

Women's Rights



2006
report of the
b.c. federation of labour

Women's Rights Committee

"I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a door mat...."

– REBECCA WEST,
"MR. CHESTERTON IN HYSTERICIS: A STUDY IN PREJUDICE,"
THE CLARION, 14 NOV. 1913,
REPRINTED IN THE YOUNG REBECCA, 1982

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reetings from the Women's Rights Committee. Since our last Report, for women in BC and, in fact, globally, it's been a time of "two steps forward and three steps back".

Just when women think we may have achieved a gain, such as the Bell Canada pay equity agreement, governments in BC and Canada come with the other fist and take away another hard-won benefit, right or decision.

While we lament the backward steps for BC women, we also want to applaud those issues and accomplishments achieved by dedication, single-mindedness and solidarity.

As you read how governments have neglected, and in some circumstances even thwarted progress on women's issues, we also want to celebrate our successes. With your solidarity, we look forward to building on those successes in the future.

government policy ... the harsh economic realities for bc women

Women's economic status in BC has declined steadily since the election of the BC Liberals in 2001. While women had not come close to achieving economic equality prior to 2001, some important gains had been made under the previous New Democratic Party (NDP) government.

Last year in BC, non-union women workers earned 29 percent less than men; the gap was only 10 percent for unionized women. Although there's clearly a union advantage for women workers, this was double the gap from the previous year due in large part to the Liberal's attack on BC's public sector workers through the privatization and contracting out of public services.

With their re-election in 2005, the BC Liberals appear to believe they were given a mandate to strip away any remaining economic supports, rights and freedoms for workers and women in particular.

Women's wages continue to remain stagnant and in many sectors have drastically declined with the continued failure of the Liberals to re-institute pay equity into provincial law. Employment standards have been hacked away, leaving few benefits for the working poor, so many of whom are women. "Flexibility" for employers has weakened safeguards for women workers in particular, as women perform the majority of part-time, short-term and low-wage work.

With lowered minimum labour standards come fewer opportunities for many women to achieve economic equality and financial security for themselves and their families. Women are unemployed longer (often due to other life responsibilities), and more frequently than men and face insecurity in the working world.

According to 2005 Statistics Canada figures, in BC, women's participation in the labour force has declined. The most striking gap in the trend of participation rates between eastern and western Canada is for women with children under the age of six. This was associated to greater access to affordable childcare and education in Quebec.

Women are forced to work 2-3 jobs in order to have some sort of living wage, yet these jobs rarely provide benefits. Instead, the entire family suffers as working several jobs consumes the time and energy that should be spent with children, family and recreation.

To help increase women's economic security, the \$6 an hour training wage must be eliminated, the \$8 minimum wage must be increased to \$10 and income assistance has got to be improved. The minimum wage hasn't increased for five years, and the training wage delivered a cut of 25 percent to women and new workers entering the workforce.

Income assistance hasn't increased in real terms for 20 years and the province has no housing program at all. These simple changes would reduce women's poverty. Reductions to and lowered eligibility for social assistance have caused hardships for single parent households, 88 percent of which are headed by women. With one-half of lone mothers (49 percent) in poverty in 2004, BC's poverty rate is higher than the national average (36 percent) by a wide margin. In BC, poverty among lone mothers rose 15.8 percent between 2000 and 2004; in Vancouver, it rose by an incredible 24 percentage points. (Source: CCPA-BC 2006 Fall Report). When the cost of living is factored into the equation, income assistance recipients receive less in 2006 than they did in 1989.

Women working in the public sector have been hard-hit as well, with the loss of more than 20,000 jobs, 75 percent of which were held by women workers. These well-paid, secure, unionized jobs assist women in achieving economic security for themselves and their families, but these have been and continue to be under attack by this Liberal government, with many jobs cut or contracted out to non-union companies. Unionized hospital workers in laundry, dietary and cleaning are seeing their jobs disappear, only to reappear as low-paid work for a private company, often with few or no benefits. These private contractors do not hesitate to cut the wages and working conditions of their employees so severely that these become equivalent to "McJobs", with high turnover and no job security.

