

Women's Equality in Canada An Environmental Scan

Executive Summary

The Gender Equality Network Canada (GENC) Environmental Scan provides an overview of work on the development of gender equality in Canada over the last fifteen years. The scan was undertaken from June to November 2017, based on interviews with over 50 activists across Canada, an online survey of the women leaders in GENC, and feedback from the first National Meeting of the GENC women leaders in September 2017.

Despite progress and momentum towards gender equality, women have not achieved equality in Canada. Whether measuring women's equality or women's equity; women's well-being or specific outcomes in employment, health, education; there are women in Canada who continue to face significant challenges and systemic inequality. An intersectional approach reveals no area that has unequivocally improved for all women. Deeper analysis reveals that for some women - Indigenous, Black, and other racialized women, immigrant women, women with disabilities and women in remote areas - improvements have been marginal or insignificant.

Context

Canadian women participated in many social movements, including the women's movement, in the last fifteen years. The diversity of strategies, ideologies and approaches in use has often led to a sense that the movement does not have a focus or theme. In fact, it has a central concern - equality and equity for all women. As women have complex and non-monolithic identities, the movement is inevitably destined to have multiple starting points and multiple outcomes.

Anti-racism/Anti-oppression and Intersectionality

Anti-racism/anti-oppression (AR/AO) discourse emerged within the women's movement in an effort to address issues of diversity, difference, and inclusion. Out of the AR/AO approach, an intersectional framework emerged, which requires a shift from a single identity perspective to an analysis on the assumption that an individual's experiences are based on multiple identities that may be linked to multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination.

Popularization of Feminism

In recent years, feminism has increasingly become popularized through social media memes and moments - such as #MeToo - and embraced by celebrities such as Beyoncé, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga and Emma Watson, not to mention Prime Minister Trudeau declaring himself a feminist.

Progress Slowed 2005-15

Progress around gender equality slowed over the period 2005-2015 in Canada. Women's equality was removed from the federal government agenda, along with poverty, housing and many other equality issues. Status of Women Canada's mandate changed to exclude gender equality and their budget was cut by 37%. More than 30 women's organizations, including national groups, lost 100% of their funding, National Aboriginal organizations, including women's organizations, were cut by over 40%, and some were eliminated completely. Settlement services for immigrants and refugees were significantly reduced. The planned national child care program was abandoned and related agreements with the provinces cancelled.

As noted in the United Nations Gender Inequality Index, "starting in 2005 Canada lost significant

ground in key areas of gender equality, dropping the country's overall global ranking by 13 places in 2008." Backlash from men's rights groups has sought to undermine women's equality. Right-wing talk shows - radio poubelle - regularly attack women, gender equality and various religious and cultural groups.

As of 2015, Canada slipped well down in international gender equality indexes: 18th on the UN Gender Equality Index, and 35th on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index.

Gender Equality Back on the Federal Agenda in 2015

The election of a new federal government in October 2015 initiated a new period in movement on gender equality. Federal policy from 2015 to the present has been characterized by adoption of an explicit Gender Equality policy approach including appointing a federal cabinet with gender parity, establishing a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, adopting a Feminist International Assistance Policy and a strategy on gender-based violence, and developing an early learning and childcare framework. The government also committed to gender-based analysis of federal budgets.

Key Priorities Today

What are the key areas to focus efforts to achieve gender equality over the coming years? **The interviews and surveys yielded a range of responses, but overall, three issues and one overarching approach - intersectional analysis - emerged consistently.** Addressing any issue, informants were clear that applying an intersectional lens is essential. The three current priority issues to ensure progress on gender equality identified in the research are:

- 1. Violence Against Women**
- 2. Poverty and Economic Security**
- 3. Indigenous Women**

1. Violence against women:

- Gender-based violence
- Sexual violence, including on campuses, sexual harassment and rape culture
- Intimate partner other domestic violence, including domestic violence in the workplace
- Missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls
- Violence against women with disabilities
- Cyber-violence

2. Poverty and Economic Security:

- Pay equity and the gender wage gap
- Employment equity and the wage gap
- Child care and women's access to the labour force
- Disparities for immigrant women, Indigenous and racialized women and women with disabilities

“The women's movement is not credible without a strong intersectional analysis. It needs to include everyone or it's not real.”

