

West Coast LEAF News Alert October 9, 2009



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.

* 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).

Selected quotes:

Kathy Corrigan, MLA for Burnaby-Deer Lake, from the Hansard, October 6th: "This report, which is generated by West Coast LEAF, a highly respected organization, lays the blame at the feet of this government. Just this year the Family Law Clinic was axed, dispute resolution referrals eliminated, extended services for family law cases suspended and the Legal Services Society gutted."

Michelle Mungall, MLA for Nelson-Creston, in The Tyee: "I think the entire report is very indicative of how this government has prioritized women's equality in the last eight years. We could obviously be doing better. The highest score was a 'C'."

Reader commenting in The Tyee: "Smart activists always delve into specifics, as West Coast LEAF has done here, looking at how and why BC legislation is consistently having a negative on women. Forest workers, largely male, fisheries workers, too, have faced many crises that warranted specific attention to their experience, and how policies and laws have impacted on them, for example. Other groups, such as recent immigrants may have other specific needs too. Homeless people, of course. Drawing out this information about how law, policy and prejudice affects these people is reasonable and useful, not an attack on anyone else. Great article. And great campaign LEAF!"

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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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