



Vancouver Women's Health Collective

HER VOICE

Spring 2003

Are you interested in...

Doing research on complementary therapies, reproductive issues, or endometriosis? Knowing about the health resources available to you in your community? Finding a new doctor or therapist? Inviting the VWHC to your meeting to do a breast health workshop?

Then please call our health information line: 604-736-5262, visit our Health Information Centre at 1 - 175 East 15th Avenue in Vancouver, or check out our web site: www.womenshealthcollective.ca

Staffed predominantly by volunteers, the information centre is open:

Monday through Thursday
10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Monday and Tuesday
2:00 to 5:00 p.m.

Wednesday
6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

UN COMMITTEE CRITICAL OF CUTS TO WOMEN'S PROGRAMS IN BC

In late-February, the United Nations Committee to End Discrimination Against Women issued a highly critical report on Canada and singled out BC for special criticism. The UN Committee found that decades of cuts to social programs have harmed Canadian women and BC's recent rash of cuts has only further compounded this.

The UN CEDAW Committee reviewed Canada's 5th Report on its compliance with the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* during its 28th session, which was held in New York City from January 13 to January 31, 2003. Canada has been a signatory to this UN convention since 1980. This means that federal, provincial and territorial governments are obligated to comply with the convention's terms and to report on Canada's compliance every 4 years.

So, what conclusions did this UN Committee come to after reviewing Canada's recent record on eliminating discrimination against women? The CEDAW Committee issued a ten-page report on Canada's efforts. It is worth noting that the positive comments in the report are less than a page while the committee identified "principal areas of concern and recommendations" that total five pages. BC and Quebec were the only two provinces singled out in the report. Quebec was praised for its child care program and BC received harsh criticism on a number of counts.

The Committee urged the government of BC to analyze the impact of its recent measures on women and girls, and to change them as necessary. It is clear that the UN Committee understands that the BC government, far from advancing women, as the UN convention requires, is moving women backwards.

The UN Committee raised concerns about the following recent developments in BC:

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR

A Day to Celebrate Women's Health

The Women's Working Group of the BC Health Coalition Marks the 16th Day of Action for Women's Health
Wednesday, May 28th
11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
at a Vancouver park (TBA)
Women's Health Information...
Music... Refreshments... Fun

Exercising your Reproductive Rights – A workshop

Wednesday, May 28th
7:00 to 9:00 p.m.
at the Vancouver Women's Health Collective
1 – 175 East 15th Avenue (at Main Street) in Vancouver

VWHC Strategic Planning Sessions

- Saturday, June 21st
9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Saturday, July 19th
9 a.m. to 1 p.m.
at the Vancouver Women's Health Collective

WISH LIST

The VWHC is in need of a clean colourful area rug, a coffee table, and couches for our meeting room. Please call 604-736-4234, if you can donate any of these items to our centre.

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- The cuts in funds for legal aid and welfare assistance;
- Narrowed eligibility rules for welfare;
- The incorporation of the Ministry of Women's Equality under the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services;
- The abolition of the independent Human Rights Commission;
- The closing of a number of courthouses;
- The cut in support programs for victims of domestic violence; and
- The proposed changes regarding the prosecution of domestic violence.

The UN CEDAW Committee holds the federal government principally responsible for ensuring that the terms of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* are implemented. The Committee particularly criticized the federal government's decision, taken in 1995, to remove conditions from the transfer of monies to the provinces. The UN Committee noted that this has meant the loss of nationwide consistent standards for health and social welfare programs, and it has had a negative impact on "women's situation" across Canada. The Committee sees the federal government's move, away from attaching conditions to the transfer of monies, as a neglect of its obligation.

Committee members also expressed shock about the poverty rates of Canadian women, and were particularly appalled by the numbers of single mothers, Aboriginal women and women of colour who are living in poverty. In a country as wealthy as Canada they found poverty rates of: 54 per cent for single mothers, 43 per cent for Aboriginal women, 37 per cent for women of colour, and 48 per cent for women who are recent immigrants. Committee members were concerned that cuts to social programs have deepened women's social and economic vulnerability, eliminating their good jobs, increasing their burden of unpaid work, and making them less able to leave abusive relationships.

