The National Council of Women of Canada
Le Conseil national des femmes du Canada

FOUNDED 1893
(INCORPORATED BY ACT OF PARLIAMENT)

IN FEDERATION WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN

Brief to the Government of Canada
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INTRODUCTION

The National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) is pleased to present this brief to the Prime Minister and the Government of Canada. While we have 122 years of policy, this brief focuses on specific social and environmental policies which we believe to be especially relevant at this time.

All policy for NCWC is generated through resolutions originating with our members, Local Councils or NCWC Committees. These are circulated to, and then voted on by, the general membership, at our Annual General Meeting. When contacting the Government, the media and the public, NCWC speak only to existing policy. This Brief is therefore the united voice of the federated membership of the National Council of Women of Canada.

NCWC is an organization of local, provincial and national organizations which are closely connected with issues at those levels, and which also has a firm grasp of international issues and Canada's commitment to them. For this reason, NCWC is uniquely qualified to approach our Government with suggestions and recommendations which are based on carefully researched and democratically approved policies for improving the quality of life of Canadians.

NCWC is a federate of the International Council of Women (ICW), an international non-governmental organization holding Consultative Status (Category 1) with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. Founded in 1888, the ICW is composed of National Councils in approximately 74 countries.

NCWC holds Consultative Status (General) with ECOSOC, enabling NCWC to bring a Canadian perspective to the work of the United Nations Commission for the Status of Women. NCWC also participates as an Observer Non-Governmental Organization with the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States.

In 2005 the Hon. Stephane Dion announced the unveiling of an Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque commemorating the national historic significance of the National Council of Women of Canada in Allan Gardens, Toronto, the site of NCWC’s first meeting. “The National Council of Women has worked tirelessly for more than a century to expand opportunities for Canadian women,” said Minister Dion. “Having the courage to break down barriers and challenge existing conventions so that women from coast to coast could participate in and influence our society, the Council paved the way for political equality and full citizenship for women throughout the nation.”
HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The UN Declaration of Human Rights declares that “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of oneself and one’s family, including food, clothing, housing, necessary social services, and to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his/her control” with “motherhood and childhood entitled to special care and assistance.”

The National Council of Welfare publication, Welfare Incomes 2009, found that despite the fact that all welfare incomes increased in 2008, this increase had very little effect as welfare incomes had already lost so much ground due to inflation of 45% between 1990 and 2009. Welfare incomes are still far from providing the necessities of life, as are the incomes of people working at minimum and other low wages and the Canadian Community Health Survey shows that 9.2% of the population of Canada or more than 1.1 million people live with food insecurity.

Research by the Canadian Centre for Public Policy Alternatives shows that there is a growing gap between upper income Canadians whose incomes have grown very quickly, and both middle income families, whose incomes have stagnated and lower income Canadians whose incomes have lost ground over recent years, this putting low income earners and social assistance recipients at risk of food and shelter insecurity.

Most recently, the United Nations released its new Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and 4 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are:

- No Poverty
- Zero Hunger
- Good Health and Well-Being
- Clean Water and Sanitation

A. LIVING WAGE

The National Council of Women of Canada urge the Government of Canada to work with provincial and territorial governments to ensure that their minimum wage policies support a living wage.

We urge the Government to amend the Income Tax Act so that the incomes of persons below the minimum poverty levels as defined by Statistics Canada shall be exempt from taxation.

B. HOUSING

Many municipalities across Canada in the past year have been working to address urgent housing needs, but they need help from other levels of government, most notably federal. NCWC strongly urge the Government to adopt a National Housing Policy and encourage all parties to work together and with all levels of government in a bipartisan effort to establish accessible, adequate, and affordable housing for the homeless and those precariously housed.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights committed each signatory country to work toward an “adequate standard of living” for all its
citizens. Women and children tend to suffer disproportionately from homelessness and its poverty-related concerns that affect not only their health but their ability to seek, find and hold jobs.

The UN CEDAW (Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination) Report urged Canada in 2003 to provide safe housing for vulnerable women. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples referred to the rights of Indigenous peoples with respect to autonomy and self-government and to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including housing, for which states are required to take effective measures to ensure improvement in these conditions.

