

Gender gap in Canada beginning to widen again

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By LYNDA MUIR

March 8 is International Women's Day, a day not only synonymous with women's equality but one of recognition and celebration of women throughout the world.

What began in 1909 as a statement of protest about the working conditions of women in New York City has turned into a global campaign highlighting women's achievements and the barriers that they continue to face.

The United Nations designated 1975 as International Women's Year, and, in 1977, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on member states to proclaim a day for women's rights and international peace.

Over time, International Women's Day has expanded into a week of events beginning March 7 and ending March 13. Today, women's organizations and governments throughout the world observe International Women's Day on March 8 by holding large-scale events that honour and recognize women's achievements and advancements and by reminding us that gender parity has not yet been reached by any of the world's countries.

In 1909, women demanded better pay, shorter working hours, and the right to vote. What has changed for women today? In Canada, women's rights are recognized and they have more options and better access to resources. We have women in all sectors of society.

There are women politicians, lawyers, judges, doctors, entrepreneurs, corporate leaders, astronauts, researchers, and scientists. Women can go to university or college, work and have a family, or remain at home with their children. They can go into the arts or athletics, and, as the recent Olympics have shown, can excel and be rewarded for their endeavours.

Although there has been considerable advancement of women's equality in Canada over the past decades, during the period from 2004 to 2009, women's achievement in all 12 areas of critical concern outlined at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 have slowed or receded.

According to a report drafted by the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, the federal government has closed 12 of 16 Status of Women offices on the premise that there is no need to separate women and men's issues, has eliminated funding to the court challenges program which was created to provide assistance to court cases related to equality rights guaranteed under Canada's constitution, and has eradicated the funding agreements that had been negotiated with provinces and territories to provide \$5 billion for child-care and early-learning programs.

In fact, Canada no longer compares favourably against other nations in assessments of gender equality and the gender gap. In 2004, Canada was ranked seventh according to the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index. In the 2009 Gender Gap Index, Canada ranked 25th. In a few short years, the hard fought gains that women made were eliminated, or reduced, and the gender gap was increased.

Many human rights organizations have criticized Canada on its lack of response to the issues of women's poverty and the endemic violence against Aboriginal women and girls.

Women have come a long way in our country, but more needs to be done. We must continue to acknowledge women's rights and work toward gender equity. Join the Women & Children's Shelter of Barrie and Colibri: Centre des femmes francophones as we celebrate International Women's Day on Monday, March 8, at 5:30 pm at the Army, Navy, Air Force Club, 7 George St., Barrie.

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