

Jack Layton: There is suffering in our own backyard ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Stephen Harper's recent announcement that Canada will be making maternal and child health a top priority at June's G8 meeting makes him a welcome latecomer to the issue.

While other countries have been delivering full-fledged support for maternal and child health since 2007, pledging \$5.3-billion dollars to the cause last year alone, Canada has been virtually invisible on the issue. Rather than marking a new approach of principled humanitarianism, this announcement highlights years of Canadian inaction on the health of women and children under Mr. Harper's watch.

Nevertheless, my colleagues in the NDP and I gladly accept this overdue commitment. But we also question why it is only women and children in the developing world that will benefit from Mr. Harper's new-found interest in gender, poverty and health.

Notwithstanding this new international commitment, the Conservative government has worked tirelessly since its election to remove gender equality from domestic programs. It has done everything in its power to stop women's organizations from conducting research and advocacy on inequality, despite the fact that poverty most often wears a woman's face in our country. It has steadfastly refused to launch an inquiry into the disappearances and deaths of more than 520 aboriginal women and girls, though that is most certainly a health issue as well.

...

Mr. Harper acknowledges that the solutions to maternal and child health problems are "not intrinsically expensive." This holds true for Canadian women and children as well: Providing safe drinking water on reserves, addressing the affordable housing crisis, and funding organizations that support women and children are all relatively inexpensive compared to the health and social costs of poverty in Canada, which are estimated at more than \$20-billion per year.

Despite these realities, we have made staggeringly little progress on poverty reduction for women and children since the unanimous passage of the 1989 New Democrat resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. Aboriginal women and children are especially left out of our government's priorities, with one in four First Nations children growing up in poverty.

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The 2009 budget was an affront to women and children living in poverty. It included no improved child benefit, no spending on childcare, no plan for affordable housing, no funding to tackle violence against women and no expanded access to EI for non-traditional workers. Mr. Harper's pronouncements that his next budget will be an exercise in belt-tightening suggest that the most excluded will be put last as families across the country struggle to stay afloat during these difficult economic times.

While this new commitment to make maternal and child health a top priority is a welcome change from Mr. Harper's usual stance, it is simply not enough make it on the international stage alone.

Canada's most marginalized deserve, and demand, more.

- reprinted from the National Post

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