Canada is the only major industrialized country to be without a national housing strategy, although the pockets of extreme poverty, homelessness, near homelessness and unsafe and/or overcrowded dwellings that exist in Canada (and which are particularly prevalent among Aboriginals, who include First Nations, Inuit and Metis) have high costs in terms of poor health, poor school achievement, increased involvement with the police and courts, as well as high levels of incarceration and unemployment through life.

NCWC urge the Government of Canada to work with First Nations, Inuit, and Metis peoples to develop and implement plans for funding housing and infrastructure construction without delay, and to provide sufficient funding and support to ensure that the housing:

1) Is supported by the necessary infrastructure
2) Is of sufficiently high quality to ensure healthy living
3) Is sufficiently plentiful to eliminate overcrowding
4) Takes into account the special needs of vulnerable women and their families on reserves, and
5) Meets the standards of the National Building Code.

Affordable housing still remains out of reach for many Canadians and many more are homeless. We respectfully state that this situation is not acceptable, and it is time for a National Housing Policy that addresses the issue with the purpose and resolve of all levels of government.

C. POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGIES

On November 24, 1989, the Parliament of Canada passed an all-party resolution, unanimously, to eradicate child poverty within 10 years. Canada was rebuked by the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee (January 2004) for economic policies that exacerbate the serious gap between the rich and poor. Canada to date has not taken strong action to implement measures that would eliminate serious poverty.

We urge the Government to collaborate with Provincial and Territorial governments and with aboriginal organizations and governing bodies, and to consult with civil society to develop anti-poverty legislation that includes a strategy to eliminate poverty by addressing the systemic barriers to full social participation by all Canadians and which contains accountability measures for government.
Therefore, the National Council of Women of Canada urge the Government of Canada to develop an anti-poverty strategy that:

a) works to improve daily living conditions of people, with special attention being given to single mothers, older women, refugee women, women with disability, and Aboriginal women living off reserve at risk of food and shelter insecurity by increasing the Federal Social Transfer to the Provincial and Territorial Governments;

b) holds the provinces and territories accountable for using additional benefits to social or income assistance recipients so that they have the resources to buy sufficient nutritional food and to live in stable, safe housing;

c) implements a National Housing strategy without delay;

d) increases funding to on-reserve Aboriginals, given the exclusive federal responsibility for housing on reserves, in order to alleviate their food and shelter insecurity, paying particular attention to the unsafe, overcrowded and often mold-infected condition of much Aboriginal housing, and lack of access to safe drinking water; and

e) develops an integrated national policy to reduce health inequities among Canadians by addressing the social determinants of health.

D. FOOD SECURITY FOR ALL CANADIANS

The Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which Canada adopted, refers to basic needs as a human right: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care…” (article 25) NCWC policy dating from 1975 supported the recommendations of the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization’s Rome Declaration that everyone has a “right to food,” and in 1977 we supported the right of every Canadian to be well-nourished, with special action being required for “nutritionally vulnerable people ….pregnant women, nursing mothers, infants, teenagers, elderly, First Nations, Metis, and Inuit, and people on low or fixed incomes.”

In 1976 Canada ratified the UN’s Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights which calls for the recognition of the “fundamental right of everyone to be free of hunger” and the Rome Declaration on World Food Security (1996) which set the goal “to ensure food security for all with an immediate aim of reducing the number of undernourished people in the world by half by the year 2015.”

There is increasing dependence on, and use of, food banks by Canadians, therefore, we strongly urge the Government of Canada (a) to ensure food security for all Canadians, and (b) to work with the provincial and territorial governments on an urgent basis to achieve universal food security for all Canadians.

We strongly urge the Government to formulate a national food security policy that will:

1) monitor urban expansion with a view to preserving good farmland and expanding Canada’s capacity for food production;

2) ensure sustainable production, processing and distribution which could build long-term sustainable farm incomes for both small and large enterprises;
3) ensure that international agreements affecting food are based on the best Canadian standards;
4) recognize that supply managed systems help to stabilize the supply of high quality food for consumption in Canada at affordable prices and help to stabilize farm incomes within the marketplace; and
5) ensure safe and nutritious food for all Canadians including those on low income and those who are geographically isolated.

E. ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE

There is increasing evidence that the use of antibiotic drugs in animal feed and in agriculture is contributing to the resistance of antibiotic medicines in humans. New drugs are not being developed quickly enough to replace those which no longer work.

It has recently been discovered that a gene, the MCR-1, turns some bacteria into antibiotic-resistant superbugs; for example, it makes E. coli and some other bacteria species resistant to colistin which has been considered “the drug of last resort” for some diseases.

We urge the Government to:
   a) implement an immediate ban on the use of antibiotics as animal growth promoters and enhancers of animal feed efficiency where those classes of antibiotics are of high importance for human therapeutic use,
   b) undertake a review of the issue in consultation with the Council of Chief Veterinary Officers, Council of Medical Officers of Health and National Farm Animal Health and Welfare Council,
   c) promote best practices in animal husbandry, and
   d) reinstate the Canadian Committee on Antibiotic Resistance.

F. NATIONAL PHARMACARE PLAN

In 2012 six million Canadians had inadequate drug coverage, including 600,000 who had no prescription drug coverage at all. A poll commissioned by the Canadian Cancer Society in 2010 showed that 74% of Canadians supported a national catastrophic drug plan.

The National Council of Women of Canada urge the Government of Canada to take a lead role in working with the provinces and territories in establishing a National Prescription Drug Plan that is universal and portable for all Canadians eligible under the Canada Health Act, ensuring the necessary resources to support such a Plan.

G. MEDICALLY ASSISTED DEATH

NCWC support doctor-assisted death and voluntary euthanasia and recommend that the Government set up safeguards through an Act permitting medically assisted death to include the following criteria:
   a) the person must be terminally ill or have a life-limiting illness/condition
   b) no person shall qualify solely because of age or disability
c) the person must make two oral requests and one written request for assistance in dying, or by using alternate communication methods for those with verbal or physical challenges

d) two physicians or two senior health care professionals in cases where a person has no regular doctor must verify that the patient is capable, is acting voluntarily and has made an informed decision

e) the person must not be suffering from a psychiatric or psychological disorder or depression causing impaired judgement or be developmentally disabled

f) the person must be informed of the feasible alternatives such as comfort care, hospice care and pain control

g) the person is given 15 days to rescind the request

h) ensure there are provisions for health care professionals to withdraw participation on personal, religious or ethical grounds.

SAFETY AND SECURITY OF PERSONS

This topic will be the focus of Council of Women programs until 2017, encompassing a wide variety of issues, including violence against women.

A. NATIONAL ENQUIRY INTO MISSING AND MURDERED ABORIGINAL WOMEN

NCWC strongly supports the Government’s national enquiry to address the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women, working with the provinces, territories, and Aboriginal governments.

We urge the Government to fund and implement programs that do the following:

a) enhance efforts on unresolved cases,

b) increase public awareness – including programs that address racism,

c) strengthen/improve data collection including DNA analysis of unidentified bodies,

d) include gender based analysis of all legislation and programs related to missing and murdered Aboriginal women,

e) focus on prevention efforts – specifically addressing the following:

i. providing safe, secure, affordable housing

ii. eliminating poverty

iii. increasing access to services for Aboriginal women

iv. restoring funding to Aboriginal women’s groups

v. providing basic quality education within Aboriginal communities

vi. supporting community capacity building

vii. providing anti-violence programs
ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

NCWC has extensive policy on a number of issues relating to the environment. In 1989 we called for a reduction in emissions of ozone-depleting chemicals and advocated for energy conservation and sustainable forest management. Other policies call for banning all offshore drilling in Canadian Arctic waters and safeguarding Canada’s arctic sovereignty; introducing a moratorium on any currently planned exploration for and exploitation of shale gas in Canada; and ceasing support of the irresponsible production of oil from tar sands in Canada by: placing a moratorium on new tar sands projects until the environmental concerns are resolved, stopping federal incentives to develop the tar sands, and increasing the monitoring and reporting of the environmental and social impacts of producing oil from tar sands.