The Hospital Employees' Union has been successful in re-organizing these women and getting new collective agreements that provide some security for these workers.

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Study after study shows that the greatest percentage of people living in poverty are not the unemployed, but the working poor.

BC teachers, 70 percent of whom are women, faced the issue of reduced education funding head-on in October, 2005 by refusing imposed collective agreements and shutting down every public school in the province. Collective agreement clauses that limited the number of students in each class were stripped out of teachers' agreements.

Teachers had not had a decent raise for over a decade, and these issues combined to create a climate where teachers across the province had no choice but to leave their jobs. There was unprecedented support for teachers as they took on the province for their rights, for students' learning conditions and for their profession.

This momentum was carried into 2006 with a strong strike mandate when negotiations stalled. An 11th hour settlement was eventually reached, seeing teachers regain a measure of economic success and a system in place to have a voice in class sizes and composition.

The Harper Conservative government in Ottawa promotes policies of free trade, privatization and deregulation, all of which adversely affect women. Work in the federal government sector is being increasingly contracted out, privatized or devolved to private agencies and contractors.

The pensions those unionized jobs provided are often lost as well, and without that security many of these women will become part of one of the fastest growing demographics affected by poverty – senior women.

Again, this has a disproportionately negative effect on women.

Campaign 2000 and its goal to eradicate poverty, continues its work to make poverty history, but faces unprecedented obstacles from government policy of low minimum wages, lowered employment standards and the failure to provide affordable housing and universal childcare.

The child poverty rate in Canada was higher in 2004 than it was in 1989. Canada's child poverty rate ranks as the 19th highest out of 26 of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations as reported by UNICEF (2005). We cannot forget that these children come from families that are poor.

Study after study shows that the greatest percentage of people living in poverty are not the unemployed, but the working poor. Almost half of Canada's low-income children live in families where the parent(s) worked all year, and could still not rise above the poverty line.

Their ongoing studies on poverty clearly indicate that Aboriginal women, women of colour, immigrant women and differently-abled women are hardest hit. They are underpaid in the workforce, have reduced access to post-secondary education, and face racism and discrimination throughout their work and home lives.

We must continue our work to ensure that women and children can rise out of poverty and have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

pay equity – finally a “win”

An historic pact has been reached with public sector workers in the province of Quebec. Cheques totaling \$1.5 billion should be in the hands of these women by Christmas.

Although the unions were happy the fight was over, they acknowledged that this was not a gain, but was actually money owed to women for almost 20 years. These women had been underpaid for years doing work for which they should

have been paid more. It took a lot of courage to keep pushing these issues, forcing the government to recognize the full value of the work women perform in Quebec.

This pay equity agreement will affect more than 327,000 women employed as teachers, nurses, daycare educators and other jobs. When the women who previously worked in Quebec's health and education networks after 2001 but have since left are added into the equation, the total number of women affected jumps to almost 400,000.

This victory follows a 14-year struggle in the Courts to get pay equity for Bell Canada employees. The women at Bell Canada and their union, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP), never gave up on their goal in achieving pay equity for women working at Bell Canada.

This Federation and the Women's Rights Committee made this fight a priority, providing resources to the campaign. Following the endorsement by delegates to last year's Convention of an emergency resolution on this case, the Federation put together a working group, helped sponsor a provincial tour of Bell operators to raise the profile of this dispute and kept pressure on Bell at every opportunity.

We were proud to contribute to the success of this campaign, and in his letter, CEP Western Vice-President Dave Coles, thanked the Federation, stating that "your support for our members through our Put Bell on Hold campaign has absolutely made the difference between justice and endless mean-spirited legal manipulations."

