

National Association of Women and the Law  **Association nationale de la femme et du droit**

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Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa

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Prime Minister Harper,

A few months ago the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) and several other national women's groups requested to meet with you to inform you of our concerns regarding several of your recent policies. Unfortunately, you have declined this invitation. For this reason, NAWL is writing to you today to re-iterate some of the points that we raised in our previous letters, and to request that you respond to our concerns by December 10 2006, 25th anniversary of the ratification by Canada of the Convention on all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Since it has been elected last winter, your Conservative Government has introduced several measures that will most certainly have a negative effect on women, such as the abolition of the national childcare program last Spring, the decision not to implement proactive pay equity legislation announced just a few weeks ago, and the cancellation of the Court Challenges Program, that funded constitutional equality rights test case litigation. NAWL has been one of several organizations opposing these policies and calling on you to honour the commitment that you made during the election campaign last winter, to respect women's human rights.

But instead of engaging women's equality-seeking organizations in a discussion on how to best respect and promote women's rights under the Charter and international human rights law, it would seem that your government have decided to exclude equality-seeking groups from the democratic dialogue and that it is trying to stifle our voices. Indeed, on Monday September 25, your government announced a 5 million cut to the very small budget of Status of Women Canada, and it abolished the Court Challenges Program, among other measures. On September 27, it released a new policy that will prohibit funding for advocacy and lobbying by the Women's Program. In addition, this new policy has removed the respect and promotion of women's equality from the mandate of the Women's program.

In a context where women's inequality remains deeply entrenched and systemic, NAWL believes that it is crucial that there exist both within government and in civil society a variety of institutions and organizations committed to the promotion women's equality. Over the years, women's groups have played a vital role, ensuring that the concerns of women are brought to the attention of policy makers, and that their input be provided in the law reform process. It is thanks to the dedicated work of women's groups that we have been able to achieve more economic justice for women in marriage, the criminalization of wife assault, access to maternity and parental benefits, the

prohibition of sexual harassment, and the reduction from 10 to 3 years for spousal sponsorship, to give just a few for examples.

Given the ongoing discrimination recently demonstrated in the Women in Canada 2005 Statistics Canada Report, it is clear that a lot more work needs to be done to ensure that women truly enjoy equality and human rights, particularly for women from historically disadvantaged groups – Aboriginal women, racialized women, immigrant women and women living with a disability and others. The recent report of the Expert Panel on Accountability Mechanisms for Gender Equality, entitled *Equality for Women: Beyond the Illusion*, released in July 2006 reiterates this sad reality.

The important role of feminist advocacy was acknowledged as early as 1971 by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. More recently, the 1995 *Federal Plan for Gender Equality* recognized that “the well-developed network of women’s organizations contributes to the setting of local and national agendas for gender equality”. The *Voluntary Sector Initiative Accord*, agreed upon in 2002, also emphasized the importance of supporting the women’s groups and other voluntary sector organizations to ensure a vibrant democracy, active citizenship, equality, diversity, inclusion and social justice. In May 2005 the Standing Committee on the Status of Women recognized that women’s groups play an important role in Canadian democracy, and it recommended an immediate 25% increase in the Women’s Program funding.

Prime Minister Harper, on the eve of the 25th anniversary of the ratification by Canada of CEDAW, we ask that you re-establish funding for a national childcare program; that you direct your ministers of labour and Justice to develop and implement a pro-active pay equity legislation, as recommended by the Pay Equity Task Force; that you restore funding to the Court Challenges Program as well as to Status of Women Canada; that you ensure that the respect and the promotion of women’s equality remains the core mandate of the Women’s Program, and that this Program be allowed to fund advocacy and law reform groups.

We are also calling on you to implement Canada’s obligations under the UN *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women*, that you formally agreed to honour during the 2006 election campaign. In particular, we are asking that your Government respect all of the January 2003 CEDAW Committee recommendations.

We call on you as prime Minister of Canada to ensure you’re your government will administer the public good in accordance with the respect, defence and promotion of the human rights of all women. We need to actively pursue the progressive realization of women’s human rights... it has been much too slow in coming.

Yours truly

Andrée Côté
Director of Legislation and Law Reform
NAWL