

11 ways the Conservatives have failed Canadian women ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Recently during a meeting with colleagues, the conversation morphed into a discussion about the pros and cons of self-identifying as a feminist.

For some, the word feminist conjures up images of angry women from the 1960s burning their bras. It can also bring to mind misguided notions that all feminists hate men, or they're spinsters who couldn't find a husband, or they're women who want more than their fair share at the expense of men's rights. These ideas couldn't be further from the truth.

Feminism is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. A feminist is any person, male or female, who supports feminism. Simply put, feminists are women and men who support equality and believe that women's rights are human rights.

Because the word feminist continues to be controversial and strike fear in the hearts of some Canadians, perhaps a new and improved term is needed. Something inclusive that acknowledges everyone working to eradicate systemic prejudice against women. I thought we could call ourselves PAM or People Against Misogyny.

I also thought that working together on a project like making women's issues an integral part of the federal election could bring members of PAM closer together.

The International Women's Rights Project created the Voters Guide on Women's Issues – Election 2015. This guide lays out the NDP, Liberal and Conservative parties' stances on the issues that affect women across the country. The guide also provides a comprehensive list of questions to ask candidates. What the guide does not include is information about the Green Party.

I've created a synopsis of the guide and expanded on certain topics with material from some of my previous articles.

1. Early Childhood Education and Care: Access and Cost

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) determined that women spend over 35 per cent of their income on childcare. A lack of affordable regulated spaces means women must choose between remaining out of the workforce, using unregulated home care, or relatives.

Compounding the problem of insufficient licensed childcare spaces is a lack of trained professionals. Historically, this has been an underpaid profession dominated by women.

It's clear that economic equality for women is tied to affordable childcare, yet Canada does not have a national child care policy.

Harper's solution to the childcare crisis gives parents monthly payments of \$160 for each child under six and \$60 for children six to 17. Parents are taxed on this monthly subsidy that doesn't come close to covering childcare costs and fails to address the real issues of the childcare crisis.

The NDP is the only party with a 10-year plan to create or maintain a million childcare spaces at a cost of \$15 per child per day. This would offer disadvantaged women across the country the chance to remain in or re-enter the workforce without facing substantial financial hardship.

The Liberals are without a policy but have called for a "Universal ECEC Program with national standards and monitoring."

2. Health Care

Canada's public universal health care system has been undergoing significant changes and not for the better. Women across the country will experience greater inequality as more procedures are privatized and dental, vision and pharmaceuticals remain uncovered.

Under the Conservative watch, the scales have decidedly tilted in favour of more money going into private options. In 2010, private health expenditures were \$1569 per capita. Only the U.S. and Switzerland spent more because their plans are largely private.

Access to adequate health care varies across the country. British Columbia charges monthly premiums of \$144 per family. Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island are without a single abortion clinic. Indigenous women, marginalized women, and women with disabilities need improved and more affordable services.

The Conservatives are maintaining six per cent health transfers until 2017. Then, the amounts will be reduced to Gross Domestic Product growth.

The Liberals are committed to publicly fund health care and federal transfer payments.

The NDP has indicated a wish to increase federal transfer payments and to provide additional funding for pharmaceuticals.

3. Violence Against Women

Over the past year Canadians have witnessed violence against women on an unprecedented public scale: famous personalities, RCMP officer, and a Conservative senator charged with sexual assault; admission of a systemic culture of rape at colleges, universities and within the Canadian military.

Unfortunately, for women facing systemic violence some things remain the same. The risk of sexual assault for women with disabilities is 150 per cent greater than women without; Indigenous women experience domestic violence and sexual assault at rates 35 times greater than non-Indigenous women; and one Canadian woman is killed every six days by a current or former partner.

Despite a clear need for more education and action to end violence against women the Conservatives slashed funding for the Ministry for the Status of Women. This resulted in massive cuts to gender equality groups across Canada. The Conservatives lack a national strategy to reduce violence against women and are without a policy on intimate partner violence.

We need a federal government that will create a national strategy to eliminate violence against women. Ironically, on May 27, 2015 the Harper government voted down MP Niki Ashton's motion, M-444, A National Action Plan to End Violence Against Women.

The motion recommended a national action plan on violence against women; an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls; and a national child care plan.

The Liberals are without a specific policy but have committed to gender equality.

4. Indigenous Women

Currently, there are 1181 documented murdered and missing Indigenous women across Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Committee, the United Nations, the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and Amnesty International have all called for a national inquiry along with the timely implementation of recommendations by the federal government.

The NDP will call a public inquiry into the missing and murdered Indigenous women within 100 days of taking office.