Police dispatchers are not so fortunate in their struggle for pay equity with their fire department counterparts. This case has been ongoing since the BC Human Rights Tribunal dismissed their complaint in 2000. In 2003, a BC Supreme Court judge quashed the Tribunal's decision, but the BC Court of Appeal has ruled that both groups do not share a common employer. This means the wage difference, which averages \$22,000 to \$33,000 a year, will remain.

Unions are spending more and more time and resources in the Courts and Tribunals fighting an issue that should have been decided by legislation long ago. The BC Liberals cancelled pay equity legislation as one of their first orders of business back in 2001, and we must renew our fight to regain this important legislation and re-energize our efforts to ensure women are paid fairly for their contribution to the economy and society.

senior women are hard-hit

Home care cuts and closures, the separation of long-married spouses in their senior years, the reductions to long-term care facilities – all combine to ensure that women are sandwiched between the two generations requiring their care. This often means women are forced to sacrifice their own needs and face an uncertain future of their own.

Elderly British Columbians face insecurity in the hands of the Liberals, and women have the most to fear. Many seniors are trying hard to care for their aging spouses in their own homes, fighting against all odds, rather than face the future with government "assisted" living.

Cuts to home support also impact the ability of single seniors to remain independently in their homes. This forces them into expensive institutional settings or increases the burden on exhausted (mostly women) relatives, often increasing visits to our already overloaded emergency rooms.

The BC Liberals cancelled pay equity legislation ... and we must renew our fight to regain this important legislation and re-energize our efforts to ensure women are paid fairly for their contribution to the economy and society.

Senior women have borne the brunt of government health policies that encourage the growth of for-profit residential care, assisted living and home health services in British Columbia.

The province promised to replace cuts to home and long-term care with so-called “assisted living” spaces, but these have never materialized to meet the needs of BC seniors. Senior women have borne the brunt of government health policies that encourage the growth of for-profit residential care, assisted living and home health services in British Columbia.

Consider a Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives report, *Continuing Care: Renewal or Retreat?*, released in April 2005, which found that the majority of seniors requiring residential care or assisted living are unattached women aged 70 years and older. “The vast majority – 75 percent – of these women had annual incomes of \$25,000 or less in 2000, and only 5 percent had annual incomes of \$50,000 or more. As a result, these women...must increasingly turn to their families for support. For those who do not have families that can support them, the situation is even worse. They often simply go without until they are admitted to a hospital emergency ward in crisis.”

And when it comes to suffering from a decrease in home support and care, elderly women are again among the hardest hit. The report states, “As a result of the decline in access to home health services, many frail seniors and people with disabilities have seen a reduction in their service hours or have been denied access to publicly-subsidized care altogether. Few are able to afford the cost of private home health services ... Thus, those who most need home care and support, single elderly women and people with disabilities, are least likely to be able to afford alternative care when the government withdraws its support.”

For-profit care for seniors is rapidly taking the place of publicly-funded and not-for-profit care. And as this trend continues, more and more seniors – particularly single women – and their families will find that if they can’t pay, they won’t get the care needed. The de-listing of many Medical Service Plan (MSP) services, including routine eye exams, non-surgical podiatry, massage, physiotherapy and chiropractic care, has worsened the lives of seniors, and poor seniors in particular.

More than ever before, seniors are being forced into food banks and food insecurity. With increased housing, heating and health care costs, many seniors sacrifice nutrition for heat or medication. That’s if they have a choice – many do not. A huge majority of those poor seniors are women who have spent their lives working inside the home or in low-paid work that did not provide for a pension plan.

Aboriginal, visible minority and differently-abled women face a future of even greater poverty, uncertainty and poor health.

women’s access to health care – going, going ...

Women have been the hardest hit by cuts to health care. These cuts not only affect women working in the health care sector, but also those who need those services the most.

Women are forced into the role of caregiver, risking their own health and economic futures in doing so, as services for children, the disabled and the aged continue to be cut and offloaded to families.

In rural communities, access to health care has been so severely reduced, in particular, access to specialized care, that it is often difficult to remember the year is 2006 and that Canada boasts of a “universal” health care system.

