

# Feminism's many successes don't mean the job is yet done <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Rebick, Judy

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## EXCERPTS

At a moment in history when "people power" is more in the news than in decades, it is appropriate that we are celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the International Women's Day (IWD): The women's movement has been the most important and successful people's movement of the 20th Century.

The women who marched in the first International Women's Day marches held 100 years ago in Europe -- demanding the right to vote and hold office, better pay, training and an end to discrimination -- couldn't have imagined the revolution in the status of women that has occurred in the century that followed. In 1911, most women workers were domestics or textile workers who worked in terrible conditions for meager pay. Once they married or got pregnant, they were fired. They couldn't vote, and had no legal status independent of their fathers or husbands. Only upper-class women had any access to education at all.

That first wave of feminists won the right to vote by the end of the First World War. But it would take two more generations before significant progress was made in eliminating other forms of discrimination. When I attended McGill University in the late 1960s, only 30% of the undergraduates were women, and almost no professors or graduate students were female. Abortion and information about birth control were illegal. Women were paid less than men for doing exactly the same job, and made about 60% of men's wages. And there was only one woman in Parliament.

I was part of the generation of women who fought on multiple fronts for what we called, at the time, "women's liberation." Between 1970 and 1990 in Canada, we won inclusion of legal equality for women in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, banned employment discrimination against all women (including pregnant women), won pay and employment equity laws, legal abortion, rights for Indian women, a stronger rape law and a divorce law that more fairly established property division. We established a network of women's services across the country, including rape-crisis centres, women's shelters and a huge expansion of child-care centres; and perhaps most importantly, liberated women's consciousness so that young women today believe that they can do anything. Most men now believe in gender equality (even if they don't always practice it).

But economic inequality continues, with women earning 80% of men's wages despite being, on average, better educated. The gap is even larger for Aboriginal women and women of colour.

But inequality within the home is an even greater problem. In Canada, men perform an average of 2.5 hours of unpaid daily work at home, while women do an average of 4.3 hours. So while women now account for 50% of the paid work force, we are still doing almost twice as much work in the home. Many younger men are putting more of their time and energy into parenting today, but it is still women who take the primary responsibility for children.

In Scandinavia, by contrast, gender equality is a higher priority: Men are doing more in the home and women are more equal in the workplace. When the Swedish government saw that men weren't taking their fair share of time off work to care for newborn children, the government developed a daddy-leave program: If the dad doesn't take off the allotted time, the family loses out on the income. Almost overnight, more than 85% of men took time off work to bond with their children. When governments are committed to equality, they find public-policy ways to promote it.

Governments in Canada over the last 15 years mostly have done the opposite. The last Liberal government promised a national child-care program. It would have been much less than we needed, but Stephen Harper's Conservatives ditched it anyway. Since Harper has been in power, Canada's record on women's equality has tumbled. In 2009, we ranked a disgraceful 73rd in the UN Gender Disparity Index. This is not only because of the Prime Minister's marginalization of feminist groups, but also because of the economic policies of both Liberals and Conservatives, which have massively increased the gap between rich and poor. Most of the country's poor are women and children. They are thus the ones who bear the brunt of cuts to social spending. They also suffer most when the public sector is trimmed, since that is where most well-paid jobs for women are located.

International Women's Day is a celebration of what women have achieved, most of it is because of the efforts of ordinary women organizers and activists. A new generation of feminists are part of every movement for change around the world, from people's power in Egypt to green power in North America. My hope is that a new women's movement will emerge as part of these people's movements and find its own ways to achieve the next wave of equality that will benefit everyone.

- reprinted from the National Post

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

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