The Liberals have committed to a national inquiry.

Harper continues to state that, "it really isn't high on [his] radar." However, it was on Harper's radar to cut funding to the Quebec Native Women's Association, Hamilton's Honouring the Circle transitional shelter, and the Native Women's Centre.

5. Housing

Affordable housing is increasingly difficult to find yet it's essential to reducing poverty and eradicating violence against women. Canada does not have a national housing policy.

The Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women has recommended that the Canadian government improve and enforce shelter allowances, social assistance rates, provide better support for people with disabilities, and provide adequate transition housing for women leaving abusive relationships.

Access to shelters, transition housing and affordable long term housing as well as affordable childcare is imperative to ending violence against women and children. The Housing First program supported by the Conservatives works wonders with people suffering from mental health and addiction issues, but is not the best model for women fleeing abuse.

Harper is set to cut funding that benefits all Canadians.

The Liberals are committed to creating a national housing action plan.

The NDP have committed to developing a national housing plan.

6. Economic Equality

In 1978 the federal government implemented pay equity under the Canadian Human Rights Act. Yet, 37 years later pay inequality remains an issue. On average women earn 71 per cent of what men earn annually. The federal government needs to hold employers accountable for ensuring men and women are paid equally for equal work.

Time away from the workforce and lower paying positions means women make smaller contributions Canada's Pension Plan and have less to live on in old age.

The Conservative government has no plans for change.

The Liberals have no party stance although MP Marc Garneau is calling for a proactive plan.

The NDP want "proactive pay equity legislation" requiring immediate action from employers.

7. Political Participation

We need more women in parliament. Women make up 52 per cent of the population, but only 25 per cent of the House of Commons. A breakdown from the 2011 election gives a better picture of women in politics:

The NDP had 124 female candidates of which 40 were elected.

Of the 90 Liberal party candidates six were elected.

The Conservatives had 68 women running and 28 were elected.

Since 1980 the NDP has had more women candidates than the other parties.

Starting with the current election and moving forward, Liberal party ridings are encouraging more women and minority candidates.

The Conservatives have no plans.

8. Refugee Women and Temporary Foreign Workers

Female migrant workers, refugee and temporary foreign workers rely on precarious employment. They earn 55 per cent of what non-racialized men earn annually and 88 per cent of what non-racialized women earn. Abuse, coercion and violence often accompany being tied to a single employer.

Harper's government has attempted to reduce healthcare coverage for refugees and is currently appealing the 2014 Federal Court ruling that these cuts are unconstitutional and amount to cruel and unusual punishment.

The Conservatives have also restricted permanent residency for temporary foreign workers.

All parties need to remedy the abuses and encourage citizenship for these workers.

9. Women with Disabilities

Women with disabilities want issues of workplace accessibility; accessible housing; shelter and transition housing; pay equity; health care; settlement help for immigrant and refugee women living with disabilities; and door-to-door delivery by Canada Post to be on the agenda this election.

10. Rights of Trans People

Trans people would like workplace discrimination and violence in their lives addressed.

NDP MP Randall Garrison's bill C-279 would add gender identity provisions to the Criminal Code and the Canadian Human Rights Act. The bill passed the House of Commons, but is currently stalled in the Senate.

11. Making Sure You Can Vote: The Fair Elections Act

The Voter's Guide on Women's Issues -- Election 2015 has a brief section dealing with voting under the Fair Elections Act.

The guide also provides an extensive bibliography for anyone looking for additional reading on a subject.

I'd like to add an issue that is imperative to women across Canada, the NDP is the only party among the three to have a Food Policy.

The NDP point out that,

"Canada is without a comprehensive food policy -- lagging behind other industrial countries in the OECD, like England and Australia. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has raised serious concerns about food security in Aboriginal communities and the lack of a coordinated food strategy in Canada. More than 2 million Canadians are at risk of going hungry, compromising our families, our health care system and our children's potential.

New Democrats have a vision for our food system—one that connects Canadians from farm to fork. We need to look at the whole picture and bring an integrated approach to federal policy that connects agriculture, rural development, health and income security. It can be done."

With the range of issues that need to be addressed you'd think Harper would spend less time boondoggling Canadians about the possibility of other parties taxing Netflix and more time dealing with issues that concern 52 per cent of the Canadian population.

It's been 31 years since the leaders of the national parties' debated women's issues. Mulcair, May, and Trudeau have said they'll debate women's issues. Harper has yet to acknowledge the invitation. Then again, Harper may be waiting to see if the debate conflicts with watching Breaking Bad.

All self-identifying members of PAM, join UpForDebate in calling for a national debate focused on issues that are important to Canadian women.

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