It had been a long time since we had heard of women giving birth on the side of the highway, yet in just one week we heard of two women in rural BC who were forced to do just that. Both had been turned away from their closest

hospitals (already a long drive from home) because the facilities were unable to provide the services required. Both women and their companions were forced back onto the highway to drive several hours in another direction to another hospital which may or may not have been able to accommodate them. They never made it.

This is just the tip of the iceberg.

Despite the election promises of the BC Liberals, women have become this government's unpaid health care providers. Families are now forced to fund the care for their differently-abled children because the standards have been so severely lowered that many of these children are no longer eligible for assistance.

The Federation's support for, and work with, the BC Health Coalition on these and other health care issues has been instrumental in organizing a strategic and comprehensive campaign against these cuts.

The federal government has done nothing to protect public health care. In fact, they support the privatization of our public system.

But it doesn't end there. A federal Conservative MP recently introduced a private members' Bill seeking to recriminalize abortion. While it is highly unlikely that this Bill will end up in Parliament, it simply reignites an old debate, once again putting the health and safety of women into jeopardy.

national childcare strategy a myth

Despite strong public support for a universal, affordable childcare program, Gordon Campbell's Liberal government has once again turned its back on BC children.

In March, BC Finance Minister Carole Taylor walked away from \$455 million of federal funding needed to create a provincial childcare system. This could have created almost 33,000 childcare spaces for working families.

The Women's Rights Committee hosted a two-day women's conference in Victoria, where women got together to teach and learn political organizing and lobbying skills. Working together with women's centres' representatives, childcare advocates, poverty specialists and other community women, we built a lobby of the BC MLAs on the issues surrounding women's economic injustice, with childcare being one of the key issues.

At this Conference, union and community women gathered together to lobby members of the provincial government to implement a real childcare program, and insist the national childcare agreement be honoured by the Harper Conservatives.

Although we were only expecting around 75 women, more than 120 union and community women registered for the Conference and participated in the lobby. These women were given workshops on both lobbying and women's economic injustice, followed by a hands-on lobby experience.

The reviews from participants were extremely positive, and we were successful in achieving our goal of making sure that MLAs heard exactly how and why their government is failing women in BC.

This was followed up on in the fall, where women attending the NDP Regional Conference in the Kootenays were given updates and practical information on lobbying techniques. The Conservatives have been unmoved. Instead of supporting families with a national childcare strategy, they introduced a taxable \$1,200 per year childcare benefit. This isn't childcare, and there is no plan.

In March, BC Finance Minister Carole Taylor walked away from \$455 million of federal funding needed to create a provincial childcare system. This could have created almost 33,000 childcare spaces for working families.

We must continue to work together with our community allies to ensure childcare remains in the public view and at the forefront of our political action campaigns.

The money can be spent on anything, and because it is taxed back, the allowance gives wealthy families more money than the single parent low-wage earner.

The Conservative government shows its ignorance about early learning and childcare services. They call a national childcare program “institutional care”. The goal of a system of high quality services is to provide warm, stimulating and developmental environments for children through programs that are responsive and caring – a far cry from institutional care.

According to Statistics Canada, mothers in the labour force in Quebec increased rapidly after its \$5 per day universal childcare system was introduced in 1997. Between 2001 and 2004, about 60 percent of all childcare spaces added in Canada were in Quebec.

Every poll has shown that Canadians strongly support a national childcare program. An Environics poll released in June shows most Canadians (76 percent) support the 2004 national childcare agreement. Even among households with stay-at-home parents, this support remains consistent, with Canadians believing governments should provide childcare.

The vast majority believe that childcare has positive impacts on children and families. Canadians believe this allows parents to participate in the workforce (87 percent), prepares children for school (81 percent), promotes the early learning and development of children (79 percent) and is essential to the livelihood of low-income families (75 percent).

More than 100,000 signatures have been collected on petitions by the “Code Blue” campaign, and dozens of community meetings have been held.

