

Up For Debate gives voice to neglected women's issues ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Women's issues are being woefully ignored in the federal election campaign, distinguished female leaders told a panel discussion at the University of Toronto Monday night.

Whether it's sexual harassment, missing and murdered aboriginal women, or employment and pay for women, the election has been largely silent on these issues, panellists told the Up for Debate event, which was livestreamed in English and French.

"We need a broader public debate to really find out what is happening and why (with missing and murdered aboriginal women)," said aboriginal lawyer Katherine Hensel, one of the panellists. "I think the Canadian public has made it clear that it's important enough to spend the resources (on a national inquiry)."

Up for Debate is an alliance of 175 women's groups, and its strategy, which included Monday's panel discussion, is aimed at sparking conversations on "gender justice and equality" leading up to the Oct. 19 election.

The event, in partnership with the Toronto Star and Le Devoir, was broadcast live on Periscope by Twitter Canada, which also promoted the debate on social media.

Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau, NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair, Green Leader Elizabeth May and Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe all agreed to be interviewed for the panel. Conservative Leader Stephen Harper did not.

The participating leaders were asked in advance to comment on a variety of women's issues and their videotaped responses were then air and discussed during Monday's panel.

For instance: how to make Canada a safer and better place for women? Start with the "testosterone-flooded" House of Commons, said May, which prompted gales of laughter in the audience at the U of T.

All leaders spoke about fixing women's inequality from inside Parliament first by increasing women's representation. Trudeau and May said that getting rid of first-past-the-post would lead to more women MPs.

Mulcair promised to introduce a 50-per-cent female quota for the boards of directors of federal organizations.

"My party president is a woman, the national director is a woman, our caucus chair is a woman. And if you look at the NDP's front bench in the House of Commons ... of the 20 places there, 10 are women, because that's a fundamental value," he said.

In their video clips Trudeau and Mulcair each called themselves "feminists."

Trudeau touted his plan to run deficits to pay for "social infrastructure" including new day care spaces. Mulcair his \$15-a-day care plan and pledge to build more shelters, and May promised a national strategy to confront violence against women.

Francine Pelletier, the journalist who interviewed the leaders in advance, said during the panel after the interviews aired that she was amazed at how both Trudeau and Mulcair are duking it out over whose child-care strategy is better.

"It does my heart glad to see two leaders trying to out-compete each other on childcare," said Kate McInturff, a member of the panel and an organizer of the event.

May was especially harsh about what she called a "boys club" in Parliament, scoffing that "because two men decide they don't want to participate, the debate doesn't happen" — a reference to the organizers' original proposal ago for a live women's issues debate, which fell apart because Mulcair said he wouldn't participate if Harper was not there.

May said women's issues, along with the environment, are too often shoved to the back burner because political discourse in this country caters to men.

"What are the issues that appeal to the alpha males? We still live in a patriarchal society, we still live in a society where men don't want to

admit they're sexist, but there is pervasive sexism," she said. "I've never worked in a workplace as male-dominated and testosterone-flooded as the House of Commons."

But there are signs that women's issues are coming to the fore of the national debate.

Angela Robertson, executive director of the Central Toronto Community Health Centres, and one of the panellists, said there's enough evidence about the presence of violence against women that government must take action.

"We become complicit through our silence in not demanding action," she said adding the leaders aren't talking enough about violence against women.

The panel also called out leaders for being out of touch with the cause of sexism. Trudeau railed against sexist music lyrics and pornography, while Duceppe brought up the issue of the niqab, slamming party leaders who support women's right to wear them during citizenship ceremonies.

"I am tired of men in power trying to relieve me of my clothing," McInturff scoffed.

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