
Statement

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NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS BY
THE HONOURABLE SHEILA FINESTONE,
SECRETARY OF STATE
(STATUS OF WOMEN AND MULTICULTURALISM),
AT THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN

BEIJING, China
September 6, 1995



Government
of Canada

Gouvernement
du Canada

Canada

Madam President, Madam Secretary-General, honourable ministers, distinguished delegates:

It is my great privilege to be here today, representing Canada at this historic event.

Fifty years ago, at the founding of this organization, the nations of the world adopted a Charter affirming the equal rights of women and men. With this commitment, the United Nations pledged to end centuries of discrimination against women.

The 1995 United Nations Human Development Report calls the long walk toward our equality "the defining movement of the 20th Century."

Twenty years ago, at the United Nations' first World Conference on Women, an international effort was launched to fulfil the UN Charter commitment - the attainment of a global "culture of equality." Yet, in 1995 there is no country where women are completely equal - not in pay, nor in status, nor in opportunity or power.

And that, Madam President, is why we are here - to claim our equal rights.

The task ahead is both difficult and daunting. We have committed ourselves to adopting a global Platform for Action accelerating progress on equality for women worldwide.

There have been predictions that we may fail in our task. That differing perspectives over the rightful place of women in society will divide us. That a backlash against equality will hinder our ability to move forward, or to hold on to past gains. This must not happen. We must not fail.

In Canada, there was a time when the idea that women should vote was considered unthinkable. When the notion that women should attend university was unacceptable. When the possibility of a woman becoming a doctor or a judge was beyond reach.

Today almost no one would question the right of women to vote, pursue higher education, become a doctor or a judge. For now we know that equality benefits not only women, but all of society.

In Canada, as around the world, women have been a driving force in transforming the lives of women. Women have placed a high priority on this World Conference as an important milestone on the road to equality.

Three years ago, Canada embarked on its preparations for this conference. We did so in the spirit of inclusiveness and collaboration with women's organizations and the many sectors in Canadian society - human rights groups, academics, labour - who are partners in the movement toward equality. We provided

support to facilitate consultation and exchange of information among women's organizations. We established mechanisms to assist us in setting priorities and in addressing our areas of critical concern.

For while we are proud of our record on women's equality, we recognize there is still much to do.

As part of our contribution to this World Conference, the Government of Canada recently adopted a Plan for Gender Equality. The Plan acknowledges that discrimination against women has a cost. It sets out concrete measures aimed at eliminating gender discrimination. One of the key elements of the Plan is a gender-based approach to government policy development. This means that we will ensure that future legislation and policies include an analysis of the potential for different impacts on women and men.

Canadian Priorities

Madam President, let me set out Canada's priorities for the Platform for Action.

We must respect women's rights as human rights. They are the very foundation of this Platform. We must reaffirm the principle that the human rights of women and girls are a universal, inalienable, integral and indivisible part of human rights as adopted at the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights. Human rights are not a boutique to which you can go to pick and choose.

In my country, women's rights were enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* 10 years ago.

In every nation around the world, women face violence on the streets and, more often, within their own homes. In Canada, we have fought for the recognition that violence against women and girls is a violation of their human rights. We have taken action - strengthened laws, undertaken public education campaigns, built shelters. We have conducted the world's first national survey on violence against women.

Two years ago, the General Assembly adopted a Canadian-initiated Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. We must ensure that the Platform includes strong measures to implement and build on the Declaration.

We must empower women and expand their choices. We must respect and value the diversity of women. We must recognize that some women face additional barriers to equality because of their race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. Because they are refugees, migrant or displaced women, because of their age,

disability, family or socio-economic status, or because they are indigenous women.

Madam President, Canada has worked to ensure that the Platform for Action is based on an understanding that social and economic policies go hand in hand. This Platform must respond to the face of poverty that is increasingly female - a dire reflection of persistent economic inequality.

Worldwide, women's autonomy and control over economic resources are essential to their own and their families' survival - it is especially critical for their children.

Worldwide, we need protection of women's rights as workers and the promotion of equality in education, training, employment and other forms of work. We need policies that enable women to earn their livelihoods on an equal basis with men and to fulfil their family responsibilities.

We need better understanding of the relationship between paid work and the unpaid work that sustains our families, our institutions, our societies and economies.

We need to pay more attention to the impact of socio-economic factors on women's health. These include economic policies and structural adjustments.

Canada is committed to the agreements reached on women's reproductive health and rights at the International Conference on Population and Development. We will work to ensure that they are reaffirmed in the Platform for Action. Nothing less.

Women in Canada and around the world are deeply concerned about peace and security issues. The Platform must set out measures to enhance women's important role in peace and conflict resolution. War is not just a peace and security issue. It is a health issue.

Women and children often suffer disproportionately in situations of armed conflict. We must recognize and address this fact. Canada has introduced wording to the Platform related to rape as a war crime and a crime against humanity.

In our own country, we have adopted guidelines for establishing gender-based persecution as eligible grounds for women seeking refugee status. We have worked to reach agreement in the Platform on the recognition of sexual violence and other gender-related persecution as grounds for consideration for refugee status.

Consolidation of Gains

At recent world conferences and summits we, the member states of the United Nations, have made significant commitments affecting the lives of girls and women. We must reaffirm these commitments here in Beijing. We must act upon them.

Madam President, over the past 50 years Canada has been a firm and committed supporter of the United Nations. We shall continue to do so. Today, we are here to support the UN in its quest for a global plan for women's equality.

I am here to pledge Canada's unflagging commitment to work toward this goal in a spirit of co-operation and goodwill with all nations.

Thank you, Madam President.