

Women's Equality

This year, 2010, marks the 15th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China. The resulting Beijing Declaration, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the "Beijing+5" resolution of the UN General Assembly represent the world's most comprehensive policy platforms for ensuring support for the human rights of women. Canada endorses the Beijing Platform for Action. There is, however, no comprehensive federal governmental plan or mechanism for implementing the recommendations made in the Platform for Action in the arenas of finance or elsewhere.¹

Canada has initiated spending measures to aid domestic economic recovery during the global recession. This is a prime opportunity to invest in programs aimed at the full and equal participation of women in core areas of Canada's economy, such as health care, education, and the delivery of social services. It is also the vehicle for addressing the uneven effects of the economic downturn on women and men. The Government of Canada's "Economic Action Plan," however, has not done so. Instead, its Economic Action Plan focuses on short-term spending and investment in physical

infrastructure projects, with no parallel investment in social infrastructure projects. The result of this strategy is more than just a missed opportunity to support the equal participation of women and men in the country's economy; it is actually increasing the gap between men and women.

Several initiatives announced in the Economic Action Plan are simply not accessible to the women who need them most. For example, the Home Renovation Tax Credit and the Home Buyer's Tax Credit target middle- to upper-income homeowners who are disproportionately men or two-income families. Nearly 40% of women in Canada earn so little that they do not have any income tax payable in the first place, and so will not qualify for these programs.²

Two billion dollars were committed to affordable housing; but half of this money is to be spent renovating existing stock and the other half is to be spent to create affordable housing once agreements with provinces and territories are reached. This does nothing for people who are in critical housing situations regardless of the recession, nor those people whose housing is at risk as a result of the recession and loss of employment security. According to Statistics

Canada, many women experience housing affordability problems, especially unattached women and female lone parents who rent their homes.³

The Economic Action Plan earmarks billions of dollars for physical infrastructure projects. These projects will provide economic opportunities in male-dominated sectors such as engineering and construction. There is no parallel investment in social infrastructure projects. Social infrastructure projects have a three-fold benefit. Firstly, they provide economic opportunities in sectors where women are well-represented, such as health care, education, and child care. Secondly, they increase the accessibility of health care, education, and childcare for those hardest hit by the economic crisis. Thirdly, there is clear evidence that investments in early learning and child care have a significant multiplier effect on economic growth. Thus, the Economic Action Plan represents a missed opportunity for greater returns on economic stimulus.

The government's economic recovery initiatives do more than ignore the needs of women. They also take direct aim at eroding women's economic and human rights. Despite protests from human rights organizations, labour unions, and women's organizations, the federal Budget Bill 2009 made pay equity for federal public servants a matter for collective bargaining, and subject to "market forces."⁴ This removes pay equity from the domain of human rights in one of the few employment sectors where women have access to stable, sustainable, salaried employment.

The AFB will honour Canada's international obligations to women's human rights under the CEDAW and will take pro-active measures to ensure that strategic investments are made, not only to avoid perpetuating inequality, but to advance women's human rights.

During Canada's 2008 review on compliance to CEDAW, the UN CEDAW Committee expressed grave concern on a range of issues, but called for immediate government action on two particular areas of concern: the inadequacy of social assist-

ance rates across Canada, and the alarming numbers of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. Although the normal reporting cycle for CEDAW is four years, the CEDAW Committee called on the Canadian government to report back in one year on steps taken to remedy these issues.

Social assistance

"The Committee calls upon the State party to establish minimum standards for the provision of funding to social assistance programmes, applicable at the federal, provincial, and territorial levels, and a monitoring mechanism to ensure the accountability of provincial and territorial governments for the use of such funds so as to ensure that funding decisions meet the needs of the most vulnerable groups of women and do not result in discrimination against women. The Committee also calls upon the State party to carry out an impact assessment of social programs related to women's rights."

—*Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the occasion of the Committee's Review of Canada's 6th and 7th Reports (para.14) November 7, 2008.*

Federal funds to support social assistance are provided to provinces and territories through the Canada Social Transfer (CST). The CST supports post-secondary education, social assistance and social services, early childhood development, and early learning and child care. The expenditure of these funds is at the full discretion of the provinces and territories. If there is no political will to increase social assistance rates, they stagnate, leaving recipients with inadequate support for the real cost of housing, food, and clothes.

Between 1989 and 2005, when the cost of living rose by 43%, social assistance benefit rates declined in both absolute and relative terms in most provinces.⁵ The federal government also permits the provinces and territories to "claw back" the National Child Benefit Supplement, sinking

welfare recipients further into poverty. This cycle of poverty has a deeply 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, who rely on social assistance for an adequate standard of living.

While not purely a budgetary measure, the AFB will attach common standards of adequacy for social assistance to the Canada Social Transfer to ensure that rates in all jurisdictions are adequate to meet current real costs of food, clothing, and housing. The AFB will also prohibit all provinces and territories from clawing back the National Child Benefit Supplement from welfare recipients.

