

Gender equality in Canada stalled or regressing: report

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OTTAWA — The push for women's equality in Canada has stalled or regressed in many areas under the Harper government, women and labour groups say in a submission to the United Nations.

The submission, to be provided to a UN conference on women next month, takes issue with the federal government's relatively upbeat assessment of the progress Canada has made toward gender equality.

"Canadian women have lost ground in many areas over the last 15 years," said Barbara Byers, executive vice-president of the Canadian Labour Congress, in a written statement accompanying the submission.

"Our government has sent a report to the United Nations that paints a rosy picture on women's equality in Canada. We have written our own document and it is a reality check on what the government is saying."

Next month's meeting is aimed at measuring the progress made since the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women 15 years ago.

The submission by labour and women's groups acknowledges that progress has been made on some fronts. For instance, it says women have made "significant gains" in access to higher education, now making up more than half of all students enrolled in undergraduate university programs.

Even so, it says men with doctorates are still twice as likely to be named full professors than women with doctorates. And women working in academia earn only 79 cents for every dollar earned by men -- only slightly better than the overall 70.5 per cent wage gap.

As for women's representation in politics, the report points out that Canada's ranking in the world has slid to 49th from 47th, behind a significant number of developing countries.

Women currently account for 22.1 per cent of Parliament, even though they make up just over 50 per cent of the population. And while that's the highest political participation rate for women in Canadian history, it's inched up only marginally over the past dozen years.

The report lays the blame for much of the backsliding squarely on the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

"There has been a systematic erosion of the human rights of women and girls in Canada," it says.

"The changes to gender architecture, the shifts in policy and programming within the government and the government's response to the economic crisis have been felt by the most vulnerable women and girls in Canada."

The report recounts how the Harper government eliminated (and later reinstated) the phrase "gender equality" from the mandate of Status of Women Canada, closed 12 of 16 Status of Women offices, reallocated funding from women's advocacy organizations and eliminated funding for the court challenges program, which helped women pursue equality rights cases in court.

It slams the government for scrapping a nascent \$5-billion over five years national child care program and contends that "senior advisers within the office of the prime minister (have) strong links to anti-feminist organizations."

Noting that murder and spousal abuse are dramatically higher for aboriginal women, the report also criticizes the Harper government for scrapping the Kelowna accord. The accord, struck by the previous Liberal government, was to provide \$5 billion over five years to the provinces to improve the quality of life for aboriginal people.

While rates of spousal violence and spousal homicide against women have dropped by 15 per cent over the past decade, the report slams the government's determination to scrap the long gun registry, which it credits as "one of the most significant factors" in reducing violence against women.

Given the wage gap between men and women, the report is particularly critical of the government's decision to remove the right of public servants to appeal pay equity disputes to the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

The government has instead made pay equity a matter that must be resolved during contract negotiations.

"Pay equity is a fundamental human right that should not be vulnerable to being traded away at a bargaining table," the report contends.

In its own report, the government does acknowledge that significant challenges remain for women seeking equality. But it lauds the facts that labour participation rates for women are at near record highs, that women have significantly increased their representation across a wide range of professions and are increasingly enrolling in male-dominated fields of study.

The government also says the proportion of women living in poverty has declined to 10.9 per cent from 16.3 per cent over the past decade.