

Achieving Gender Equality in the

by Roxana Ng

L'auteure examine le Plan d'action du gouvernement fédéral canadien pour l'égalité entre hommes et femmes. D'après son analyse, l'auteure se demande si les grandes lignes et les

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On the eve of the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women and NGO Forum in Beijing in September 1995, the Canadian government released its gender equality plan entitled, *Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality* (heretofore *The Plan*). It is clear that *The Plan* is Canada's demonstration to the international community of its desire and commitment to achieving equality between women and men. The question is whether indeed it provides adequate and appropriate guidelines and strategies for realizing this goal. This article is my assessment of *The Plan* in light of recent developments within the government affecting gender equality. Since it is impossible to discuss all the areas covered by *The Plan* in this short article, I will attempt to give an overall framework within which to make sense of the actions outlined in *The Plan*.¹

The Plan begins by reviewing the progress of women's rights in Canada dating back to 1916. It then describes the legal provision for gender equality in Canada, such as that provided by the *Charter*, as well as Canada's obligations in the international community. The mandate of the federal department in charge of coordinating and administering gender policies—Status of Women Canada (SWC)—is also described. In addition, *The Plan* spells out the partners needed in implementation, namely the provincial and territorial governments and the voluntary sector. It defines an important differentiation between women's equality and gender equality, preferring the concept of gender equality because it focuses on "the social arrangements that govern the relationship" and "foster equal partnership" (11) between men and women.

After these introductory remarks, the rest of this 83-page (in English, 95 pages in French) document states the overall principles of *The Plan* and discusses *The Plan's* eight objectives in detail. These objectives are: 1) implement gender-based analysis throughout federal departments and agencies; 2) improve women's economic autonomy and well-being; 3) improve women's physical and psychological well-being; 4) reduce violence in society, particularly violence against women and children; 5) promote gender equality in all aspects of Canada's cultural life; 6) incorporate women's perspectives in governance; 7) promote and support global gender equality; 8) advance gender equality for employees of federal departments and agencies.

Since this document was released just prior to the Beijing conference, on which media attention was focused, there has been little media coverage and public discussion of *The Plan*. Yet feminists and women's groups should familiarize themselves with this document because it is the federal directive on gender equality in the years to come.

From a feminist perspective, *The Plan* offers little new information. It acknowledges that there is still much work to be done to achieve equality between women and men. We need to question why this is so despite Canada's participation in the Forward-Looking Strategies (FLS) reached after the 1985 UN Conference in Nairobi (see Stienstra and Roberts). Indeed, Canada dropped from first to ninth place in the United Nations' 1995 *Human Development Report* in terms of gender equality.²

The Plan stresses women's different realities, indicating that the government has finally caught up with the feminist movement in recognizing women's diverse experiences. It also recognizes that research is needed, for example on all aspects of women's health and well-being. In other words, it confirms what women and women's groups have known for years: that the gender gap, instead of closing as a result of provisions in our law, is widening. It acknowledges that the voluntary sector, especially the well-developed network of women's organizations, has a long tradition in improving the status of women. It emphasizes the importance of consultation with women's organizations in order to achieve gender equality.³

The first objective of *The Plan* commits the federal government to implement gender-based analysis throughout all departments and agencies. Pat Webb, of the Canadian Congress of Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW), calls it a visionary plan, but also adds that as such, it "presents no measurable objectives, and time lines and resources are not addressed."⁴ Therein lies the major flaw of this federal initiative.

Next Century: Myth or Reality?

In addition to the lack of strategies, time lines, and resource allocation pertaining to *The Plan*, there is no concrete mechanism for monitoring the implementation process to ensure that the actions outlined are enacted. To supplement *The Plan*, Status of Women Canada released

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a working document entitled, *Gender-Based Analysis: A Guide for Policy-Making* in March 1996. But the same issue can be raised of this as *The Plan* in terms of the lack of time lines, expected outcomes, and monitoring mechanisms. Thus, while SWC is mandated to coordinate and administer policies regarding gender equality, it has no real power to implement and enforce policies.

Let us look at what has happened in terms of the federal government's recent record in promoting gender equality.

With the trimming of the federal budget, funding to women's groups has been reduced for up to 50 per cent over the last five years. The social security review has had a major negative impact on women. Last March, Mrs. Finestone, the former Secretary of State on the Status of Women, abolished the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW), the arm's-length organization set up to conduct gender-based policy analyses, and incorporated some of its functions into SWC.⁵ There has been no serious⁶ consultation with feminist organizations as a national body around the radical restructuring of the government machinery and funding criteria for equality seeking groups. We need to question why it is that measures that have the potential for eliminating gender discrimination and other inequalities are being taken away at the same time that the Canadian government presents a visionary equality plan to the world.

