

Cutbacks leave poorest women trapped in “vicious circle”

Shelagh Day

I did not think that we could move so far backwards so fast. The neoliberal restructuring of the last 15 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 agreements.

In 2010, the neoliberal erosion of the foundations of women’s equality – strong social programs and investment in the “care economy” – is now paired with the overt misogyny and hostility to rights of the Harper government.

Canadian women have developed some common understandings over the last 40 years of activism. We were not satisfied with the thin, formal version of women’s equality. We fought for the full, substantive version, with material conditions at its centre. This comprehensive version of equality, which even the Supreme Court of Canada says it embraces, commits us to look at women’s real conditions, and ask whether women experience equal outcomes.

In the language of international human rights, this 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 full 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.

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 “vicious circle” of bad policies and abandonment, a circle that 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 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 that 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, lack of representation *before* children are taken away, inadequate welfare entitlements, and poor housing – all these problems make it difficult to break out of the vicious circle.

As a feminist and a human rights activist, I find it unacceptable that in Canada there are women trapped 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.

So I will never “shut the fuck up” about the real inequality of women in Canada. We can do something about it; we know *how* to do something about it. Male-led governments are simply letting us down.

This is a moment when a new solidarity among women is desperately needed. We have been stunned, I think, by the deep inroads into the social foundations of our equality that have been made by the neoliberal project. Women’s organizations have also become siloed, specialized – focused on child care, on housing, on violence against women. This specialization has been useful, but it does separate us, and we need a re-forged solidarity that reaches across groups and interests.

It is a time to let go of uncertainties... time to fight back.

(Shelagh Day is an expert on women’s human rights, with many years of experience working with governments and non-governmental organizations. Currently, she is a Director of the Poverty and Human Rights Centre, whose central goal is to strengthen the human rights of the poorest women.)



Never retreat

Nelly McClung

Never retreat, never explain, never apologize — get the thing done and let them howl!

—**Nelly McClung**, (1873-1951),
Canadian suffragist, activist and author.

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