A. NATIONAL ENERGY STRATEGY

NCWC urge the government to develop a National Energy Strategy for Canada that:

a) ensures that resource development occurs within a sustainable development framework, and
b) that this National Energy Strategy provides economic incentives to research and develop clean energy sources for Canada’s energy needs.

We need the Government to make conservation of natural resources and the development of renewable energy resources a priority – as well as to increase funding for renewable energy technology.

B. ALTERNATE ENERGY

National Council of Women of Canada policy has long supported alternative and renewable forms of energy.

Over the past 40 years, we have urged the Government to:
• give priority to research into the development of solar energy,
• make the development of renewable energy sources a priority,
• establish a program of public awareness, reduction of consumption, and restoration of funding for conservation and alternative energy programs,
• use renewable and alternative sources of energy and encourage experimental projects and research,
• establish an Alternate Energy Commission to promote the use of renewable and alternate sources of energy by encouraging and supporting further experimental projects and research by accredited agencies.

We also urge the Government of Canada to give high priority to exploring the use of geothermal energy for electricity. Geothermal energy is non-polluting, relatively easy to process, of almost infinite supply, and known to be available in Alberta, British Columbia, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories. Geothermal energy is already being used in the production of electrical power in many other countries, including Indonesia, New Zealand, Japan, the Philippines and the United States.
C. MORATORIUM ON EXPLORATION AND EXPLOITATION OF SHALE GAS

The National Council of Women of Canada urge that any new exploration for shale gas in Canada be postponed until methods are developed which make it safe for the environment, especially for nearby aquifers which may be affected by the fracking process, and that the shale gas industry be regulated.

We strongly urge the Government of Canada to:

a) introduce a moratorium on any currently planned exploration for and exploitation of shale gas in Canada.

b) work with the Provinces and Territories to develop strict guidelines to regulate any possible future development of a shale gas industry in Canada.

D. NUCLEAR WASTE/NUCLEAR ENERGY

The National Council of Women of Canada strongly urges the Government to reject the Canadian Environmental Assessment (CEAA) Joint Review Panel’s (JRP) recent recommendation to the Minister of Environment. This project would allow Ontario Power Generation (OPG) to bury hundreds of thousands of tons of low and medium, very dangerous, nuclear waste (some of it extremely long-lasting) near the shore of Lake Huron. We believe this project to be unwise in the extreme, with the strong probability of an outcome most dangerous to the health, safety, and environment of millions of people.

Over the past few decades, NCWC has urged the Government to:

• reject as unsafe the AECL “concept” for the burial of high-level nuclear wastes in the Precambrian shield,

• initiate a public policy debate with broad public consultation, on the energy future of Canada with specific focus on the nuclear issue,

• expend research monies on a search for a safe technology to treat nuclear wastes,

• upgrade current nuclear-site safety,

• develop alternative sources of energy,

• bring Canadian radiation exposure standards into conformity with those adopted by the International Radiation Protection Association of 1991, while encouraging the Association to improve these standards even further to reflect the gender and age differences of women and children,

• do all that is in its power to prevent expansion of the nuclear industry, and

• call a moratorium on the development of nuclear power, and grant no new licences for new nuclear reactors.

NCWC urge that the mining of high-grade uranium be phased out, in tandem with the phase out of nuclear plants at the end of their life cycle; that the mining of low-grade uranium not be allowed as a replacement for high-grade uranium; and that in the interim, active mines and mills be made safe, and abandoned mines be cleaned up and secured.
E. NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION

The International Court of Justice in the Hague ruled that the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be contrary to International law and the principles of humanitarian law. The Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons established by the Australian Government has proposed practical steps toward a nuclear-free world.

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), in effect since 1970, is the only binding multilateral treaty with the goal of nuclear disarmament by the nuclear-weapons states. In order to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and work toward complete disarmament, 190 parties have joined the Treaty, including the five nuclear-weapon states. The United Nations states that “More countries have ratified the NPT than any other arms limitation and disarmament agreement, a testament to the Treaty’s significance.” Every five years NPT talks take place to assess what progress has been made and then a document which details future action is signed. At the 2015 Review Conference in New York, Canada was among three countries which declined to sign this document.