The UN report paid important attention to women's ability to exercise their legal rights. The Committee found that the trend to cut funds for family and poverty law legal aid, as was recently done in BC, discriminates against women, because women are the principal users of civil legal aid, while men are the principal users of criminal legal aid. Making family law legal aid unavailable prevents women from accessing their rights. The UN Committee also recognized that women must have full access to exercise their constitutional right to equality. This access is currently blocked by the restrictive mandate of the Court Challenges Program, which provides test case funding for equality challenges to federal law, but not to provincial law.

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The UN Committee was particularly shocked by the situation of Aboriginal women and expressed intense concern about the persistent and systematic discrimination faced by Aboriginal women in all aspects of their lives. The Committee found that Aboriginal women are overtly discriminated against under the law in Canada, specifically because Aboriginal women living on reserves do not enjoy matrimonial property rights, and because the residual discrimination caused by the "marrying out" provision of the Indian Act has not yet been corrected. Aboriginal women have been lobbying for years to get these problems fixed and the CEDAW Committee has said that these failures to treat Aboriginal women equally are incompatible with the convention.

So, how did women influence this UN Committee and the content of their report? It happened both in person and in writing. In terms of reporting, BC and Canadian women's organizations detailed the state of affairs for women. Nationally, the Feminist Alliance for International Action, an alliance of 40 Canadian women's groups, compiled a lengthy report entitled *Canada's Failure to Act: Women's Inequality Deepens*. This report outlines the harmful effects of Canada's cuts to social programs on women and I would encourage you to explore the full report on the FAFIA web site.

In BC, the Vancouver Women's Health Collective along with a number of other women's groups, Shelagh Day who works with the Poverty and Human Rights Project, and Margot Young a lawyer with UBC's Centre for Feminist Legal Studies, came together last year as the BC CEDAW Group. We produced a 40-page report detailing the cuts to programs that effect women and related this to specific articles under the *UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. The BC report also notes that the harmful impacts of current government policies in BC have a

pernicious effect on groups of women and girls who are most disadvantaged and most vulnerable.

The report we produced is entitled *British Columbia Moves Backward on Women's Equality* and details the harmful impacts of current government policy in BC including an examination of the following:

- Legislated protection against sex discrimination;
- Legal aid;
- Access to court;
- Income assistance and social services;
- Elimination of the ministry of women's equality;
- Elimination of funding for women's centres;
- Violence against women;
- Police protection for women;
- Criminalization of teenage girls in lieu of social programs and services;
- Sexual exploitation and the Secure Care Act;
- Education;
- Employment rules and standards;
- Child care;
- Women's health; and
- Rural women.

Women's organizations were represented by Sheila Day, Margot Young, and Sharon McIvor in New York leading up to and on January 23, 2003, when the UN CEDAW Committee reviewed Canada's compliance with the convention. Shelagh Day was able to meet with and talk to the individuals who comprised the UN committee and raise the concerns of BC and Canadian women's organizations. This meant that women's groups were able to counter the report that was presented by the Canadian government delegation to the UN CEDAW Committee.

Since the late-February release of the UN CEDAW report, women have been active in BC and at the national level organizing press conferences, a well-attended public meeting in Vancouver on March 12,

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a letter writing campaign to BC MLAs and ministers, the International Olympic Committee, and federal government ministers and senators, and we are hoping to secure funds for a national spring meeting so that women may come together to discuss the report findings, strategize, and meet with federal politicians and Status of Women Canada staff.

Overall, I believe this story illustrates the power of individual women and women's organizations in influencing the contents of a UN CEDAW report. As well as broadening UN committee members' understanding of the Canadian government's compliance with the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. Florence levers, the head of the Canadian delegation that appeared before the CEDAW Committee in New York, and the federal government's deputy minister for Status of Women Canada, promised the CEDAW Committee members that Canada would make its best efforts to implement the Committee's recommendations. Women are now looking to the BC and Canadian governments to reverse the patterns of discrimination against women.

Caryn Duncan is the VWHC's Administrator, the Community Co-chair for the BC Health Coalition, and the VWHC representative on the BC CEDAW group.

