

# WE'RE WORTH MORE!

## The Women's Movement and Government Funding

This information sheet  
looks at:

1. Canada's promise to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.
2. How the government is backing out of its commitment.
3. Government funding of women's groups: pros and cons.
4. What the government has done for women lately.
5. How this affects us all.
6. What we can do.

### 1. CANADA'S COMMITMENT TO END DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

The Canadian government is a signatory to both the *United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, 1981; and the *Forward Looking Strategies* document, Nairobi, 1985.

Both these documents call for the participation of non-governmental women's groups in any social change movement or institution working to achieve women's equality.

NAC and women's groups across Canada believe "the Canadian government has an obligation to maintain and increase, according to need, its funding of women's organizations dedicated to the principles of the UN Conventions and *The Canadian Charter of Rights*."

#### Background

Government funding for women's groups began in 1973 with the creation of the Women's Program Division of the Secretary of State. This was in response to Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommendations (1970), combined with pressure from emerging women's groups.

Since 1973, countless non-governmental groups have acted as advocates for women and have advised the government on legislation and programs affecting women. Just as importantly, many women's groups have provided essential services in the areas of women's health, transition housing, sexual assault crisis centres, women in conflict with the law, employment counselling, and much more. Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of women's volunteer labour provide these services, and the demand for the services is ever increasing.

### 2. HOW THE GOVERNMENT IS BACKING OUT OF ITS COMMITMENT TO CANADIAN WOMEN

In 1987, the federal government promised that the funding level of the Women's Program would be maintained and indexed to a cost of living allowance, and it considered increasing funding to meet the needs of new groups and emerging priorities. Instead, it has severely cut funding to women's groups over the last two years.

In 1990-91, \$1.6 million (15%) of the Women's Program budget was cut. The previous year, 1989-90, \$2 million (15.3%) of the budget was cut. The

Women's Program of Secretary of State now has a budget of only \$9.4 million dollars, or .009% of the total Canadian budget. Compare this to the \$14.2 million the government spent promoting its unpopular Goods and Services Tax, or the \$17 million it loaned to strip clubs.

In 1990-91 core funding to 76 women's centres in Newfoundland, Quebec and British Columbia was cut. After country-wide protests, \$1.4 million was returned, but only for one year. Provincial governments have been approached to pick up this funding, but no acceptable agreements have been made.

The Women's Program budget now amounts to only 75¢ for every Canadian female. Women have a right to expect that our taxes are used to remove barriers to our full participation in Canadian society. We deserve and need more federal funding, not budget cuts to the work we do.

Similar cuts were made to programs that fund native and visible minority advocacy groups. The advocacy work of women in these groups has therefore been doubly cut.

The government does not consult with national women's groups about funding priorities.

The government ignores women's protests of its refusal to fund activities related to reproductive rights, peace, the environment and lesbian rights.

The Secretary of State Department will be cut by at least another \$23 million in 1991-92. We can expect further cuts to the women's program.

#### Operational Versus Project Funding

The government has announced it is moving away from operational funding towards project funding.

Most of the approximately 600 women's groups funded by the Women's Program already receive only project grants. A small number receive operational grants. Women's groups had won this more secure, less intrusive operational funding after many years of negotiations with the Women's Program. The two successive 15% cuts were directed explicitly at the "administrative overhead of groups" receiving operational funding. The exception to this was NAC, which was cut by 50% over three years, and feminist publications which lost 100% of their operational funding.

The political effect of the emphasis on project funding is that the Program will have increased influence over the priorities of women's groups.

NON-INTRUSIVE OPERATIONAL FUNDING IS OUR RIGHT,  
AND A NECESSITY FOR GROUPS PROVIDING ONGOING  
ADVOCACY AND ESSENTIAL SERVICES FOR WOMEN.

### 3. GOVERNMENT FUNDING OF WOMEN'S GROUPS: Pros and Cons

"Funding" is more than a transfer of money. It is an agreement between funders and recipients that certain kinds of activities are in part the responsibility of the funder. The current crisis in funding for women's groups is more accurately described as a struggle about who has the bulk of social responsibility to address and change the systematic inequalities women face. The cuts to the Women's Program suggest that the work of eliminating barriers to women's full and equal participation in our society is being "privatized", i.e., foisted upon the voluntary, charitable work of women.

In a market economy resources are unequally distributed, and it is the government's role to redistribute resources to assist disadvantaged groups.

Working in the women's movement, we have had to struggle with the questions of whether government funding criteria violate our autonomy and right to define our issues. Other serious dangers include organizations becoming short-term project driven, becoming an arm of government, being unable to plan for long-term change, facing competition for funding dollars between equally needy groups, being unable to communicate with one another, shaping projects to fit inappropriate government criteria.

Without our clear, strong voice stating what we want and need, the government will define "equality" for us. Social policy has been strengthened by our pressure on government to maintain its international and domestic obligations. Let's not lose this voice. Non-intrusive operational funding is our right.

### 4. WHAT HAS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DONE FOR WOMEN LATELY?

#### *The Federal government*

- is in the process of recriminalizing abortion;
- reneged on its promise of a new childcare system;
- called the 0.5% reduction in the wage gap a "victory";
- MPs gave themselves a \$9000 raise;
- free-traded away women's jobs in electronics, food processing and textile industries;
- backed out of its responsibility for unemployment insurance and retraining;
- shut us out of the constitutional decision making process;
- refused to fund women's work on reproductive choice, lesbian rights, peace and the environment;
- decreased funding to women's groups by \$3.6 million in the last two years;
- taken the country to war;
- is in the process of reducing and privatizing social programs, healthcare, post-secondary education.

### 5. HOW THESE CUTS AFFECT YOU

- The movement towards women's full equality in Canada is being thwarted.
- Women's groups will not be able to meet demands for their services. Groups' limited, and now massively reduced, resources are being shifted away from dealing with the needs of women, to the needs of funders and fundraising.
- Women's organizations, centres and periodicals will disappear. The accumulated cuts have resulted in the majority of Canadian women's organizations being in peril. They have had to cut staff, services, newsletters and more. Providing broader services for survivors of sexual violence and abuse, for example, has become almost impossible.
- Although women's centres won back transitional funding for 1 (possibly 2) years, many of them are in jeopardy of closing if agreements with their provinces fall through.
- Due to the cuts, newly formed organizations, such as visible minority, disabled, native or immigrant women's groups, are not as likely to receive secure funding.
- The cuts particularly target political advocacy and educational groups.
- Women's groups must compete with other social movements for shrinking public and private dollars.
- Solidarity across regions will suffer, as groups have less and less resources to communicate with one another.
- If you are a woman in trouble, you will find there are fewer services — shelters, transition houses, crisis centres, information and networking for you.
- If you are a citizen concerned about equality and social justice, you will see less of your tax dollars being spent on these issues.

### 6. HOW YOUR VOICE CAN BE HEARD

- Write, call, or fax Brian Mulroney, Prime Minister of Canada, House of Commons, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6. The FAX # is (613) 957-5636.
- Visit, call or write your local Member of Parliament in her or his constituency office.
- Become active in or make a donation to feminist organizations. Keep our voice strong.
- Talk to friends, colleagues, neighbours about the federal cuts to women's equality in Canada.