



Urgent Resolution 2007
STATUS OF WOMEN CANADA FUNDING AND MANDATE CHANGES
Submitted by BPW London

WHEREAS women's groups have played a key role in supporting the Canadian government in implementing important law reforms such as maternity benefits, economic justice for wives, custody and access, criminalization for wife assault and given this type of positive reform also helped the government meet its commitment to its obligations to the United Nations human rights under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); and

WHEREAS on October 3rd, 2006 the Government of Canada removed the word "equality" from Status of Women Canada's (SWC) mandate which significantly changes the mandate and the goals of the agency; and

WHEREAS Women across Canada are concerned about the impact of a precedent setting trend to cut funding to organizations that might advocate or lobby for equality for women, as demonstrated in the recent cuts to the Status of Women program which will close 12 of the 16 offices across the country and drastically decrease the accessibility of customized community-based resources and research currently available to all women; and

WHEREAS the purpose of the office of the Status of Women has always been to advance women's economic and social equality and eliminate violence against women through a focused mandate that:

- a) Works with community groups to provide these organizations with much needed research including statistics and trends;
- b) Provides information to equality-seeking women's groups to allow them to stay current with key issues affecting women and make sure that politicians and policy makers are informed about these key issues; and
- c) Provides funds to assist women's organizations in preparing and presenting their concerns to government; and

WHEREAS it will be extremely difficult for the four remaining regional offices located across the country in Ottawa, Montreal, Moncton and Edmonton to equally serve those marginalized groups of rural women, aboriginal women and women with disabilities across the Ontario, Quebec, Atlantic Canada and the Western Provinces; and

WHEREAS cutting the previous budget by \$5 million is a devastating blow to the Status of Women Program by greatly hampering its ability to effectively assist equality-seeking women's groups continued support of informed politicians and policy makers, and will also negatively impact those organizations that rely on the Status of Women's research and support network to ensure proactive service delivery that continues to address the shifting demographics in communities and women's unique social, economic, and employment needs.



THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that BPW Canada urges the Government of Canada to acknowledge and recognize the critical role of women's' organizations within a strong and discerning research network across the country in supporting the governments efforts to implement positive reform and meeting its human rights obligations to the United Nations; and

FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that BPW Canada urges the Government of Canada to reinstate the original mandate and the funding budget for the Status of Women to the \$23 million previously allocated; and

FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that BPW Canada urges the Government of Canada to reopen all of the offices previously operating across Canada.

Implementation:

1. Write individual letters addressed to the Minister Responsible for Status of Women. Check the federal government website to make sure you have the correct person as their portfolios change. Remember a letter to a Minister or MP in Ottawa does not require postage.
2. Write a letter from your club president on behalf of all your members to the Minister Responsible for Status of Women.
3. Meet with local MPs and give them a copy of this Resolution. If you have more than one MP in your area, arrange to have your members meet them all. Ask them to support our position and pressure the government to fulfill our resolves.
4. A sample letter will be drafted and sent out for individuals and clubs to use or revise as they see fit.

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Background

Economic and social inequality has long been recognized as connected to the incidents of violence against women. Women will often stay in an abusive relationship because they cannot afford to provide housing and support for themselves and their children on their own. (Women continue to make 28% less than men and struggle to make ends meet). Because women earn significantly less than men, especially those in minimum wage, part-time jobs, their retirement pool is considerably less, leaving many senior women living below the poverty line.¹

Canada remains a full participant in its human rights obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and women have assisted the government in meeting these obligations by reminding them of the barriers hampering equality. For many women equality remains elusive as there are many significant issues to be addressed to fulfill the commitments under CEDAW, such as affordable childcare facilities, discrimination against Aboriginal women and immigrant women, and sufficient legal aid.²

The reforms made through the work of women have been of significant benefit to the improvement of the lives of both women and men across the country, such as maternity/paternity benefits, custody and access, amendment of the *Indian Act*.² Given these facts it is most disturbing that on October 3, 2006, the Government of Canada saw fit to remove the word "equality" from the Status of Women Canada's (SWC) mandate, significantly changing its goals and operations.

See below excerpts from the letter issued from National President, Fran Donaldson and 1st Vice President, Sue Calhoun, to Prime Minister Harper (December 4, 2006):

The Canadian Federation of Business & Professional Women's Clubs (BPW Canada) is dismayed with the announcement that Status of Women Canada will close 12 of its 16 regional offices across the country next April.

This move follows an announcement earlier this fall that the department's budget had been cut by \$5 million. This, despite Prime Minister Stephen Harper's statement during the January 2006 election campaign that "If elected, I will take concrete and immediate measures, as recommended by the United Nations, to ensure that Canada fully upholds its commitments to women in Canada."

BPW Canada is shocked with the Prime Minister's seeming change of heart, especially given that the closures will mean few women across Canada will then have access to or information about Status of Women programs.

In contrast, the United Nations High-Level Panel on System-Wide Cohesion in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and the Environment recently released a report, recommending that the UN create an independent women-specific agency at the UN to address issues of women's health, equality and security.

This recommendation followed lobbying efforts by Canadian Stephen Lewis, Special Envoy to the UN on HIV/AIDS, who has consistently argued that the UN has not fulfilled its mandate in addressing gender equality issues.

December 10, 2006 will mark the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), of which Canada was a signatory. CEDAW goals have yet to be met.

BPW Canada finds it curious that while international organizations are moving in one direction – towards greater equality for women in the world – the Canadian government is moving in the other – cutting budgets and closing offices that have promoted efforts towards gender equity.

Moreover, we are shocked that the Conservative government seems prepared to walk away from its international commitments, like CEDAW.

BPW Canada finds this situation totally unacceptable. Our national Board of Directors, along with our membership across the country, plans to work hard to put these issues on the agenda in the next federal election. The women of Canada deserve better.

¹Assessing Gender Equality Trends in the Situation of Women and Men in Canada, *Status of Women Canada, August 2005*.

²The History of Status of Women's Canada *Women's Program* and Why it Matters, *Status of Women Canada, September 2006*.

