

FAFIA's CEDAW Campaign

25 Years, Ready or Not?

NANCY PECKFORD

Cet article dépeint la campagne de AFIA (Alliance féministe pour une action internationale) « 25 ans, prêtes ou non? » qui demande aux partis politiques de faire un grand pas en avant et de s'attaquer à quelques uns des problèmes qui sont toujours en suspens et pour lesquels trop de femmes au Canada réclament une action (tel que recommandé dans la CEDEF (Convention pour l'élimination de la discrimination envers les femmes)).

Twenty-five years ago Canada signed the most comprehensive human-rights treaty on women's rights, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This was an enormous accomplishment for women around the globe who had worked for many decades to establish a human-rights treaty that specifically addressed the persistent and systemic discrimination against women. Canada was among the first to sign this treaty in 1980, and ratified it with the consent of all provinces and territories in the fall of 1981.

It was a time of watershed moments for women in Canada. After a long struggle and much contention, women had just won the equality-rights provisions regarding sex discrimination in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The National Action Committee on the Status of

Women was consolidating the efforts of organized women to ensure that the recommendations from the Royal Commission on the Status of Women a decade earlier were implemented. The federal government had established the Women's Program to help support the efforts of grassroots and national groups to educate, mobilize, and support the efforts of women in their communities to combat poverty, violence, and other realities.

When Canada signed CEDAW in 1981, it agreed to undergo periodic reviews by an internationally renowned expert body. Canada has undergone five such reviews since signing the convention, and the response from the UN is indicative of the cavalier nature with which Canada unfortunately has treated its obligations to women's equality.

Despite the fact that many women in Canada are not familiar with CEDAW, in part because the Canadian government has not publicized its own obligations under this international treaty, women's organizations have made use of CEDAW for some time. In 1990, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women submitted a parallel report to the United Nations regarding Canada's second CEDAW report that focused on the negative impact that Canada's changing economic priorities were having on women in

Canada. In a 1993 report, the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women concluded that few of Canada's CEDAW commitments were being met and that Canada continued to enter into international treaty agreements without being clear about how or even if they would be implemented (see FAFIA 2004). On the occasion of the 4th United Nations review of Canada's adherence to CEDAW in 1997, an ad hoc group of individuals and organizations produced a shadow report that focused on the growth of women's inequality as a direct result of Canada's policy priorities (FAFIA 2004). The report concluded that these policies compromise Canada's domestic commitments to women's equality, including those made in the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, which, ironically enough, the federal government has identified as one of the primary vehicles through which CEDAW is upheld in Canada. In 2002, at Canada's 5th UN review, FAFIA submitted a report, *Canada's Failure to Act: Women's Inequality Deepens* (FAFIA 2004), which came to the same conclusions.

The Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA) is a strategic alliance of over 70 Canadian women's equality-seeking and related organizations. FAFIA's mandate is to further women's equality

in Canada through domestic implementation of its international human rights commitments. Over the past several years, FAFIA has paid particular attention to ensuring Canada lives up to its own commitments under CEDAW.

The most recent United Nations review of Canada's compliance with CEDAW was in January 2003. The UN treaty body conducting the review noted that the federal government must take urgent action to remedy the profoundly unequal status of Aboriginal and First Nations women and the systemic discrimination confronted by immigrant and refugee women (to read the UN full report, see <http://www.fafia-afai.org/en/node/189>). As well, it called upon the government of Canada to improve its treatment of women who come to Canada under the live-in caregiver program; reverse the downloading of care-giving onto women which arise due to cuts in social programs; and increase the resources available to women for legal aid. Further, it called upon the federal government to reconsider those changes in the fiscal arrangements between the federal government and the provinces and territories so that national standards of a sufficient level are re-established and women will no longer be negatively affected in a disproportionate way in different parts of the country.

Since the UN made these recommendations in 2003, FAFIA has mobilized to have them implemented. We have petitioned the federal government over three years, written an open letter to then Prime Minister Paul Martin, and liaised with all federal ministries affected by the recommendations. In addition, FAFIA has made a particular effort to meet with the federal, provincial, and territorial ministers responsible for the status of women to discuss the possibility of developing a pan-Canadian action plan. Despite this, governments in Canada, and particularly the federal government which has oversight responsibilities

for the treaty, have been remiss in acknowledging their responsibilities under the convention, and have yet to come forward with an implementation plan for the most recent set of recommendations from the UN. In short, Canada has an intergovernmental process for ratifying treaties, but appears to have no meaningful inter-governmental process for implementing them or for monitoring

Canada has undergone five reviews since signing the convention, and the response from the UN is indicative of the cavalier nature with which Canada has treated its obligations to women's equality.

compliance with them.

To address this gap, FAFIA, after three years of hard work, had the opportunity to meet with representatives from the Federal/Provincial/Territorial meeting of Ministers responsible for the Status of Women held in Regina, Saskatchewan in 2005. This meeting was partly won due to the activism of women in Newfoundland and Labrador during the previous year's meeting who, together with FAFIA, had prepared a list of demands for the same group of Ministers. Not invited to formally present them, two women from Newfoundland, Nancy Riche and Dorothy Ingles, were chosen to deliver them into the conference room while 50 women gathered outside singing Bread and Rose.

