

**A PRESENTATION TO
THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE
ON
THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

NOVEMBER 25, 2004

FROM

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF CANADA

PRESENTED BY

CATHARINE LAIDLAW-SLY, PRESIDENT

Thank you for the opportunity to appear today and identify some issues of concern to the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC), together with some forward-

looking suggestions for action.

NCWC is Canada's oldest federated organization for women, founded in 1893, with the Mission Statement "to empower all women to work together towards improving the quality of life for women, families and society through a forum for member organizations and individuals." This mission still informs all our work and our regular recommendations to all levels of government. However, members are constantly aware of the fiscal constraints that are part of life for all those citizens whose status is not equal in all respects. Women are still not equal in our society which is why the establishment of this Standing Committee was long seen as necessary. NCWC commends Members of the House of Commons for establishing this Committee.

Today, women still face real inequality in society in spite of the many initiatives undertaken to improve their status in many ways. Because these measures have often been small steps that were not necessarily integrated, or developed with the use of sound gender dis-aggregated statistics, the advancement of women has not been equal for all women. In fact, Aboriginal women, visible minority women, and disabled women still experience real discrimination that has a negative effect on their economic and personal security and well-being. There are two fundamental areas of action and interaction that could be undertaken by this Committee.

One of the underlying causes of inequality seems to be that women still do not count. The members of this committee will recall that in 1995, at the Beijing Fourth World Conference for Women, there was an agreement which Canada supported without reservation to publish Auxiliary Accounts annually, showing the value to the Gross Domestic Product of the uncounted and unpaid work done mostly by women. This has still not happened here in Canada. The effects of this public ignorance range all the way from the simple fact that women are still presented in our media more as sex objects than as contributing citizens, to the present low number of women standing for and elected to the House of Commons.

Sadly, business, especially men in businesses of all sorts, are seen as the vital spark-plugs for the engine of the national economy even though it is known and acknowledged that it is women entrepreneurs who have a better track record of success in starting and succeeding in developing new enterprises that are also recognized as a real engines of growth in our communities. However, women, doing the unseen and uncounted unpaid work of our society, are the invisible lubrication of that engine but their importance and value receives only lip service acknowledgement. Proof of this bias is seen in the time allocated to business interests appearing before the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance when compared to those organizations representing the voluntary sector working to enhance Canada's Social Infrastructure.

NCWC, supporting the initiatives adopted at the Beijing Conference and stated in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, would recommend that this committee

assemble the information presently available through the figures obtained by Statistics Canada and the values established by the Department for the Status of Women and publish these as a preliminary step to having the Department of Finance include these figures in their yearly reports. This would go a long way to clarifying what the value of Home Care giving of all kinds really is. It would also cut out all sorts of incremental mini-measures currently being offered for some sorts of unpaid work without the benefit of a comprehensive understanding of the real value in and to our society.

NCWC members are also concerned that women's elected representation at the national level seems stalled in the range of 20% plus. This is a far cry from equal representation for the group that is in fact a majority in Canada according to the last census. NCWC has called for Electoral Reform, recommending that a Royal Commission be established, with 50% of the Commissioners drawn from women's stakeholder organizations to examine all the possible ways in which more equal and fair representation both of public opinion, and of male and female candidates could be achieved, presenting their conclusions to the public and the government for decision.

Accordingly, NCWC would urge that this Parliamentary Standing Committee start this process by holding hearings designed to assist Canadian women in learning of all the possible reforms, with the possible advantages and disadvantages of each electoral system, in preparation for a public plebiscite on reforms designed to achieve equal representation for women. In particular, NCWC would hope that this committee would have as its self-imposed mandate, the responsibility to see that women's organizations had the necessary resources to participate in the research necessary for informed appearance before hearings on Electoral Reform.

NCWC's other on-going issues of concern calling for action include measures designed to maintain or strengthen Canada's Social Infrastructure, development and implementation of measures designed to enhance economic equality for women throughout their lives, and the on-going stability, continuity, and predictability of funding that enables non-profit and voluntary organizations to fulfill the missions for which they were created.

