

Media Release

For immediate release

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When will women have access to justice in British Columbia? Even the United Nations is concerned

January 14, 2009 – West Coast LEAF is extremely concerned about further cuts to family law legal aid announced yesterday by the Legal Services Society. In the publication *Legal Aid Denied*, West Coast LEAF documented the inequality women have faced in family law because of past legal aid cuts.

In November 2008, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women stated in a report, “The Committee is concerned at reports that financial support for civil legal aid has diminished and that access to it has become increasingly restricted, in particular in British Columbia, consequently denying low-income women access to legal representation and legal services.”

“This news is devastating. Our family law system is in crisis and the demand for help is higher than ever – this is not a solution from the Legal Services Society.” Alison Brewin, author of *Legal Aid Denied* and Executive Director of West Coast LEAF, says. “We’re disappointed that the government has failed to respond to the UN committee’s report, and in fact has made the situation worse.”

Imagine this:

- a woman is dropping her children off for an access visit with her ex-spouse;
- the woman sees he is drunk and has two choices: leave her children, or take them home;
- earning \$40,000 a year, she is ineligible for legal aid and can’t afford a lawyer, so she tries to call the LAWLINE for legal advice, but with only two lawyers on staff, the wait is at minimum four hours;
- she takes the kids home again;
- the husband, who earns \$75,000 per year, has a private lawyer who argues for and gets full custody of the kids on the basis that the wife is refusing him access

This is the kind of scenario that advocates and family service providers around the province have been witnessing since the first round of Legal Services cuts. The newly announced cuts to legal aid not only compromise and deny access to justice for women, but they threaten the Constitutional values of equality enshrined under our *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

“Equality rights, the rule of law and international treaty obligations oblige those responsible for the administration of justice to stem this flow,” continues Brewin.

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

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