

Remarks to the PCW Manitoba  
Semi-Annual Meeting  
Winnipeg, November 17, 2007

I want to thank your president Maxine Balbon for the kind invitation to attend your semi-annual and for asking me to say a few words this evening. Although this is my first trip to Winnipeg and Manitoba, I feel very welcome and among friends as I already know so many of you. Mary Scott, Muriel Smith, and Bonnie Siemens are on the NCWC Board, Elizabeth Fleming and Beatrice Watson are convenors, and Arlene Draffin Jones is our Fundraising Chair. I have also had the pleasure of meeting PCWM president Maxine Balbon and LCW Winnipeg president Pat Powell at AGMs and I know others such as Dr. Mary Pankiw, who came to the Ukraine last September. Those of you whom I have not yet met, I hope to do so today.

NCWC will soon be celebrating its 115<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and I am here to tell you that we are more relevant and vital than ever, and more than that, we are needed more than ever.

For those of you who are not Council members, I just want to give you some general background. For its work during the past century, NCWC has been recognized by the federal government as being of national historic significance and a plaque has been erected in Allen Park in Toronto to this effect. We are comprised of 17 Local Councils such as Winnipeg's, 5 Provincial Councils such as PCW Manitoba, and nationally organized societies such as National Assoc. of Women and the Law, the Salvation Army, the YWCA, the VON, Action Canada for Population and Development, the Canadian Assoc. of Midwives, the Elizabeth Fry Societies, Canadian Council of Muslim Women, Hadassah-WIZO Org. of Canada, Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Ukrainian Women, and many more.

Internationally, we have been a member of the International Council of Women since 1897; we are also a member of the Organization of American States, and we hold Consultative Status (II) with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

Over 100 years ago, we were working to improve the lot of three underprivileged groups – female prisoners, female factory workers, and female immigrants, and our efforts helped to bring significant improvements such as the appointment of women patrons in prisons.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, we were lobbying for such public health measures as a safe water supply, pasteurized milk, and medical inspection in schools. Also during that time, we were trying to gain the vote for women, both provincially and federally.

NCWC members have played an active role in the formation of many vital Canadian institutions, including the Victorian Order of Nurses, Children's Aid Societies, and the Consumer's Association of Canada. Council also played key roles in the formation of the Women's Bureau of Labour Canada in 1954 and the Federal Bureau on Aging in 1978.

Throughout its history, Council has supported having women appointed to senior positions within government and the judicial system. It also supported the call for a Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1967 and the resulting formation of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

NCWC was active in having provisions against discrimination included in the Human Rights Act. The inclusion in the Act of equal pay for work of equal value was the culmination of Council lobbying on this subject, which began with a demand for equal pay for equal work which had been approved by members at the 1907 Annual General Meeting.

Responding to the variety of interests embraced by its affiliates, NCWC has often been a leader in presenting a wide range of information regarding developing issues to the government. From women's equality to children's rights, public health reforms to inner-city playgrounds, consumer protection to citizenship work, the concerns of the National Council of Women of Canada have been wide-ranging and its influence far reaching.

Several important issues arose this past year as Prime Minister Stephen Harper apparently forgot that he had signed onto CEDAW during the election. This is the UN Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, which is really a Human Rights Treaty for Women. Changing the mandate of SWC to exclude equality, closing 12 out of 16 federal SWC offices, abolishing the national childcare program, and failing to support the adoption of pay equity legislation are examples of arbitrary decisions taken by this government without consultation with those most affected by these actions.

This government then tried to tell us that there **is** gender equality in Canada - that we are equal – or **maybe it's just that they think we are "equal enough."** Well, "equal enough" is not Good Enough!

Statistics Canada, *Women in Canada: A Gender Based Statistical Report*, March 2006 stated that: As of 2004, 58% of all women over 15 were part of the paid workforce, accounting for 47% of workers. However, women are still not getting an even break, much less equal pay and equal treatment. On average, women still make about 72% of what men make. Women are more often forced to work part-time, as employers find this is more economical for them, and they do not have to pay benefits such as health and dental. In fact, according to the Canadian Labour Congress, women account for about 7 in 10 of all part-time

workers. Poverty affects almost half of single, widowed, or divorced women over 65 and more than 40% of unattached women under 65.

A Canadian Labour Congress Report also addressed the inequities in Employment Insurance as women, especially over forty, find it increasingly harder to qualify for benefits, and when they do, they receive benefits for a shorter period of time. Women, who account for most of the part-time workforce, again were disproportionately affected. Now 1 in 3 unemployed women qualify to collect EI benefits, down from 70% in 1990, and 4 in 10 unemployed workers qualify to collect EI benefits, down from 80% in 1990. Maternity benefits also fall under the EI umbrella, and therefore, many women such as those who are self-employed do not qualify. According to the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL), one in every three mothers cannot access maternity or parental benefits under EI.