Bonnie Brayton
DisAbled Women's Network Canada
GENC Consultative Committee

- Decent jobs
- Precariousness of income and work
- Minimum wage
- Guaranteed Livable Income
- Migrant workers' rights

3. Indigenous women:

- Ongoing racialized violence - missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls
- The legacy and current context of colonization including major disparities in; income, housing, education, economic opportunities, social and health services.
- Intergenerational trauma, Residential schools and Truth and Reconciliation
- Interplay of poverty, housing, education and economic opportunities
- Importance of identity rooted in culture, language, responsibility to land and relationships amongst peoples
- Understandings and approaches to equality offered by the unique histories, experiences and identities of First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples
- Leadership of Indigenous women in addressing issues and in providing holistic, culturally-based responses.

Strategies for Change

The discussion of strategies is happening at two levels simultaneously. The women's movement has been fairly sophisticated about discerning effective strategies for incremental improvements. At the same time, there is concern that the big picture is not fundamentally changing and there's a lack of coherent strategies for addressing the underlying structural forces that drive inequality. Four major strategies for change used by women's organizations and partners in recent years emerged from the research:

1. Collaboration

2. Movements and Organizing

3. Advocacy

4. Legal Action

1. Collaboration: An essential tool, collaboration extends resources, builds momentum and stretches inadequate funding. It was particularly effective 2005-15 when promoting women's equality was not a federal government priority.

- Collaboration often requires new partners to learn about one another and understand the issues from different perspectives.
- Go beyond "the usual suspects" to engage with less typical partners, such as the legal system, police, the business sector, and faith communities.
- Build effective relationships with elected officials of all parties and lay the groundwork for a change of government.
- Inclusion and intersectional analysis are essential, both in the range of partners engaged and strategies for engaging them.

2. Movements and Organizing: Women have been highly effective in galvanizing social movements that have had a significant impact on public awareness and public policy debates:

- **Idle No More**, formed in Saskatchewan by three Indigenous women and one ally, quickly grew to be an international movement supporting Indigenous people.
- **#BlackLivesMatter**, started in the U.S. by three women, grew across America and into Canada. Highly effective organizing by Black Lives Matter Toronto led to a coroner's inquest into the police shooting of Andrew Loku and re-establishment of a provincial Anti-Racism Secretariat in Ontario.
- **Sisters in Spirit**, launched by the Native Women's Association of Canada in 2005 to raise awareness about violence against Indigenous women and girls, received widespread national support. With allied actions by other Indigenous women's groups, led directly to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.
- **Up for Debate**, supported by a coalition of 175 organizations and hosted by Oxfam Canada, pushed for a national leaders' debate on women in the 2015 federal election. Though it failed to secure a debate, it put gender equality on the election agenda, which was taken up by the Liberal party in the election and in government.
- **Equal Voice** convened "Daughters of the Vote" to inspire young women to participate in electoral politics, which brought one young woman from every federal riding in Canada to sit in Parliament on March 8, 2017.

3. Advocacy: Women's organizations have filed thousands of policy briefs with the federal government and its agencies providing the evidence for change.

- Accurate, credible information is key to an effective advocacy strategy. The women's movement has led development of evidence-based feminist methodologies - including the lived experience of women - through feminist research institutions across Canada.
- Make the economic case: Quantifying the economic costs of inequality - e.g. the costs of violence against women - can become a compelling policy argument for change.
- Integrating media and social media are complementary strategies to advocating with the government and create pressure for change.

4. Legal Action: Women's legal organizations and clinics have successfully used the court system to make change on issues from abortion to pay equity.

- Test cases in court can establish legal precedents - change the law or how it's implemented - leading to progress for many women.
- Formal complaint processes, such as human rights tribunals, can also lead to remedies that have a systemic impact.
- International law, such as human rights declarations and covenants Canada has signed - some of which are legally binding - are used to bolster our arguments for equality.
- Some organizations offer legal clinics to enable women to better understand and exercise their rights (e.g. in employment law or family law).



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