Missing and murdered Aboriginal women

“The Committee urges the State party to examine the reasons for the failure to investigate the cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women and to take the necessary steps to remedy the deficiencies in the system. The Committee calls upon the State party to urgently carry out thorough investigations of the cases of Aboriginal women who have gone missing or been murdered in recent decades. It also urges the State party to carry out an analysis of those cases in order to determine whether there is a racialized pattern to the disappearances and take measures to address the problem if that is the case.”

—*Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the occasion of the Committee’s Review of Canada’s 6th and 7th Reports (para.32) November 7, 2008.*

More than 520 Aboriginal women in Canada have gone missing or been murdered over the last 40 years, the majority of whom have not been found or identified in the last decade.⁶ There has been no formal recognition by the federal government of these disappearances and murders as a massive human rights viola-

tion. Although the government has supported the Sisters In Spirit Initiative led by the Native Women’s Association of Canada to research the root causes and trends related to the disappearance and death of these women and girls, as well as to educate Canadians about these tragic losses, the funding for this initiative will end in 2010. This is an important effort to address the issue, but the federal government must take leadership to comply with its obligations.

The AFB will make a direct, immediate, and transparent response to this crisis. The AFB will allocate sufficient resources for a thorough investigation of all cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women, and to correct deficiencies in the law enforcement system. The Native Women’s Association of Canada has created a sophisticated database of more than 250 variables to address the root causes, trends, and police or system responses to more than 520 cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. The AFB will **support the ongoing development of the database** and provide resources to ensure that the database is utilized by all those responsible for dealing with this issue, including law enforcement and judicial officials, and policy-makers.

The social and economic conditions of Aboriginal women make them even more vulnerable to violence. The AFB will also invest in a national plan of action to deal with Aboriginal women’s poverty, lower educational attainment, poor health, and lack of access to clean water and decent housing. The inquiry and national plan of action will be designed and implemented through consultation and in collaboration with all levels of governments, all relevant federal departments, and especially with Aboriginal women’s organizations.

Child care

During Canada’s 2003 CEDAW review, the Committee recommended that affordable child care spaces in Canada be expanded.

“The Committee recommends that the State party further expand affordable childcare facilities under all governments and that it report, with nationwide figures, on demand, availability and affordability of childcare in its next report.”

—*Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the occasion of the Committee’s Review of Canada’s 5th Reports (para.330) January 23, 2003.*

Prior to 2006, the progress on creating a national early learning and child care plan was extremely slow. Since then, child care agreements and transfers to provinces and territories were approved. However, soon after the election of the Harper government, the agreements were cancelled, in favour of a \$100 taxable monthly benefit. This benefit has not created needed additional spaces, does not come near to covering the cost of a single space, and does little to help women in Canada or guarantee equal access to paid employment and opportunities for economic empowerment.

The 2008 CEDAW recommendations echoed this concern.

“The Committee urges the State party to step up its efforts to provide a sufficient number of affordable childcare spaces...”

—*Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the occasion of the Committee’s Review of Canada’s 6th and 7th Reports (para.40) November 7, 2008.*

The AFB will repeal the cancellation of the child care agreements and ensure that all children, women and families have equitable access to quality, affordable child care services. This requires adequate and sustained transfers to provinces and territories. The AFB will also demand that accountability mechanisms be established to require provinces and territories to develop plans with timelines and targets for lowering child care fees and adding public spaces.

(For more details on AFB specific actions, see the child care chapter.)

As the anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action approaches, the AFB is committed to taking concrete measures to implement CEDAW and to uphold women’s equality rights in Canada. In order to do this, Canada must address the dire human rights violations being committed against Aboriginal women; take steps to better meet the needs of low-income Canadians; and invest in the needs of all children, women and families through a publicly-funded early learning and child care system.

Notes

1 Auditor General of Canada Report to the House of Commons, Chapter 1, “Gender-Based Analysis”, Spring 2009, p 8

2 Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action in collaboration with Lisa Phillipps, Osgoode Hall, “Why Tax Policy Matters to Women”, November 2007, available at www.fafia-afai.org

3 Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, “Women’s Inequality in Canada: Submission of the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action to the United Nations’ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women on the Occasion of the Committee’s Review of Canada’s 6th & 7th Reports”, September 2008, p.92, available at www.fafia-afai.org

4 Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action in collaboration with Kathleen Lahey, Queen’s University, and Lisa Phillipps, Osgoode Hall, “Federal Budget 2009: As the rich get richer, women are still left out in the cold” February 2009, available at www.fafia-afai.org

5 Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, “Women’s Inequality in Canada: Submission of the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action to the United Nations’ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women on the Occasion of the Committee’s Review of Canada’s 6th & 7th Reports”, September 2008, p.87, available at www.fafia-afai.org

6 Ibid., p. 11 Native Women’s Association of Canada, *Voices of Our Sisters In Spirit: A Report to Families and Communities*, Ottawa, April 2009.