

Barriers facing women

Prepared by the Canadian Federation of Students

1. Societal attitudes toward women. Society has definite ideas about the behaviour of men and women, and although these roles are changing, politics at the upper levels is still considered a "male" activity.

2. There is still the pervading notion that family life and public life are not compatible. This is not a problem for men, because women are at home to take care of the household. Men, however, do not generally consider taking on this role to enable a woman to become active in politics. This is a problem even for students on campus who wish to become active.

3. A lack of financial resources. Women make approximately 64% of what men make, and 60% of Canada's poor are women. Women who work in the home do not have large sources of income. Nor do women have an "old boys network" to tap for funds. Because society views politics as a largely male arena, men are more likely than woman to get a leave of absence from their jobs. Of course this is beginning to change.

4. Self perceptions and behaviour patterns. And finally, when we overcome all these barriers, we may face a lack of confidence in our own abilities, perceptions and opinions. Too often, it is harder to get heard as a woman, or an assumption is automatically made that we won't understand something. Too often also we believe that we actually don't have something to say which is as profound or as interesting

as the man sitting next to us. But probably every one of us has had the experience more that once of not saying something because we feel uncomfortable about talking; only to have someone else say it (and perhaps not as eloquently as we would have if only . . .). As well, we've probably all had the experience of saying something, maybe something important, but we get on response and yet not ten minutes later a man says the something in a different way and suddenly everybody is interested in this novel idea.

This is not to say that men don't experience such things. Of course they do. But women experience them much more often and possibly for different reasons than do men. As women move into areas that have been male domains for a long, long, time and those areas include students' union executives, we are constantly having to push ourselves to do things that many of us haven't assumed that we were going to be doing.

5. Twice the work. We also must work harder than our male counterparts. We take on not only the general issues of the Union, but we must also take on the "women's issues" of the Union. It is important to make women's issues everyone's issues, and have both men and women put time and effort into organising education and advocacy campaigns. This is not to say that we should stop calling them "women's issues". It is still necessary, while much of the public remains ignorant of women's oppression, to focus attention on women.

International Women's Day: some notes

Every year throughout the world women celebrate International Women's Day on or around March 8th. Steeped in a history of women's struggles for equality, it has come to symbolize women's efforts to shape a better world.

The origins of the day can be traced back to the early twentieth century when women in both North America and Europe were fighting for better working conditions, demanding the right to vote, and as the First World War escalated, calling for peace.

A strike of female garment workers in New York on March 8, 1857 and a second strike fifty years later by similar workers still labouring under poor working conditions in New York are often attributed as the events which gave rise to the observance of International Women's Day. Although it appears that these particular dates do not actually mark the beginning of strikes, they do reflect a period of significant labour unrest. The early twentieth century witnessed numerous strikes involving up to thousands of women in major centres such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Montreal.

On March 8, 1908, women's suffrage was discussed at a meeting of the New York City Social Democratic Women's Society. A year later on February 23, 1909, two thousand people in New York attended the first National Woman's Day. The event, sponsored by the American Socialists focused on women's rights and suffrage. By 1911, the day was also

celebrated in Europe. Louise Zietz and Clara Zetkin, two German women, had suggested at the International Socialist Women's Meeting in 1910, the designation of a day as International Women's Day.

The day was observed on various dates in both February and March throughout Europe and Russia as well as the United States in the following years. At an International Women's Day march in Switzerland in 1915, women focused their commitments on peace.

After a period of years in which the observance of the day was limited to countries such as Spain and China, International Women's Day was revived and revitalized in the late 1960's in North America. In 1977 a United Nations resolution was passed calling for countries to celebrate a day for women's rights and international peace. March 8th was not specifically designated in the resolution, but it has become the day observed in many countries. In New Brunswick International Women's Day has been observed by many women's groups and hundreds of women over the past number of years.

Although the origins of International Women's Day seem to be drawn from more than one event, the essence of the day has remained clear to women over the decades. As the need continues for a day to reflect on our progress and to consider future action, it is likely that International Women's Day will be celebrated for many years to come.

Principles of inclusion

by Wendy Robbins, RSP

There is another way, and some of us remember it. Daughters of Copper Woman

What has happened in Canada since the Meech Lake Discord, you ask? What is different in this round of proposed constitutional amendments?

While it is still too early to discern what shape the federal government's final proposals will take (the Dobbie-Beaudoin report, the aboriginal people's conference, and another first ministers' meeting are all pending), some preliminary results are already in from the five "little conference that could."

Here are some observations on the process of renewal from an RSP - a "randomly selected person." Originally we were told that some "ordinary Canadians" would be chosen randomly, but in such a way as to allow for regional representation. By the time of the fifth conference, it was clear that other demographic considerations had also been taken into account: participants included aboriginal people, francophones and anglophones, new Canadians representing the "multicultural" community, and people of differing abilities and sexual preferences. At the concluding conference in Vancouver, half of all delegates were women, leading Judge Rosalie Abella to remind us that there were, after all, "two founding genders." Did women and minorities make a difference?

