

Canada tops for women, ranked 20th for UN gender inequality: survey. Others say different. ^[1]

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Source: Vancouver Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 13 Jun 2012

EXCERPTS:

A new survey suggests Canada's reputation for women's equality shines brightly in the global gender equity community, but scholars at home argue the glow quickly fades in the shadow of cold, hard facts.

Figures from Statistics Canada, the United Nations and the World Economic Forum challenge the country's image as a leader in championing women's rights, they said.

That image was reinforced Wednesday in a study released by TrustLaw, a legal news service run by Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The organization surveyed 370 gender equity specialists around the world, including aid workers, policy-makers and journalists. Participants were asked to outline their perceptions of how the G20 countries treated women residing within their borders. The European Union, which is officially listed as a single G20 nation, was not included in the survey.

TrustLaw said survey participants had the rosiest perceptions of Canada's gender equity record when considering issues as diverse as quality of health care, political participation, freedom from violence and trafficking, workplace opportunities and access to resources such as education.

Germany, the U.K., Australia and France rounded out the top five, with India placing last on the list.

The report singled Canada out for placing a high priority on education, offering universally affordable health care and upholding laws that forbid acts such as child marriage.

Canada's gender equity scholars, however, say the issue is much more complex.

"The perceptions abroad are probably based very heavily on Canada's prior leadership on gender equality issues," said Queen's University professor Kathleen Lahey.

"Between 1995 and 1999 ... Canada genuinely was at that time in the forefront of promoting, and indeed increasing, women's equality. But the other reality is that that perception has lingered long past its sell-by date."

Lahey said the decline began around the time Canada's reputation was reaching its zenith, as the Liberal government at the time began enacting budget cuts to curtail a national deficit. Under the current Conservative regime, Lahey said the decline has accelerated.

Significant budget cuts to Status of Women Canada forced the closure of 12 out of 16 national offices, according to the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.

Further cuts in the 2012 federal budget shuttered initiatives such as the Women's Health Contribution Program, while legislation such as the National Childcare Benefit does little to improve life for the country's mothers, it argued.

Minister for the Status of Women Rona Ambrose said the survey's findings are a testament to Canada's strong record on women's rights.

"These 63 global experts from five continents recognize that our efforts to promote gender equality, to safeguard women and girls against violence and exploitation and to ensure their access to health care are what make Canada a great country for women," Ambrose told the House of Commons.

"Women in Canada can count on our government to continue our efforts in that respect. We have increased funding for women to its highest level ever, funding over 500 projects now to end violence against women across Canada.

Lahey said statistics based on research from international organizations, however, paint a clearer picture of Canada's gender equity status.

The United Nations annual Gender Inequality Index placed Canada 20th last year on a list it used to top, while the World Economic Forum handed out a ranking of 18 in its 2011 Gender Gap Index.

Figures from the country's statistical agency also signal problems, Lahey said.

Statistics Canada data shows Canadian women make 68.3 per cent of what their equally educated male counterparts earn, down almost a

full percentage point from the 69.2 recorded in 1990.

On Tuesday, an Ontario divisional court ruling stipulated that it's legal for women to make less money than men doing the same work so long as the earnings balance out at the top of the pay scale.

Judith Taylor, associate professor of women's studies at the University of Toronto, agrees that Canada's international reputation for gender equity is overly rosy.

The decline that's taken place, however, isn't enough to change the country's status as a relative haven for women around the world, she said.

Canada has proven able to juggle the needs of diverse female populations, including a significant influx of immigrants, she said. Countries with more restrictive immigration policies, she said, can't be measured to the same standard.

"Countries have to be judged by the responsibilities they take on," Taylor said. "For instance Germany, because it accepts fewer immigrants, it's not dealing with as much on-the-ground inequality as Canada is."

-reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: gender ^[3]

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