NCWC strongly urge the Government to sign onto this document and work toward the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. The 1996 ruling of the International Court of Justice stated that all countries have an obligation under international law to conclude negotiations to eliminate nuclear weapons.

F. NATIONAL WATER STRATEGY

NCWC urge the Government to protect our Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway system, our ground water, and all waterways and coastlines, including the need for:

a) conservation of water resources
b) a safe drinking water act
c) a national river basin management policy
d) ground water protection as well as federal action to prevent water diversions, and
e) continued protection and restoration of the Great Lakes ecosystem.

We urge the Government to strengthen legislation to protect our navigable water through:

a) the requirements that all projects, for example, bridge, boom, dam, causeway, or dredging on all Canadian waterways be subject to environmental assessments;
b) and maintenance of the existing common law and traditional use of navigable waterways.

NCWC strongly urge the Government of Canada to:

1. protect the long-term supply of water for domestic, agricultural, commercial, industrial uses, etc.;
2. prohibit the export of bulk water by pipeline, tanker, bulk carrier, or by inter-basin transfer;
3. assert sovereignty over Canadian water resources, and ensure that multilateral trade agreements guarantee compliance with Canadian ownership and control over the delivery of vital natural resources such as water; and
4. work with the provinces to ensure the prohibition of water exports in order to avoid repercussions under NAFTA or any other trade agreement.

NCWC is not alone in recognizing the magnitude of our water problems which have been exacerbated by population growth, industrial and urban development, and climate change, among other stresses. Therefore, we feel it is increasingly important that the Government of Canada take the lead and, working closely with Provincial, Territorial, First Nation, municipal governments, water experts and the Canadian public, develop a National Water Strategy and ensure that this vital resource – its quantity, quality, and sustainability – is protected for generations to come.

G. DRILLING IN THE ARCTIC

There has been widespread thawing in the Arctic due to climate modification, resulting in exposure of a very delicate ecosystem that, if damaged, cannot be repaired, and more exposed areas that can be exploited or used for research. It is known that there are vast, rich deposits of great variety in the seabed, thought to hold one quarter of the world’s undiscovered oil. The effect of an oil spill on the delicate nature of the ecosystem is irreversible because oil cannot be cleaned up adequately in the cold Arctic waters, the drilling of emergency side-pipes is not likely to be feasible when the spill occurs under the ice and the occurrence is not identified in time, and these areas are only available for remedial action two months of the year.

A spill in Arctic waters could destroy the last rich reserves of fish and significant wildlife habitat, and with the expected surge in drilling and transportation of oil, accidents are expected to increase, accidents which are dangerous and impossible to control and have serious implications for the preservation of the now healthy ecosystem.

Therefore, the National Council of Women of Canada urge the Government of Canada to:

a) proceed urgently to ban all offshore drilling in the Canadian Arctic waters,
b) improve Canada’s capacity to monitor effectively the banning of all offshore drilling activity in the Canadian Arctic waters and enforce existing legislation,
c) ensure that the results of monitoring practices are verifiable and made public,
d) continue to work with the Arctic Council to promote the banning of all offshore drilling in the Arctic,
e) work with other countries with offshore waters to ban offshore drilling in Arctic waters, and
f) encourage the use of the connection with NORAD for oil-drilling monitoring.

We also urge the Government of Canada to work with the United Nations to achieve a ban on offshore drilling in the Arctic.
ELECTORAL REFORM

A. ELECTORAL REFORM/PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Whereas a functioning democracy requires accurate representation of opinion, which means that the number of seats that a political party obtains should be in reasonable proportion to the number of votes it obtains. In the first-past-the-post system of elections, governments can get a majority of seats with a minority of votes. Other electoral systems such as proportional representation offer more power to the voter and give excellent representation to minorities.

Therefore, NCWC urge the Government of Canada to:

a) establish a Royal Commission to examine the current Canadian system of voting and systems used in other countries, including proportional representation, and to consult nationwide on the views of Canadians on this issue,

b) hold a referendum following the report of the Royal Commission to permit voters to choose among the systems considered the best of their types, and

c) incorporate the system chosen into the Constitution, so that any major change to the electoral system therefore be required to be approved by referendum.