

For women, Harper's government has been a disaster ^[1]

Author: Hamandi, Ali

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EXCERPTS:

It was supposed to be a national leaders' debate on women's issues. Instead, due to the absence of Conservative Party Leader Stephen Harper and NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair, organizers had to re-tool the event as a series of one-on-one interviews with four federal party leaders — Mulcair, Justin Trudeau, Gilles Duceppe and Elizabeth May.

Harper's no-show — and the fact that he was booed in absentia at the start of Monday's livestreamed event — should have surprised no one at all. His government's austerity agenda has left women facing not only declines in their labour force participation but a persistent pay gap and the neglect of the public services on which they typically rely.

The combination of these impacts has struck a hard blow against women's economic equality in this country. In 1994, Canada held the highest ranking on the UN's Human Development Index (HDI) and was seen to have the best gender-equality measures worldwide. Two decades later, we rank eighth on the HDI — and our 23rd-place standing on the UN's Gender Inequality Index got all the wrong kind of international attention at the recent Commission on the Status of Women Conference in New York.

As of 2014, over 80,000 women had left Canada's labour force, bringing their participation rate down to 61.6 per cent from 62.2 per cent in 2013. This is Canada's lowest rate of women's labour force participation since 2002 — a reversal of decades of gradually growing gender equality through women's participation in the workforce. With a population of 14.7 million women aged 15 and over in Canada last year, this 0.6 per cent decline in the participation rate meant 88,000 fewer women working.

And this was not the result of an overall decline in employment in the more female-dominated sectors. On the contrary, women's employment levels in those sectors — education, health and social services — all increased, while they declined elsewhere. Despite all that has been done to promote the participation of women in non-traditional occupations, Canada's workforce became even more divided by gender last year.

What's more, pay gaps for women — especially Aboriginal Canadians and members of minority groups — are greater in the private sector than in the public sector.

In fact, Catalyst Canada lately noted that the Canadian gender pay gap is double the global average. Women working full-time earn only 82 per cent of what men earn. And around 70 per cent of part-time employees in Canada are women — a lot of them women who work part-time because they can't get child care services. Mothers who take parental leave have been shown to face a pay gap of three per cent for every year they do not work — for the rest of their lives.

In spite of these trends, there's been little progress in reducing wage gaps for women. In fact, the gap has increased recently. There's no simple solution that effectively responds to the full scope of the problem, as gender inequality has pervaded every facet of Canadian society. But the Conservative government's budgets have done little to address the situation.

Since 2006, the Conservatives have cut the Status of Women Canada budget by 37 per cent, compelling the closure of 12 of its 16 regional offices. As a result, advocacy groups and women's service providers, such as rape crisis centres, have become ineligible for funding.

Meanwhile, the high rate of violence against aboriginal women has become a national tragedy, as has the lack of government action to prevent it. Over 1,200 aboriginal women have gone missing, yet Harper's government has cut funding from the Sisters in Spirit database project, which once kept track of these "stolen sisters".

In the same vein, the planned National Child Care Program was eliminated and related bilateral agreements with the provinces were cancelled. Instead, in the name of giving parents better "choices", a \$100-monthly taxable allowance for pre-school children was instituted — an amount that barely covers hiring the occasional babysitter. Is it surprising that UNICEF ranked Canada last among 25 developed nations on early childhood education and child care?

Exacerbating matters are the funding cuts to Statistics Canada and related organizations, eliminating crucial research that can be used to develop programs and policies that benefit women. This lack of evidence will make it harder to argue that public interventions are

necessary to redress women's social and economic inequality.

The Conservative government has offered up its income-splitting tax policy as a gesture to "help families". But this generous tax break will not be enjoyed by 89 per cent of Canadian households — even as it consumes \$2 billion in lost revenue that could have gone towards, for example, a national child-care program.

With its budget supposedly "balanced", isn't it now far past the time for the federal government to be more balanced in its social policies? It should go without saying that women's economic equality is not only crucial for women themselves but also for a stable and prosperous economy. Unfortunately, Conservative denial has only made the problem worse.

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