The first category, Canada's Social Infrastructure includes Health Care, Child Care including early childhood education, women's economic security (including pay equity and income security for the disabled, the elderly, and those who have done unpaid work to the detriment of their own personal long-term income security), Education including life-long learning opportunities, Homelessness (especially the invisible homeless and those working poor who cannot find safe affordable housing) and last but not least, the elimination of all forms of violence against women in Canada.

With reference to women victims of violence, NCWC is supporting the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) in their work to improve the situation and treatment of a relatively few women (probably less than 500 all told). Federally Sentenced Women include a disproportionate percentage of Aboriginal women (which

indicates a racial bias in Canadian society) while no longer in Kingston Penitentiary, are still not benefiting from the implementation of the recommendations made over a decade ago. The United Nations CEDAW Review specifically recommended that their treatment be improved.

CAEFS, supported by other women's equality-seeking organizations, has appeared before the Canadian Human Rights Commission, recommendations were forthcoming, but it is the regretted conviction of all who are consulting with Corrections Canada that the recommendations for classification and treatment of these women, most of whom have suffered from a lifetime of all sorts of violence, will not be implemented. There is little political advantage or will it seems to act on behalf of these women. Yet all of us who have worked to overcome violence against women and female children know that the sorts of abuse these FSW have suffered differs only in degree from the abuse that many of us have seen or even experienced personally. This is an area where this committee by its interest and inquiries could effect a real improvement.

The Canadian Government has a commendable record of consulting widely on social infrastructure questions. However, there is a problem due to the fact that all too often, these consultations are arranged as if all organizations had professional representatives present in Ottawa. Therefore there is no allocation of funds to defray the costs of bringing in the best representative of a non-profit organization. NCWC has experienced this as have many other women's organizations. It would be most helpful if this committee could work to convince all consulting departments that funding the presence of the best and most knowledgeable representative would ensure that the Government would have the benefit of the best information available. This seems more cost-effective in the long-run.

A second area of concern is the earlier mentioned stability and viability of women's non-profit and volunteer organizations. The withdrawal of all core funding in favour of project funding has not worked to improve the quality of work done by organizations, particularly those who are not allowed to have a tax number because they do not deliver services. In fact, it even cripples attempts to produce documents in both official languages, do adequate and unbiased research, and improve public education and outreach. Project funding does not implement the recommendations in the Beijing Platform for Action for Institutional Arrangements - National Governments (Chap 5 A Beijing PfA). Further it does not respect the intent of the recommendations for National Governments as set out in the Beijing PfA Chapter 6, Financial Arrangements (Articles 346 - 350). NCWC would recommend that this committee assimilate these recommendations in its mandate.

Lastly, NCWC is concerned that the participation of NGO Women's organizations representatives in international conferences and consultations, or their presence as Observers at Trade Negotiations is severely constrained. In fact. All too often delegates must use their own after-tax income to participate. There is no recognition in the tax system of this expense, although it reflects well on Canada's reputation that there still is

a body of experienced women whom the Government can enlist as delegates when it need to. Both government departments and organizations should be concerned that this cadre relies on women with financial resources and excludes the working poor, and those who have little disposable income. We would hope that this committee would examine ways in which more women active in the NGO community and therefore well-informed on issues which could affect the long-term viability for Canada's Social Security Network, are presently unable to be present as they should be and as business interests can afford to be at these international conferences and trade treaty negotiations.

NCWC wishes the Committee well in its work and looks to forward copies of all our Briefs and Reports to this committee on a regular basis. We regret not having had either the time or the income to permit translation of these recommendations. The National Council of Women of Canada looks forward to productive and positive interactions with the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Status of Women and thanks all those Members of Parliament who have agreed to serve, especially the Chair and the Vice-Chairs. This can be a positive development for Canadian Women.