

Province gets a “D” in women’s equality: report card results in near-failing grade

October 6, 2009 – British Columbia fares badly in the first annual West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund CEDAW Report Card, released today. This morning, the local women’s rights organization presented Premier Campbell and other Cabinet and opposition members with a Report Card based on international standards of gender equality.

The Report Card grades the BC government on how well it has adhered to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Two areas in the report – Access to Justice and Missing & Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls – were given a failing grade.

The Report Card uses statistics and trends in social policy to monitor BC’s compliance between CEDAW’s 4-year reporting periods, in order to hold the government accountable both to UN standards and BC women. Measurements include a number of important legal and policy areas, such as access to justice, violence against women, and social assistance.

The report card highlights Canada’s last-place showing in childcare provisions among developed countries, while highlighting lesser-known domestic policy changes such as the move away from a “pro-charge policy” in cases of domestic violence.

West Coast LEAF Legal Director Kasari Govender says, “The goal of the Report Card is to provide British Columbians with tangible targets – it tells the government where they are failing the women of this province as the eyes of the world begin turning to Vancouver in the months leading up to the Olympics.”

The report was compiled by West Coast LEAF with input from various community organizations. “We want to raise the province’s understanding of international standards and expectations,” says Executive Director Alison Brewin.

Canada's next report to the UN CEDAW Committee is due this fall.

Excerpts from the report:

* BC continues to have the highest overall poverty rate in the country at 21%*, which includes disproportionately high numbers of women, children and Aboriginal people. With the economic crisis resulting in 47% more recipients of social assistance between September 2008 and May 2009, the government needs to work harder on ensuring equal access to sufficient social assistance for women and marginalized people.

** The news release originally published included a statistical error, due to incorrect source material. The correct information is: "While recent statistics are difficult to ascertain, in 2006, BC*

continued to have the highest overall poverty rate in the country at 13%, which includes disproportionately high numbers of women, children and Aboriginal people."

* BC law prohibits judges from considering violence in relationships as relevant to custody and access decisions, and dual charging (of both spouses, despite possible indications that the male spouse was the primary aggressor) remains high.

* With the lack of core funding to reduce parent fees, raise staff wages and build new community-owned spaces, the state of childcare in this province undermines, rather than supports, women's economic empowerment.

* Despite an increase in demand for legal aid services, further reductions in service in 2009 have resulted in the following changes: the elimination of the family clinic in Vancouver; the elimination of almost all LSS staff lawyer positions in the lower mainland (38 in total); the elimination of dispute resolution referrals and the suspension of extended services in family law cases."

* Private family law services are out of range of many women: for instance, while the average two day civil trial in BC cost \$38,130.00 in 2008, a female lone parent family earns an average of \$37,700 per year in BC (compared to a male lone parent family that earns \$55,300).

West Coast LEAF's mission is to achieve equality by changing historic patterns of systemic discrimination against women through BC-based equality rights litigation, law reform and public legal education.

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