aboriginal women this way: sexual abuse in childhood; addictions; male violence; inadequate welfare; loss of housing; loss of children.

Another woman described the circle this way: A woman seeks to leave a violent relationship, but there are few adequate supports. Often a woman needs social assistance so that she can support herself and her children independently from the violent partner. Once she is receiving social assistance, inadequate rates mean finding and maintaining adequate housing for herself and her children is difficult, if not impossible. Children may be apprehended because they have witnessed male violence, or because living conditions are considered poor enough to constitute "neglect". Once children are apprehended, it is often hard for women to get them back. Shelter allowances are cut when children are not present, but a mother has to show that she has an adequate place for children to live before the children can be returned. Lack of legal aid to deal with separation matters, representation *before* children are taken away, welfare entitlements, and poor housing, makes it difficult to break out of the circle.

As a feminist and a human rights activist, it is unacceptable to me that in Canada women are caught in conditions that stand so starkly in contradiction to our declared commitments to equality. What creates the 'vicious circle' is the absence of adequate, basic social programs – affordable housing, civil legal aid, and income security – that can change these conditions and prevent the harms.

A nation's economic model, a nation's budget is a statement of values. Canada is redistributing wealth upwards and income inequality and poverty rates have increased rapidly over the last decade according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.² At the same time, women and men in

² OECD, "Country Note: Canada", *Growing Unequal?: Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries*, Geneva: OECD, 2008, online at: www.oecd.org/els/social/inequality. The OECD said: "After 20 years of continuous decline, both inequality and poverty rates have increased rapidly in the past 10 years, now reaching levels above the OECD average". Inequality in household income increased significantly and poverty increased for all age groups. The OECD further noted that taxes and transfers do not reduce inequality in Canada as much as in other OECD countries or as much as they previously did in this country.

Canada are now being asked to spend 1.3 billion for security for the G8/G20 summits, 16 billion for 65 new F-35 fighter jets, and 1 billion dollars a year for the next five years for an estimated 4,189 new federal prison cells that will be required because of the *Truth in Sentencing Act* which limits the credit a judge can allow for time served prior to sentencing.³

But commitment to women's human rights and women's security provides a different vision. Starting from the reality of women's conditions, many different women's conditions, permits us to imagine a state and a world that is more egalitarian and more secure, not just for women, but for everyone. It is time to shift the paradigm, to allocate our resources to fulfill the basic human rights of Canada's people, to make a woman-centered economic model, which values adequate food, clothing and shelter for everyone, adequate incomes, child care, access to rights, and the safety that comes with equality and collective responsibility for everyone's well-being.

So here are my strategies:

- a pan-Canadian strategy to eliminate poverty, that is responsive to the particular causes and consequences of poverty for women and girls
- a national housing strategy
- a national child care program - which women are surely entitled to after forty years of lobbying
- a new investment of funds for the Court Challenges Programme, legal aid, and human rights institutions to ensure that women have full access to the use of their rights, entitlements and protections, and
- a co-ordinated strategy to address the entrenched and long-standing disadvantage of Aboriginal women and girls, and the stunning failure of police and governments to protect them from violence.

Your Excellency, I feel that pieces of the Canada that women need are falling away, like the beautiful pieces of glacier ice in Greenland, falling into the sea. As Lucie Lamarche has said here, it is time for us to pull ourselves together, and to take the risk of solidarity, before it is too late.

Thank you.

³ Kevin Page, Parliamentary Budget Officer, *The Funding Requirement and Impact of the "Truth in Sentencing Act" on the Correctional System in Canada*, June 22, 2010, online at: http://www2.parl.gc.ca/sites/pbo-dpb/documents/TISA_C-25.pdf.