1. Process

Meech Lake, your basic "white men in suits" deliberations, was, most would now admit, an embarrassing anachronism: patriarchal, competitive, secretive, exclusionary, and hierarchical. It focused on the freedom and distinctness of Quebec as one of only two founding nations. In the name of "justice," it was billed as the "Quebec Round."

This round, the "Canada Round," was broadly consultative; instead of first ministers conferring in an "old boys' network" hideaway, it was structured around five conferences, held from Halifax to Vancouver, involving about 1,000 people. For the most part these were not politicians or members of parliament, but representative of various organizations such as the National Action Committee, the Economic Council of Canada, the Ethnocultural Council, organized labour, and so on, as well as several hundred "ordinary citizens" from all the provinces and territories. It stressed connections, co-operation, community, compassion-in a nutshell (summing up with a new word my daughter recently taught me) - "heterarchy."

2. Principles of Inclusion

The 1992 conferences recognized the legitimacy of the claims of our

aboriginal peoples to be included amongst the founders of this country (post Elijah Harper and post Oka Crisis). Most of the conferees also wanted to find a place in a "Canada Clause" in the constitution to include reference to the contribution of newer Canadians whose roots lie in neither Aboriginal, French, nor British traditions, and who currently make up more than 40% of the population. In addition, Sheilagh Day and other feminists argued persuasively for a reformed Senate to have, amongst other things, proportional representation of women and men. So the "Canada Round" has at its centre a principle of inclusion rather than exclusion and an enlarged concept of what is fair.

3. Pragmatism

Why were the (male) politicians - right up to Joe Clark - so surprised by the success of these conferences? How was it that public opinion, which had seemed harsh and hopeless to the pundits five weeks ago, become open and positive. *Cherchez les fem(inistes)!*

A constitution is like a religious creed, a club pledge, or a family plan: what values do we endorse? What rules do we consent to abide by? What happens when there is a dispute over or a need for a change to the basic document? The draft report from the Vancouver conference defines a constitution as "a document that formalizes the legal relationship between the public and the state." Then it goes on: "More than a set of regulations, however, a constitution reflects the values, aspirations and opportunities of the people it protects. It must capture the essence of what binds people together while allowing room for their diversity."

Canada is enacting a potentially tragic drama: to be or not to be. Will we stay united as "one large family" or divorce/be divorced by Quebec and try to just "live together" on this continent as polite strangers?

A divorced woman myself, I have a great deal of sympathy for "la belle province," who has been treated like a second class citizen for a very long time, deprived of her separate identity, swallowed up and dominated by her multiple husbands, the English-speaking provinces. Like a modern woman, like Ibsen's Nora, she eventually discovered her duty to her "self" and her right to be treated with greater respect and dignity. She now wants her own bank account, as well as a joint one with her partners, and she doesn't want, in every area of her life, to be told what decisions to make. A self-confident Canada can work things out with a self-confident Quebec; an insecure Canada or an insecure Quebec cannot. As I see it, the division of powers between the federal and provincial governments, as between the federal gov-

ernment and our aboriginal peoples, both of which are still in need of articulation in very precise terms - extremely pragmatic issues - are the only major problems remaining in this series of discussions.

4. Fairness

The principle that fairness does not mean treating everyone the same - a principle that every parent of more than one child knows - is operative here. In fact, to treat different people with differing needs and abilities exactly the same is patently unjust (hence the concept of levelling the playing field for disadvantaged individuals or groups in "equity" hiring practices). Judy Rebick of the National Action Committee is being credited with coining the term "asymmetric federalism." (New emphasis, not new concept: the Yukon and Northwest Territories have been "asymmetrical" for a very long time, and so too has Atlantic Canada - we used to call it "regional disparity"). This, too, is good feminist praxis.

5. Product

The poetic new Canada Clause, proposed by the Writers Union of Canada, starts, not with God, but with the land: "Canada is the land, stretching from sea to sea . . ." and it includes four groups of Canadians: First Nations, French, British and newer Canadians. Instead of the dry document we have had in the past, which deals with sawlogs and woodchips but not social programs (such as health care insurance), we may well in the near future have a constitution which promises a social charter, which starts from the humble premise that Canada is the land and its diverse peoples, and which reminds us all that nation-states, however constituted and however large, are, after all, but a portion of the planet earth.

What does it all add up to? Inclusiveness, diversity, fairness (but not necessarily sameness), reform of all our institutions to accord with these principles, co-operation, communication, participation, and, let's hope, survival. The constitution of Canada is a document that could reorder our collective experience on some more important principle than power ratios, a principle that I hesitate, but only for a moment, to call love; it is a document that could change our life.

"It is time that humans began to think with their hearts." Lisa Graham, 1st year UNB student

- This word is not enough but it will have to do . . .
 . . . a finger-grip on a cliffside. You can hold on or let go.
 Margaret Atwood - "Variations on the word love"