For more information:

UN CEDAW Report on Canada
www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf

Canada's 5th Report to the CEDAW Committee
www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/pdp-hrp/docs/cedaw_e.cfm

Feminist Alliance for International Action
Canada's Failure to Act: Women's Inequality Deepens
www.fafia.org

BC CEDAW Group
British Columbia Moves Backwards on Women's Equality
www.povnet.org

The BC CEDAW Group is a coalition of 12 organizations including:

- Aboriginal Women's Action Network
- Working Group on Poverty
- West Coast Women's Legal Education and Action Fund
- Justice for Girls
- Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter
- Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres (BC and Yukon Region)
- End Legislated Poverty
- Vancouver Committee for Domestic Workers and Caregivers Rights
- British Columbia Coalition of Women's Centres
- Vancouver Women's Health Collective
- National Action Committee on the Status of Women – BC
- Women's Working Group of the BC Health Coalition

The BC CEDAW Group was supported by the Women's Committee of the BC Federation of Labour, the BC Government and Service Employees Union, and the Hospital Employees' Union.

THE VANCOUVER WOMEN'S HEALTH COLLECTIVE

Our Purpose

We have all been taught that only medical experts know about good health care. In fact, health information has been passed down from one generation of women to the next for centuries. Since our founding in 1972, the VWHC has promoted and supported women helping women to help themselves.

Our Mission Statement

The Vancouver Women's Health Collective provides information, resources and other support for women to empower themselves to take charge of their own health care.

Our Members

We are a charitable, non-profit women's organization, funded primarily by donations, membership fees,

grants, and fund-raising initiatives. Volunteer members are an essential part of the VWHC. There are many opportunities for volunteers to share their stories and enhance their skills. Please call us for more information. Many thanks to past and present volunteers and members, without you we would not be here!

HER VOICE

HER VOICE, the VWHC newsletter is published twice a year. HER VOICE is a forum to connect VWHC members, as well as the broader community, around women's health issues and activities at the VWHC. Submissions relevant to women's health and/or well-being are always welcome. Opinions expressed are those of the writer and not necessarily those of the VWHC.

The VWHC's menopause kit,
Menopause: a self-help approach,
is now available for \$10
(plus \$2.50 if postage is required).
Please call 604-736-5262
to order a VWHC menopause kit.

Are you looking for a welcoming, comfortable,
women-centred meeting space to offer a workshop,
hold training sessions, etc...

The VWHC has space available for \$12.50/hr plus GST.

Please call 604-736-4234
for more information.

Sephira
healing centre

With a Focus on
Women's Health

Pam Fichtner, R.M.T.

Massage Therapy, Craniosacral Therapy
Energy Balancing, Acupressure Mudras

Telephone 604-251-6879

2nd Floor, 10-2495 Commercial Drive (at Broadway Skytrain)
Vancouver, BC V5N 4B8 www.sephirahhealing.ca



Yes, I want to help women access quality health information!

I would like to join the VWHC I would like to renew my VWHC membership

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Address: _____
(street)

_____ (city/province) (postal code)

VWHC membership category: Fee enclosed: \$ _____

- Volunteer pay what you can up to \$25/yr
- Associate \$10-\$25/yr
- Health Practitioner/Therapist/Business \$50/yr

All VWHC Members

- receive the VWHC's newsletter and invitations to special events
- may participate at the monthly Steering Committee meeting & the AGM
- support the mission statement, values, and goals of the VWHC

Volunteer Members

- expected to volunteer at the information centre & attend one bingo shift

Health Practitioner/Therapist/Business Member

- entitled to a business card ad in HER VOICE

I wish to make a donation to the VWHC (a charitable tax receipt will be issued) \$ _____

Full amount of my membership fee and donation \$ _____

Thank you for your support!



Contact Us

1 - 175 East 15th Avenue
Vancouver, BC V5T 2P6

health information line: 604-736-5262

fax: 604-876-1282

administration line: 604-736-4234

www.womenshealthcollective.ca

e-mail: vwhc@vcn.bc.ca

2002/2003 VWHC Funders

BC Ministry of Community, Aboriginal
and Women's Services

BC Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor
General, Gaming Policy

VWHC Members & Donors

Summer Career Placement Program, HRDC