

# Regress trumps progress: Canadian women, feminism and the Harper government <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Full report in pdf <sup>[2]</sup>

### Excerpts:

- Canadian women and organized feminism achieved measurable gains under a series of Liberal federal governments from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s.
- Women's groups, particularly in English Canada, pushed back against core policies championed by Progressive Conservative majorities in the years 1984-1993.
- Conservative minority governments since 2006 have moved crucial equality markers backward, but in a deliberately under-the-radar manner.
- This erosion is likely to continue, even with a social democratic Official Opposition for the first time in Canadian history.

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Jurisdictional decentralization in Canada limits federal control in most policy domains. With approximately 90 percent of adults working in sectors governed by provincial or territorial labour laws, and with sub-national governments largely responsible for health care delivery, retrenchment is harder to achieve in these fields than in a more centralized system. Moreover, the federal election of May 2011 brought a numerically strong New Democratic Party Official Opposition to Ottawa, one with more than 40 percent women in its ranks. Since the 1970s, the NDP has stood out from other federal parties for its willingness to enforce formal affirmative action policies that promote women candidates in winnable seats; furthermore, the party has consistently adopted pro-feminist positions on equal pay, childcare, electoral reform and other issues.

Statistics Canada data from 2009 showed more than 8 million or close to 60 percent of adult women in Canada worked for pay, twice the number employed in 1976. Over time, rates of female unionization and selfemployment have risen, the latter reaching nearly 36 percent by 2009. Levels of educational attainment also increased markedly such that by 2007, women constituted more than 60 percent of Canadian university graduates, including in the life and physical sciences.

This promising background does not alter the stark reality that the 2011 federal election brought to power an antiequality majority government, however. Harper's track record of implementing regressive changes will probably continue now that his party controls both houses of parliament,

thanks in part to a loyal base of social conservatives who bolted from the Mulroney organization of the 1990s to form the Reform, Alliance and then merged Conservative parties. Moreover, the arrival of similar right-wing governments at the provincial level in Canada, widely predicted to occur in upcoming elections, combined with the presence of traditionalist mayors in major cities, including Toronto and Winnipeg, could produce parallel erosion at those levels.

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In more general terms, efforts by successive federal governments to lower taxes, cut spending and offload social policy responsibility have created growing burdens for families. Research shows that over time, more Canadian women have had to informally care for a chronically ill senior, often an aging parent, such that by 2007 close to one-quarter of the female population over age 45 shouldered this work. At a rhetorical level, Conservative discourse consistently condemns »judicial activism,« a code word for pro-equality jurisprudence by appointed judges. It speaks of building up Canada's military capabilities by purchasing new fighter jets and defending Arctic sovereignty, thus ignoring »soft power« international strategies that would enhance the lives of women. Policy toward Canada's Aboriginal peoples was regularly framed in terms of deadlines for concluding formal agreements with primarily male band leaders, rather than addressing violence against Aboriginal women both on- and off-reserve.

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** gender <sup>[4]</sup>

federal programs <sup>[5]</sup>

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