

Abolishing the long form census muzzles women's organizations

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Solid data forms the basis for developing and implementing policies.

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EXCERPTS

"Depriving organizations of reliable data that allows them to support their arguments is the same as muzzling," said a witness who appeared before the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women. And that, in a nutshell, is why the Harper government abolished the long-form Census questionnaire, I think.

The Standing Committee was also told by the Fédération des professeurs du Québec that cancelling the mandatory long-form Census would: "condemn women to see, hear and say nothing about themselves." Holding solid data - including different results for each sex - led to the implementation of policies and programs designed to fight gender inequality. "Without data from the census, groups will have difficulty making their points and women's ongoing inequality will become invisible," said St Mary's University economist Martha MacDonald.

What will be lost with a voluntary program is the reliability of the data and the ability to compare changes (positive and negative changes) over the years. "Unreliable" data "will shift the debate from the underlying issues to whether the data can be trusted for this purpose", as said Ivan Fellegi, a former Chief Statistician of Canada.

Now, isn't that convenient for those who don't want to deal with these issues?

The Chairperson of the defunded New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women recently listed what information could no longer be provided in its bi-annual Status Report on Women in New Brunswick, if the long-form data were not available. Here are but a few examples:

- The level of schooling of First Nations, handicapped, Francophone and Anglophone women;
- The hours of unpaid work by sex; and
- The labour market participation and average earnings of First Nations, immigrant and other persons.

It almost seems as if Conservative governments - both federal and provincial - have "muzzling women and women's equality groups" high on their to-do list.

The consequences of abolishing of the Census long-form questionnaire will impact more than women's equality rights, but that movement will be particularly affected.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women recommended that the government reinstate the mandatory long-form Census in 2011. You must have noticed when you completed the Census form earlier this month; the mandatory completion of the long form was not reinstated.

The outcry that started last summer when the Harper government's decision regarding the long-form Census became known - the government didn't announce it, exactly - was phenomenal. Even today, this silly decision is brought up in conferences and in ordinary conversations by people who feel a loss, a loss of information and a loss of some of the sparkle of our proud institution known as Statistics Canada.

The reaction was strong because in Canada, we trust Statistics Canada to provide us with reliable data about ourselves. We like our data and we like our Census. That is not true in every country.

Municipalities and business groups have joined women's and other community groups to ask the government to reinstate the mandatory long form. The sorry reason that the government gave was that someone had - or someone might eventually, it was not made clear - complain about the invasion of their privacy. Meanwhile thousands of Canadians were saying: "But we want you to ask us these questions."

The other line that the Harper government crossed - and Canadians instinctively knew it - was to get involved in the technical side of statistics gathering. A government must, of course, have the authority to determine the content of a census. But then it must stay out of how that information is gathered, which is the business of professional statisticians.

Involving politics will only throw suspicion on the data, at home and abroad. Recently, the European Union Statistical Advisory Board decried the Canadian government as "undermining" the independence of Statistics Canada.

The federal government has said - and tried to force the head of Statistics Canada to say - that conducting a voluntary survey instead of using a long-form Census would provide the same level of information. As Munir Sheikh, the Chief Statistician of Canada, wrote in a great open letter after he left his job over this issue: "... To the question of whether a voluntary survey can become a substitute for a mandatory census. It can not."

Experts state and non-experts feel intuitively that data from a voluntary survey will produce less reliable data, and will especially under-represent vulnerable groups - female, low-income, lone parent, Aboriginal and immigrants. A self-selected sample will not produce the reliable data needed to conduct proper gender-based analysis of programs and policies.

Census changes also involved another major loss for women. Questions that tabulate unpaid activities are no longer included. This is more than a loss; it is an insult to the traditionally female work done at home.

Questions on unpaid activities have been included in the Census since 1996, and are crucial to getting recognition for housework and unpaid care provided to children and seniors. These data allows government to plan what services and policies are needed. The Standing Committee heard about why those questions were inserted into the Census - the information assisted communities to plan the services needed that pertain to child care and elder care.

I guess that reliable data are no longer needed in Canada. Too bad! Using evidence to make decisions makes sense to me.

- reprinted from Straight Goods

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