The federal NDP in May introduced the **Early Learning and Childcare Act**, proposed childcare legislation modeled on the same principles as the **Canada Health Act** – quality, accessibility, affordability and universality – principles that reflect our values. This was expected to be voted on September 25th, and support will be critical.

Childcare is likely to be a decisive issue in the next federal election, and the Harper plan may make some Canadians less likely to vote Conservative. We must continue to work together with our community allies to ensure childcare remains in the public view and at the forefront of our political action campaigns. BC’s women and children are depending on us.

who will speak for us?

The Liberals have made it clear to BC women that they simply don’t matter. They believe we don’t need a strong voice. This was abundantly clear when the Ministry of Women’s Equality was eliminated as one of their first orders of business, replaced by a junior ministry with no substance or standing.

Previous reports have detailed the devastation wreaked upon women’s rights and programs since the 2001 election of the BC Liberals. This year, though, we may well see the end of an important advocate for BC women who have no one else to speak for them. Women’s centres throughout BC may be closing their doors this year, as their funding runs out and programs become too expensive to maintain.

Where will women who seek shelter from abusive partners go? Who will work with women to help them access the services to which they are entitled? Without this support many women, especially in rural communities, will fall by the wayside and will have fewer options to create a safer future for themselves and their children.

We must do all that we can to support women's centres throughout BC, both financially and through every other means possible, to ensure that their doors do not close forever. We must continue pressuring the BC Liberals to revisit their decision to devastate local communities, stripping them of the often one and only safe haven for women.

Only by providing this support will women in BC have access to these services so desperately needed in their own communities. The Liberals have completely abdicated their responsibility for, and to, women in this province. We must work together to make that change.

women's rights are human rights

You may have heard this refrain before, because we've been saying it for years.

Stephen Harper's Conservatives, despite their minority mandate, prowl around the edges of equal rights, constantly testing the waters and attempting to change public opinion, and ultimately the legislative agenda, on these issues.

This federal government was elected on a platform of fear – fear instilled by the US-style campaign where national security, rights and freedoms mean something very different than what we have experienced in the past. This country has been through the growing pains of debating equal rights, and Canadians have clearly come out in support.

Harper's plans to give a free vote on the definition of marriage and equal marriage may appear at first blush to many Canadians as democratic, but their plans to reopen these issues is regressive in the extreme.

We celebrate the Canada where same-sex couples from around the world can come to achieve and celebrate their legal union, and where women have choices over their reproductive health.

Poll after poll shows Canadians are comfortable with the choices they have made in support of equal marriage and choice for women, yet Harper seems determined to get his ultra-Conservative agenda on the table sooner rather than later.

Even a recent Report on Business Survey of Canada's top 150 Executives of Canadian companies revealed a surprising lack of interest in reopening the debate on same-sex marriage. Fifty-three percent do not want to see new legislation banning same-sex marriage, while 37 percent called it a low priority.

According to one CEO, "These are social evolutions which are happening in Canada and throughout the world. Why should we spend a lot of resources and time on those?" he asked. "Those are happening, let them happen."

We must remain ever vigilant and connected to our allies if we are to ensure that these rights remain open to Canadians.

violence against women still not on the radar screen

The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, "It's a girl."

SHIRLEY CHISHOLM,

1ST AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN ELECTED TO CONGRESS AND THE FIRST WOMAN TO MAKE A SERIOUS BID FOR THE DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION IN 1972.

When almost any newspaper in the country has a story about a woman affected by violence – whether it is through domestic violence, rape, dangerous work, the sex trade, forced prostitution, illegal trafficking of women, war, AIDS,

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Without a substantial commitment of leadership and resources, no amount of United Nations resolutions will change the fact that women are being systematically murdered, abused, neglected and devalued.

neglect or the myriad of other forms of violence – one would think violence against women would at least have caught the government’s attention.

