

Women's Fund closure reduces sustainability for women's groups

West Coast LEAF saddened by closure of national women's fund

March 2008 – West Coast LEAF, the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund, is saddened by the spring closure of the Women's Future Fund. Over the past decade, the Women's Future Fund provided support and operational sustainability for Canadian women's organizations. Its closure leaves a gap in meaningful and practical economic support for advocacy groups such as the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) and the national body of LEAF.

In 2006 the mandate of the federal Status of Women agency was changed to eliminate advocacy and lobbying on behalf of women. Under the revised mandate, many women's groups were no longer eligible for funding, including the Women's Future Fund. Attempts to secure other sources of continuing funding were unsuccessful, and this month the group has announced that it is winding down operations and will close its door in the spring. This follows the 2006 elimination of twelve regional Status of Women offices as part of the same revised mandate, and last year's closure of the National Association of Women and the Law. The closure of the Status of Women office in BC represents a loss of access to research and policy analysis in a major western centre, and the loss of NAWL means there are fewer groups focused on the protection of *Charter*-enshrined equality provisions for women.

Similar to the United Way, the Women's Future Fund was the first and only national women's fundraising federation in Canada, and provided a convenient and cost-effective means for Canadians to support a diversity of organizations contributing to a better quality of life for all women and girls. For almost 10 years, the WFF aimed to expand Canadians' support for women's equality, raising money primarily through a unique workplace giving mechanism, and disbursing it to a diverse range of national women's organizations. The groups grew from three participating workplaces in 2000 to over 30 by 2006. Until 2006, 100% of funds raised were distributed to member organizations, for a total of over \$200,000. The Women's Future Fund was also able to significantly raise awareness of the issue of gender inequality.

Ironically, there is now an even greater need for an independent financial resource for women's groups. With the elimination of the advocacy mandate from Status of Women Canada, and the loss of the Women's Future Fund, we no longer have an arms-length funding body independent of government policy and political mandates. Financial independence is an often-overlooked necessity for creating and sustaining change. The Women's Future Fund was unique in dedicating itself to supporting and enabling that change.

West Coast LEAF Board of Directors Vice-President External Karey Brooks says, "In order for women's groups to work independently and successfully, we must have access to funds that are not tied to ever-changing political mandates. Sustainability is essential to our work because it often takes many years to effect change and we need to have the financial security to do so. West Coast LEAF, like many social service and equality-seeking groups, often receives project funding from government and private funding agencies. These funds are almost always tied to specific projects based on current priorities and mandates and do not support the overall operations of the organization. A group like the Women's Future Fund that directly provides funds for core organizational capacity is a rare and unique example of belief in equality rights and advocacy being expressed in a direct, key manner with a real impact."

The quiet closure of WFF and NAWL is part of a current trend of government reducing support for women's rights under the false assertion that women's equality has already been achieved, and no longer requires attention or funding. The current federal budget has been criticized for not being friendly towards women, and BC in particular has been criticized for lack of funding for women's issues. In Vancouver, both PEERS (Prostitutes Empowerment Education Resource Society) and PACE (Prostitution Alternatives Counseling and Education Society) lost funding within the last year.

The WFF will maintain an office until operations are wrapped up in the spring. They encourage supporters to continue supporting gender equality in Canada and redirect their donations to one or more of their past member organizations, listed at www.womensfuturefund.com.

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West Coast LEAF (Legal Education and Action Fund for women), a registered charity, was founded in 1985 to advance women's equality in BC and Canada. LEAF and West Coast LEAF founders had a vision: that Canadian law would one day reflect full equality for women. As a non-profit organization, West Coast LEAF relies on support from donors to carry out its programs. Women in British Columbia and across Canada benefit from our advances in law and success in the courts.