In 2005, Ministers responsible for the Status of Women granted our request to meet. A delegation from FAFIA, the Coalition of Provincial

and Territorial Advisory Councils on the Status of Women, and the National Association of Women had the opportunity to engage in a historic dialogue with these Ministers regarding how governments in Canada could work together, and with women's organizations, towards substantive improvements to women's equality. FAFIA proposed that, in anticipation of the next United Nations review of Canada's fulfillment of its CEDAW obligations in 2007, governments and women's groups collaborate on the development of an action plan to respond to the 23 recommendations from the UN CEDAW committee directed at Canada in January 2003. Representatives at the meeting also spoke of the importance of re-claiming the language of women's equality (vs. gender equality). We underscored the significance of federal resources and a federal role regarding the pursuit of women's equality, while noting that Québec has a distinct and unique role in determining the nature of its social programs. Core funding for women's groups and movement on federal pay equity legislation were identified by our NGO delegation as being particularly urgent priorities.

An Anniversary and a Call to Action

The year 2006 is the 25th anniversary of Canada's ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. As such, it provides us with a rare opportunity to capture the imagination of elected representatives, policy makers, and other social policy actors regarding why Canada must do better when it comes to women's equality.

To mark this anniversary year, FAFIA launched its campaign, *25 Years: Ready or Not?* (see Peckford) in December 2005 during the federal election. We urged political parties to commit to taking a bold step forward to respond to some of the

outstanding challenges confronted by all too many women in Canada (as articulated in the CEDAW recommendations and identified by our members as priorities). We developed a pledge card for candidates. Individual activists and representatives from FAFIA's member and partner organizations from across the country took this pledge card out to all candidates meetings and other fora to encourage candidates to sign. FAFIA members in St. John's, Inuvik, Winnipeg, Whitehorse, Toronto, Montréal, Blackstrap, Edmonton, Trois-Rivières, and Moncton, among many, many other places, worked to get pledges from candidates. Individuals from women's centres in Nova Scotia moved particularly quickly over the holiday period to obtain the pledge of Peter McKay, deputy leader of the Conservative Party, and other representatives. In addition, FAFIA developed an e-card that individual women could send which urged party leaders and their local candidates to sign the pledge. In the end, 8,000 emails were sent.

As a consequence of these efforts, all federal party leaders, including now Prime Minister Stephen Harper and a total of 188 MPs are committed to the pledge. These pledges came from every province and territory, and from candidates of all political stripes. In addition, during the election, federal party leaders provided public statements to FAFIA expressing their commitment to improve the situation in Canada as recommended by the United Nations Committee on Discrimination against Women in 2003. In so doing, they explicitly acknowledged that Canada needs to do more to uphold women's human rights.

FAFIA'S campaign goals are framed in terms of six thematic areas where policy change must be achieved if Canada truly wishes to ensure a just and inclusive community for all women and men in Canada. They include: 1) advancing women's social and economic security, particularly as it pertains to federal pay equity

legislation and access to social assistance benefits sufficient to meet basic needs; 2) improving women's access to legal aid for family and civil law; 3) better facilitating the contribution immigrant and refugee women wish to make to their communities by supporting their needs for profession-specific language training and skills upgrading as well as back to work mentoring and bridging programs; 4) eliminating the systemic discrimination Aboriginal women in Canada continue to face by removing the current limitations (as currently stipulated by Bill C31) on Aboriginal women's ability to pass on their legal status to their children and grandchildren, ensuring that First Nations women have matrimonial property rights equivalent to the rights of other women in Canada; and providing financial resources to Aboriginal women's organizations at the same level as their male-led counterparts; 5) responding to violence against women and girls by providing reliable and sufficient government funding to shelters, transition houses and other front line services; and 6) supporting women's advocacy to ensure that women's voices are heard through the development of cutting edge and sophisticated policy analysis.

Postscript: Envisioning the Future

When this article was originally written in the summer of 2006, the significant cuts and changes to Status of Women Canada (SWC) had not yet been announced. The over 40 per cent cut to the SWC operating budget, the closure of twelve of sixteen of SWC's regional offices, the prohibition of advocacy and most research with federal funds, the elimination of the Policy Research Fund, in tandem with the refusal to implement federal proactive pay equity legislation and the elimination of funds for a pan Canadian child care system, signal a profound rejection of the realities of

most women's lives. These decisions also run counter to the commitment that Prime Minister Harper made during the federal election to uphold CEDAW. Throughout the fall, FAFIA actively worked with a broad network of women's and other equality seeking organization to respond to these cuts and changes. To mark International Human Rights Day and the 25th anniversary date of Canada's ratification of CEDAW, women organized actions in communities throughout the country between December 8th though December 11th to signal their discontent with the current government's actions, to underscore Harper's broken promise to women and to demand better. In so doing, women sent a clear message: that vigilance, activism and concrete actions are still needed to protect and implement women's human rights, both in Canada and internationally, and that we will be unrelenting in that fight.

FAFIA would like to thank José Charlebois who provided crucial assistance in compiling this article.

Nancy Peckford is FAFIA's Executive Director.

References

- Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA). "About Us." Online: <<http://www.fafia-afai.org/abo/index.php>> Accessed July 6, 2006.
- Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA). Toolkit. "Commitments Abroad, Inequalities at Home: The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, What it is and Why it Matters." Ottawa, 2004.
- Peckford, Nancy. "25 Years, Ready or Not?" *Canadian Dimension Magazine* March/April 2006 Issue. Online: <http://canadiandimension.com/articles/2006/02/26/380/> Accessed on July 6, 2006.