Even as this Report was being finalized, more women and girls were in the headlines, singled out as female and then killed. In September, a gunman burst into a Montreal college, killing one young woman and injuring 20 others. Not even a week later in the US, a gunman entered an elementary school classroom, dismissing the boys from the room then sexually assaulting the young girls before killing one girl and then himself. And not two weeks after that, five young girls between the ages of 6 and 13 were killed when a man burst into an Amish school in Pennsylvania, released the boys and adults, then lined up, tied up and shot the girls. At the time of this addition to our Report, five of these innocent girls were dead and several more were in critical condition.

Women have gone missing in the Downtown Eastside, on the Highway of Tears, in the Maquiladora production zone in Mexico, in war-torn Afghanistan and throughout the world. Yet, nowhere does this seem like a priority for government intervention or policy.

missing women

Have our governments not noticed, or do they simply not care.

Despite several task forces and the symposium held on the Highway of Tears, changes for BC women simply aren’t happening quickly enough. Reports can make recommendations, but these are no good when they simply languish on a shelf somewhere without being implemented.

Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for AIDS/HIV in Africa, made news when he publicly advocated for a special UN Department for Women, structured along the lines of UNICEF for children.

“After fifty years of passivity and paralysis, it’s time to have an agency through which women can assert their rights ... They need a new and powerful voice. They need an advocate that never allows the world to forget the sorrow it perpetuates. They need a women’s agency.”

STEPHEN LEWIS, 2006.

For decades, women have relied on the United Nations as an important venue for the promotion of human rights and social justice, demanding that the UN set global norms and standards in these areas. Just last year at the World Summit, governments reaffirmed that gender equality is critical to the achievement of all Millennium Development Goals.

Many women’s rights advocates now fear that the political championship at a global level for social justice and women’s rights is eroding. Evaluation after evaluation shows that countries consistently fail to prioritize, and significantly underfund, women’s rights and equality work.

This new UN agency must have a comprehensive mandate dedicated to the full range of women’s rights and concerns, derived from the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and UN resolutions, which are largely ignored by signatory countries. This mandate must include research and monitoring.

There is no global agency equipped to deal with gender-based issues, and violence against women has been identified as an urgent priority to be tackled worldwide. Without a substantial commitment of leadership and resources, no amount of United Nations resolutions will change the fact that women are being systematically murdered, abused, neglected and devalued.

So why did Stephen Lewis' statement become news? Is no one paying attention to the issue of violence against women?

The United Nations estimates:

- Between 113 and 200 million women around the world are “demographically missing”;
- Every year, from 1.5 to 3 million women and girls lose their lives as a result of gender-based violence or neglect;
- One woman in five is a victim of rape or attempted rape during her lifetime;
- So little value is placed on women's health that each year approximately 600,000 women die in childbirth;
- Millions of girls are victims of infanticide in countries that value male over female children;
- Young brides are killed if their fathers do not pay enough money to the men who married them. These are called “dowry deaths”, although they are not deaths, they are murders;
- Women account for almost half of all HIV/AIDS cases worldwide; in Africa, close to 70 percent of cases are women. Elderly women, often the poorest, are left to care for the children of AIDS victims. They are also becoming the rape victims of men who feel they cannot get infected by these elderly women;
- As many as four million women and girls a year are sold into prostitution; and
- Two million suffer genital mutilation, often in conditions that lead to lifelong pain, infection and premature death.

Women worldwide are also denied access to education, with approximately two-thirds of the world's 876 million persons without literacy skills being women.

It appears that no matter how many days are set aside each year to remember women victims of violence, government policymakers still don't get it.

Women get it – on March 8th, International Women's Day; on November 25th, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women; on December 6th to remember those 14 young Montreal women killed; and on December 1st to remember the women affected by AIDS. Only women and the brothers who support us appear to remember that in 2006, as in all the years past, violence is still a part of everyday life for women.

Women never stopped getting it. We get it each time we open a newspaper and read about another mother, daughter, sister, child or friend who has suffered the, more often untold, abuses women face in our society.

