

Women's rights have declined under Harper - researcher ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Women's rights have suffered under Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government, a trend that will continue unless Canadians raise their voices in protest, says a researcher from the University of Regina.

Jill Arkles made the argument in Fredericton on Tuesday as part of a presentation she made at the 2011 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

The event is being held in Fredericton this week and is hosted by the University of New Brunswick and St. Thomas University.

A small crowd gathered in a lecture theatre at Gillin Hall on the UNB campus to listen to Arkles present findings from *The War On Women: Gender-Based Citizenship Rights and the Conservative Party of Canada*.

It's a study she's completed that examines the Harper-led Conservative government's performance on issues such as pay equity, access to childcare, the protection of reproductive rights, employment structures and how the past few federal budgets have affected women's programs from coast to coast.

It outlines the government's failure to improve the lives of indigenous Canadian women.

She said she studied policy documents, party platforms, media reports, social studies and reports from non-governmental organizations to flesh out what has happened since Harper has taken office.

Arkles said her research suggests that negative changes to women's programming may be compounded by the relationships those programs share with other societal resources.

"All of these issues were really interconnected and overlapping. Often one area precipitated into other areas, so the rolling back of pay equity had implications for the employment structures we have in Canada, as well as the ability for women to access childcare," she said.

"When looking at the whole picture, it's easy to see that women's rights have been rolled back and their ability to access citizenship, both as a right and a practice, has been restricted. In some areas, this loss of rights was really done incrementally over time. In other areas, the loss (occurred) by stealth and it was very substantial."

She cited Harper's decision to cut funding to women's advocacy groups as an example of a significant blow.

"One of the greatest losses since the Conservative party formed government has been the loss of funding for the (Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada), specifically in the areas of research and advocacy," she said.

"This really has implications for the ability of women, both as communities and individuals, to act as an agency within our society. We know that many of the organizations that were previously funded under the status of women commission had fundamental disagreements with Conservative party policy and thus it represents a silencing of this voice and all these organizations."

Arkles said it's time for women to use their voices to change policy.

"We can be critical of legislation and public policy," she said.

"I tell people that we can write letters to our MPs. I do it all the time. I never really get a substantive response, but I do it all the time. I think we have to make sure we hold our elected officials to account. So we need to be asking questions and getting involved, although Harper does have a five-question rule. So it's going to be tough."

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- reprinted from the Daily Gleaner

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