In order to understand this contradiction, we have to situate *The Plan* in the larger context of global restructuring, and the role of the Canadian state⁷ in this restructuring process. An essential feature of late capitalism, indeed a major tendency of capitalism as a mode of production, is the progressive erosion of collective rights vis-à-vis individual rights. We see this in the Canadian Constitution, as well as the recent elimination of funding to

disability rights groups.⁸ As the concept of gender equality becomes entrenched institutionally (a battle fought and won by the feminist movement), the state is withdrawing its support of and reliance on organized feminist groups in favour of consulting with experts and key informants, who include but are not restricted to feminists. It is crucial that we pay attention to this tendency to ensure, as much as possible, that the women's movement is not fragmented by this kind of individualizing process.⁹

While the expansion of the state, including the welfare state, had served the interest of the national bourgeoisie in western democracies in the post-war period, this is no longer the case as capital moves beyond national boundaries to capture markets and augment profits. Within western nations, the social safety net which has been so vehemently fought for by working people is being eroded rapidly. In Canada, this tendency is manifested by the privatization of social responsibilities (such as health care) and the devolution of federal responsibilities to the provincial and municipal levels in the name of deficit reduction. This is a move put in place by the Mulroney government and continued by the Chretien government despite their rhetorical differences. We must grasp any equality plan proposed by the government in this context that the current lingo calls "restructuring" and "globalization."

Thus, although we can use the gender equality plan, as well as the international agreement made in Beijing, as political leverage and hold our government to the promises it has made nationally and internationally, we cannot rely on the goodwill of the government alone to achieve gender equality. Given the political, economic, and ideological climate in which we are working, feminists individually and collectively need to be vigilant of the forces that work to undermine our hard-won rights and to divide us from each other. Feminist groups need to work in concert with one another to develop appropriate political and funding strategies, as well as a division of labour for these strategies, that will sustain us in the difficult years ahead. We need to make alliances with other social movements and with our sisters globally to ensure that we support each other in our effort to eliminate all forms of inequality. If *The Plan* has a merit beyond rhetoric, it is to stimulate our reflections on what has been won and lost, and to remind us of the struggles that lie ahead.

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¹This analysis was largely based on my preparation for a press conference in Ottawa called by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) on September 6, 1995—the Worldwide Day of Action for Women's Equality in conjunction with the Beijing conference. In writing the press presentation, as the president of CRIAOW at the time, I was indebted to Linda Clippingdale and Sandi Kirby for their preparatory work. In this article I also draw on the press presentations by Pat Webb (President-Elect of the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women—CLOW), and Jocelyns Tougas (Executive Director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada).

²In this report, Canada is listed as No. 9 under the heading, "Gender-Related Development Index (GDI)." Women in Canada have a 29.3 per cent share of earned income, compared to 70.7 per cent for men. (Notes prepared by Linda Clippingdale, Executive Director of CRIAOW.)

³Press presentation by Roxana Ng, September 6, 1995.

⁴Press presentation by Pat Webb, September 6, 1995.

⁵Since then, feminist researchers and feminist groups across the country have been emphasizing the need for independent gender-based policy research and analysis. In spite of the pressures exerted, no mechanism has been put in place to allocate the budget, which was retained in the overall federal budget last year, earmarked for the defunct CACSW. As this article goes to press, it appears that some of the monies returned to SWC from CACSW (totally around \$1 million) will be allocated through an RFP (request for proposal) process. In my opinion, if this is the only mechanism for women's groups to obtain research funds, then the research agenda will be largely controlled by SWC.

⁶By serious I mean that although women's and other groups were asked to respond to government initiatives, such as the social security review, the time line provided for the response was totally inadequate, giving groups no real opportunity to review the voluminous materials and think through policy and other implications for their constituencies.

⁷I am using the term, "the state" here to refer to the multiplicity of departments and functions responsible for ruling in Canada. Thus I do not restrict my comments to SWC. More importantly we need to see how different levels of the government work in concert to affect the process of individualization and reorganization I mention in this article. For further discussion on "the state," see Ng; Ng, Walker, and Muller.

⁸The Federal Minister of Human Resources assured the electorate in his announcement in June that services to individuals with disability will not be undermined with funding cuts to advocacy groups.

⁹Space does not permit an elaborate discussion, but I should point out that the pseudo-consultations instigated by SWC on the whole question of feminist policy research and analysis resulting from CACSW's demise is a case in point.

References

- Ng, Roxana. *The Politics of Community Services*. Halifax: Fernwood Books, 1996.
- Ng, Roxana, Gillian Walker, and Jake Muller, eds. *Community Organization and the Canadian State*. Toronto: Garamond Press, 1990.
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ELISAVIETTA RITCHIE

Prophecies

Women of the future will
design future sinks
with space behind faucets
so men can scrub the crud
without getting cramps
in their hands or
using their toothbrush.

Women of the future will
design ovens so that to bake
and clean the stove
men don't have to squat,
kneel as to gods,
stick our heads in.

We will design vacuum cleaners
with long suction tubes
so men don't crunch
their spinal discs.

And superlight superquick
tire-changing kits
that work even on lonely roads
at night in the rain.

At least now that men
are washing more dishes
they've invented detergent
for sensitive skin.

My ex-learned to clean and cook
for his busy new lawyer-wife,
even to bake her bread.
That's progress.

Elisavietta Ritchie's recent books include The Arc of the Storm (Signal Books, 1996), Elegy For the Other Woman (Signal Poems, 1996), and Flying Time: Stories and Half Stories (Signal Books, 1996).