Women understand it when we see the insidious way violence has affected how we live our lives. Women get it every time we, or someone we know, is afraid to jog alone or walk down the street with a friend at night. We no longer park in underground parkades, we look over our shoulders when we hear footsteps, and we adjust our routines because of our ever-increasing level of fear.

Women really get it when we stand together at yet another candlelight vigil for yet another victim of the senseless crime of violence against women.

Still, investigations into missing women only take place after a huge public outcry, and government policy is deliberately lacking in initiatives to protect women.

It often feels like we are the only ones who **do** get it.

Still, investigations into missing women only take place after a huge public outcry, and government policy is deliberately lacking in initiatives to protect women.

Women have the least amount of economic and physical security in peaceful times, and are increasingly at risk in times of war.

Women need to become better organized and united. Those of us who have achieved a measure of equality must do more to assist and mobilize our Sisters and Brothers. Only our outrage and political pressure can lead to change.

speaking out for women worldwide

As we speak out for the rights of women in Canada, we also speak out for our Sisters around the world.

Current skill shortages have increased the demand for skilled workers from developing countries. The worldwide shortage of health care workers has led to the poaching of health workers', contributing to the global crisis in health care.

These mostly women health care workers are leaving their home countries, weakening the health system infrastructure in developing countries. And when they arrive in Canada, unscrupulous employers and recruiters are taking advantage of these workers employment and human rights.

We are supporting the development of a Migrant Worker Project for BC, because this issue affects women, both as health care workers and as users of our health care system.

We speak out for women worldwide who are affected by violence, who go missing, and more than ever, those women affected by armed conflict.

war means no peace for women worldwide

Canada's increasingly militaristic role in the US-led conflicts in the Middle East is having a serious effect on women, both in Canada and abroad.

Women have the least amount of economic and physical security in peaceful times, and are increasingly at risk in times of war.

Rape, poverty, forced migration, family and personal insecurity – these are only a few of the risks that face women living through armed conflicts.

Canadian women, many of whom signed on to the military because of Canada's traditional role of peacekeeper, are being sent to participate in active combat. In fact, this year we saw the first woman in Canadian history killed in combat.

For nearly five decades, Canada has pursued peace in nations around the world ... and brought hope to lives torn apart by war. Throughout this time, Canada has built a reputation as a respected peacekeeping nation. All that is changing.

Women are the peacemakers, and we must join together to fight against the Harper Conservatives' blind support for the US Bush administration and the wide net it casts in the name of September 11th and domestic security. Women have no security under these neo-Conservative regimes, and often end up being the victims.

friends and allies

Fortunately for women in the labour movement, we have allies in our unions and our central organizations, and we have built and strengthened alliances with women in the community, in political organizations and with women's advocacy groups. By developing multi-faceted links, we are able to reflect a much broader perspective on issues important to women.

Our Childcare and Economic Equality Conference and lobby is a prime

example. Rather than simply working from a labour perspective, we again participated as part of the broader community.

Women's conferences are another opportunity to bring women together to share energy, ideas and knowledge, and to forge relationships in support of women's issues. Our Spring Conference and lobby mentioned earlier in this report is a clear example of how this works. Women are empowered to have their voices heard and to realize their abilities and potential in effecting change on issues affecting women.

This must be an ongoing priority for the Federation in the years to come.

Many affiliates held conferences, which focused on a broad range of topics from remembering our rights, childcare, women's economic security and the women of Bountiful, BC. In addition, many BC women participated in women's conferences and institutes held across Canada and in the United States.

women make a difference

Women turned out to vote in historic numbers, and helped elect and re-elect politicians who support issues important to women, our unions and our allies. The Federation's "Count Me In" campaign was a huge success in engaging women in political action.

How is it, then, that the number of women elected to governments is at an all-time low? Why aren't more women, and especially visible minority women, seeking election? Women comprise 52 percent of the population in Canada, yet made up only 21 percent of the MPs in Ottawa.

