

A long way, baby, but ...: Feminists should be angry at tardy progress on social equality, but there is much to celebrate on International Women's Day [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

INTERNATIONAL Women's Day. But what is there to celebrate?

More cuts in government funding. Mothers and children living in poverty, depending on food banks. After years of promises of decent childcare and maternity leave, we still trail far behind what European women have taken for granted for decades.

A few women have cracked the glass ceiling into big corner offices but many more are clustered in middle management completely out of the pipeline to the top.

Our House of Commons seems stuck at 21 per cent women.

Most of Europe with its system of proportional representation in voting regularly returns from 33 per cent to 45 per cent women to its parliaments.

When Toronto MP Carolyn Bennett, head of the Liberal Women's Caucus, expressed some disappointment in a drop in the number of women appointed to the cabinet, our Prime Minister threw a tizzy fit.

Should we be angry? Yes. Should we be discouraged? No.

When my grandmother was a girl, women had all the rights and privileges of children with no control over their own money and little say over what happened to their own offspring.

When I was a teenager, one of my women teachers who had fought to win the vote for Canadian women, earnestly told us we would live to see Canada's first woman prime minister.

The boys guffawed. Even a few girls tittered in disbelief.

All around us women teachers outnumbered men many times over, but all principals and vice-principals were men. All doctors, lawyers, in fact, almost anyone in authority was a man.

And the word "feminist" never passed our lips.

In my thirties I was told, because I was getting married, I couldn't have a job for which I had worked hard. Although I'd been paying my own bills for over a decade, suddenly as a married woman, my husband had to sign my credit card. Social workers could be jailed for giving out information on birth control.

You couldn't get a legal abortion even if your life was endangered. And a woman could be paid half as much as the man working besides her doing exactly the same job.

All of these conditions were considered quite natural and proper.

And all but a few women shuddered at the idea of being labelled "a feminist."

When I was 50, people thought a Royal Commission on the status of women absurd.

The government gave it so little importance, only 25,000 copies were printed, which sold out immediately and it became an all-time best seller.

At Chatelaine magazine I was regularly getting letters that began "I'm not a feminist, but..." and the writer would go on to complain about something that irked her Progress.

When I was almost 60 and at the Advisory Council for Women in Ottawa, a conference we had planned to discuss what effect the new

Charter of Rights would have on women, was arbitrarily cancelled by a cabinet minister.

Defiantly women held their own conference and got a whole new equality clause for women in the Charter.

U.S. women have been fighting for a similar change in their constitution for over 80 years, without success.

A triumph.

Today some women still shun the "f" word. They like to say we're in a post-feminist mode, as they march off in power suits, briefcases in hand, cell phones glued to their ears, just like men.

Is this what we worked for? To be just like men?

Men tend to look for new technological solutions for problems.

And when they dream of an ideal society, they tend to hark back to some nostalgic past when men were men, and women were in the kitchen or the nursery.

When women dream, they envision a whole new world.

Cautious about technological solutions and bottom line measurements of success, we see a world where people, the environment and the planet itself will be looked after a whole lot better.

And as we march on International Women's Day, with more and more men right beside us, we hope, as we always have, to change the world.

The immediate prospect has always looked steep, strewn with boulders, nearly impossible.

But when we turn to look at the vistas we've passed, our current difficulty looks like just one rockier hill.

And the view behind us?

Breath-taking!

Today some women still shun the "f" word. They like to say we're in a post-feminist mode, as they march off in power suits, briefcases in hand, cell phones glued to their ears, just like men. Is this what we worked for? To be just like men?

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