

Is the Canadian Government All Treaty

by *Nycole Turmel*

En examinant les promesses faites par le gouvernement canadien à la Conférence de Beijing pour atteindre l'égalité entre

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hommes et femmes, l'auteure analyse les stratégies proposées dans le contexte des pratiques actuelles du secteur public fédéral.

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We arrived from everywhere and from places in between.... Women who shared a vision of making this world a better place to live in. And despite the complexity of the political issues and the diversity of our cultures, a global Platform for Action (PFA) was adopted to accelerate the progress towards equality for women everywhere. But the question remains. Will governments fulfill their commitments or simply put the promises they made in Beijing on the backburner?

As a member of the federally-funded Canadian Beijing Facilitating Committee, I joined 39 other women from various Canadian NGOs representing community, social, labour, and non-profit organizations. Our objectives were clear. First, in the weeks leading up to the Beijing gathering, we set out to encourage and prepare Canadian women to play an active role in the Forum. Secondly, we shared information, participated, and lobbied members of official government delegations attending the United Nations Conference. Finally, (and most importantly), our third objective was—and continues to be—to ensure that the Canadian government complies with the commitments made in Beijing.

The two-week long gathering of 30,000 women from 189 countries

(including 500 Canadian women) focusing on women's issues was in stark contrast to the location of the Conference. Set in China, a country with an appalling human rights record, the Conference felt the strain of conflicting ideologies. Complaints about heavy-handed Chinese security and officials' intimidation of participants unfortunately marred the Conference. Nevertheless, although heavy rains and the location of the NGO Forum (some 80 kilometres north of Beijing) were also obstacles we had to deal with on a daily basis, our efforts to build networks and raise awareness on major issues such as domestic violence, one of the leading causes of female injuries in almost every country in the world, were successful.

NGO Forum

We had the choice of attending any of the hundreds of daily workshops and plenary sessions. The handbook describing the workshops was about the size of a telephone directory of a small town. Each of the workshops were developed around one of the Conference's 12 priority areas: the globalization of the economy, the environment, peace, poverty, health, human rights, violence, education and training, political participation, the girl child, the media, and mechanisms for the advancement of women. Conducted by women from around the world (including Canadian women), the workshops provided us with an opportunity to engage in vivid discussions. It became clear during these workshops that problems experienced by Canadian women are not so different than those experienced by women around the world.

Because of the great success of the Women's March Against Poverty held last summer in the province of Que-

bec, our facilitating committee proposed that a similar march be organized internationally in the year 2000. The idea captured the imagination of many and support for the march is gaining momentum worldwide.

UN Conference

After the NGO Forum on Women came the UN Conference in which official government delegations gathered to debate issues and make commitments on behalf of their country that would be drafted into the PFA. Although the United States and Australia made significant commitments and took measures to improve women's rights in their respective countries, the Canadian government limited itself to boasting of its past accomplishments and of its recent *Federal Plan for Gender Equality*.

This plan is interesting because it clearly stipulates that all future government policies will be assessed for their impact on women before being introduced. The document states:

In order that public policy not discriminate against women, it must be analyzed to determine whether its impacts will be different on men and women. Since June 1995, the federal government has adopted a policy requiring departments and agencies to conduct gender-based analysis of all future policies and legislation where appropriate. (SWC 1995, 17)

This pledge is clearly in contradiction with the right-wing agenda currently being carried out by the federal government—massive job cuts in the federal public service, reductions to Unemployment Insurance, and the dismantling of our social safety net.

According to the 1995 United Nations survey known as the "human

No Action?



Nycole Turmel and friends, ngo Forum 1995.

development index," Canada rates as the first country in which to live—unless you're a woman. Then we stumble down to ninth in the world. The UN report states that "over the past 20 years, doors to education and health opportunities have opened rapidly for women but the doors to economic and political power are barely ajar" (United Nations 76).

That is why one month after the Conference, the Public Service Alliance of Canada launched a human rights day postcard campaign addressed to the Canadian Prime Minister demanding that the federal government, a signatory to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, play a leadership role in returning our country to an economic and social path that protects and expands human rights.

Another issue that will push women further back is the largest downsizing program ever engaged in Canada. The government will cut 45,000 jobs in the federal workforce over the next three years. Women who have been ghettoized for years in low-paying clerical and secretarial positions are in the most vulnerable

position. Ironically, only a month after the federal government adopted its policy of "gender-based analysis," it started issuing surplus notices to public service workers. Where was the gender-based analysis?

And finally, despite the federal government's rhetoric to the world about the need for justice and equality to all women and the fact that pay equity legislation was introduced in Canada in 1977, the federal government refuses to abide by its own law and set an example for other employers by rectifying the wage gap between men and women in its own workforce. At the Public Service Alliance of Canada we have been involved in a ten-year battle to obtain pay equity for 65,000 workers in female-dominated occupations in the federal public service. The federal government continues to deny women equal pay and goes even further by slowing the lengthy legal process by using every trick in the book. This battle is still not resolved.

As a woman, Beijing was a tremendous and rewarding experience. As a trade unionist representing federal public service workers, I strongly believe that Canada still has a long way

to go before it can boast of its accomplishments on women's issues in this country.

So far, the ink that Canada has used to sign the pay equity legislation, International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and United Nations treaties seems to disappear when comes time to put them into practice.

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