Our situation in BC is no better than the national scene. Women make up only 21.74 percent of the BC Liberal caucus, and only 21.21 percent of our provincial NDP caucus.

The federal NDP caucus is the happy exception to this trend, with 41.5 percent of NDP MPs being women.

Even with affirmative action policies in place, the percentage of women elected is still so low. Why aren't women, and especially visible minority women, seeking election or running in nomination races in contested elections? What is keeping women from having their voices heard on the issues of childcare, minimum wage, health care, education and every other "women's" issue?

Even when women are successful in winning a nomination, it is often in a riding or constituency where they have little chance of winning.

Although women are often provided with some resources when seeking elected office, we still need more skills training and support through campaign schools, mentoring by existing women in elected positions, and affirmative action candidate recruitment policies.

Women also need a reason to get involved, even if it means just getting out to vote. Unfortunately, both the Campbell and Harper governments are giving us plenty of reasons. Women understand the relationship between right-wing governments and poverty, lack of opportunity and increased violence in society and at home. We can and must do more to reach those women disenfranchised by our political systems, and build a stronger network of women between elections instead of just when elections have been called.

This combination of strategies is the only way women's voices will be heard, at all levels of government.

Women are empowered to have their voices heard and to realize their abilities and potential in effecting change on issues affecting women.

Committee Members

Karen Adams
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Karen Kilbride
Mary LaPlante
Jane MacEwan
Ann McClenaghan
Lorene Oikawa
Marj Owen
Marion Pollack
Jinny Sims (Chair)
Kay Sinclair
Petra St. Pierre
Betty Stevens
Mona Sykes
Iris Taylor
Debbie Taylor
Jane Turner (Alt)
Terri Van Steinburg
Brenda Wagg
Joie Warnock
Paula Welke
Jane Staschuk
(Secretary)

our solidarity is our strength

Women in the BC labour movement have such a strong advantage over our non-union counterparts.

Beside the obvious economic advantages and educational opportunities unions provide, our solidarity gives us the advantage of friends who will back us up on our issues and concerns. But often it is only by pushing hard, or by putting our issues right in the face of others, that we feel we have been heard.

That's why this year, we provide a visual demonstration on one of the most pressing issues discussed in this Report – violence against women in all its forms.

Although we could not possibly touch on every issue discussed or dealt with by this Committee, we believe this provides a good indication of the scale of our challenge.

We invite you to join women in your union, your community and in the larger global arena to push back against those who would neglect or subvert women in our attempts to achieve complete economic, social and gender equality.

More and more, we are gaining new energy from one another as we share our knowledge through our local, provincial and national committees, conferences and coalitions.

This strength is our success.

Women here at home and around the world are counting on you to support this Report and the following recommendations.

recommendations

1. The B.C. Federation of Labour, with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), continue to work for a quality, universal, accessible, affordable and developmental national childcare program, and for the funding, expansion and improvement of a BC-based childcare program;
2. The Federation will continue and expand its work with union women, community women and other women's organizations to build a strong, knowledgeable network of women for lobbying, organizing, political action and progressive social change;
3. The Federation must continue to push the provincial government to re-create a stand-alone Ministry of Women's Equality, and provide it with the necessary funding and resources to be an effective voice for women;
4. The Federation must demand the BC Liberal government immediately restore all funding to women's centres in this province;
5. The Federation continue to work to achieve pay equity legislation and programs at all levels of government;
6. The Federation continue to take steps to ensure the participation of Aboriginal women, women of colour, differently-abled women and lesbian women is advanced and expanded;
7. The Federation continue to support equal marriage as an equality issue, and work with the CLC to ensure this right is protected;
8. The Federation continue to work with our allies to ensure the protection of women's access to a safe, legal abortion; and
9. The Federation through the CLC, actively campaign and lobby the United Nations to create a separate United Nations Agency for Women.

B.C. FEDERATION OF LABOR
(C.C.L.C.)
MERGER CONVENTION
VANCOUVER - B.C. NO. 15-16-17
1956