One in four women is a victim of sexual violence. Cuts to social programs mean that funding for shelters is cut. Sex workers are particularly vulnerable to gender based violence.

Young aboriginal women often have no access to shelters in remote communities and are five times more likely to die from violence than other women. It is also a fact that a lack of housing is most crucial for women and children. A Canadian Press article by Bob Weber in Thursday's paper (Nov. 15) states that adequate housing is scarce all over the North and that Ottawa's decision to stop building social housing was a mistake. Ms. Fuller, director of the Yellowknife YWCA stated that it had a huge impact on Northern Canada and it's one they are still struggling with. The article also states that waiting lists in Nunavut for social housing routinely exceed 1,000 families, and with Canada's youngest population and highest birth rate, the territory would have to build 273 units a year just to keep up. Ms. Fuller also states that women have the hardest time because they don't have economic resources to fall back on. She also says that in Nunavut, which has Canada's highest rate of family violence, it is women who are often forced out of the homes they have shared with abusive partners.

**And if all this** were not enough to convince you that we **do not** have gender equality, every media outlet this week has carried the shocking story about a serious gender gap in ICU care in hospitals in Ontario. The reports state that older women receive less life support and die more often than men in intensive care. *"Among older patients, being female was associated with a 20 percent increased risk of death in ICU, an 8 percent increased risk of death in hospital, and a 6 percent increased risk of death over one year," reports a medical team that looked at almost 500,000 patients admitted to 13 Ontario hospitals over two years. The report, to be published in the Dec. 4 issue of the Canadian Medical Association Journal, is being held up as clear evidence of gender disparities in the quality and provision of health care.* The article I read said that *"the findings are just the latest evidence of gender related differences in Canada's health care.*

*Other studies have found women are not as likely as men to be admitted to hospital arriving at emergency departments with heart problems, are less likely than men to receive implantable cardiac defibrillators, and are at increased risk of receiving potentially inappropriate medications.”*

Access to justice has also become more problematic for women since the 1990s when much funding for legal aid was cut. A little over a year ago, the Conservative government cut the Court Challenges Program which effectively silences marginalized Canadians. Treasury Board president John Baird stated that it “did not make sense for the government to subsidize lawyers to challenge the government’s own laws in court.” Women continue to make up a disproportionate number of those marginalized Canadians. The Court Challenges Program enabled those citizens without resources, who believed that their rights had been legally infringed to challenge the law both federally and provincially. In 2004-05, the program handled 56 equality rights applications and 26 language-related cases that otherwise would never have been presented.

How will the government ensure that these citizens’ rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms are protected, if the only viable recourse to them has been eliminated?

The elimination of the Volunteer Canada Initiative by this government directly affects volunteer organizations. More than 12 million Canadians, the majority of whom are women, provide 2 billion hours of volunteer work annually. This decision was an attack on the public spirit which built Canada, including Canada’s political parties. This was considered a non-core program which did not “meet the priorities of the federal government or Canadians.”

This government has also cut services to immigrants and adult literacy programs in the department of Human Resources and Social Development, which hurts new citizens, in particular women, who often have difficulty accessing the support systems that will enable them to become part of the paid work force. This was another arbitrary decision taken in spite of requests from organizations to discuss the programs that immigrant and visible minority women, including Aboriginal women, need.

The March 2007 budget stated: “Many older Canadians want to continue working and saving.” The fact is that the majority of those “older” Canadians working minimum wage jobs are women who “need” to work because pensions (OAS and CPP) are woefully inadequate. There have been no change to eligibility rules for EI while the government has continued to amass huge surpluses. The government did put more money into Status of Women, however, this money cannot be accessed for research or advocacy purposes, but is not accessible to for-profit corporations. Qualifying projects appear to have been reduced to service delivery.

How can we address systemic inequalities for women when no provisions are made for research to determine the root causes and for advocacy to make the changes that would eliminate the need for “service delivery programs.”

The government now has a huge surplus, approx. 19 billion, of which they seem quite proud. However, I am not proud, I’m appalled – as it seems to me that much of this surplus has been accumulated at the expense of those in our society who need help the most: women, children, seniors, and Aboriginals. This government has an obscene surplus and a failing social safety net. That is not the kind of Canada I envision.

The National Council of Women has fought to improve the status of life for women and children for almost 115 years, and, as I stated at the beginning of my remarks, **we are needed more than ever**. We are a strong, independent, self-funded organization. We must, and we will, continue to advocate - with strength and with conviction – as we work:

- ❖ To end gender inequality.
- ❖ To give voice to those who have no voice.
- To elect women to all levels of government.
- To advocate on behalf of all women and children, families and communities, and the most vulnerable in our society.

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