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# Canadian Women — A Soviet View

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It might seem that the status of Canadian women is better than that of women in the US, since they at least do not have to struggle for official recognition of equality of the sexes. All that is provided for under the 1982 Canadian Constitution's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is equally guaranteed to men and women. This provision was included in the Constitution at the urgent request of women's organizations. Article 7 of the Constitution reads that all citizens of Canada are equal before the law whatever their race, ethnic background, sex, age and religious affiliation. And, last but not least, the second chapter of the *Canadian Human Rights Act* endorsed by that nation's Parliament in 1977 provides for equal pay for equal work. Besides, Canada has signed and ratified a number of international documents concerning the status of women, including the 1980 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (which the US has not done). Ratifying that Convention, the Canadian government declared that it intended to observe its every provision. So, Canadian women boast extensive constitutional and legal rights. But in reality they are as rightless as the US women and face just as many difficulties.

Neither the Liberal Trudeau government nor Mulroney and his Conservatives have done anything at all to improve women's working conditions, though that issue is of paramount importance for the majority of Canadian women. It is obvious that unless the government undertakes drastic measures, the employers are not going to renounce their old policy of discrimination against women. Women face discrimination in employment, promotion and pay. Women in Canada earn on the average 40 percent less than men; in the services that gap is 44.6 percent, while in trade it is 44.8 percent.

Discrimination in pay is closely linked with discrimination in training. In 1981, women accounted for just five percent of the workers specially trained for the job they were doing. According to Canadian specialists, things have since gotten even worse, particularly due to endorsement in 1981 of a law under which vocational courses shall be reserved for the more skilled and experienced workers. Most women do not belong to that category. Their lack of qualifications dooms them to 'work ghettos,' that is, offices, stores, light industry factories and the services. According to statistics, 48 percent of women have been doing the simplest jobs (21 percent of men). Apart from being low-paid, the jobs done by women offer absolutely no promise of promotion.

Where politics is concerned, according to Canadian experts the number of men holding offices of responsibility, for instance, in the governing party at the provincial and national level exceeds

that of women in similar positions three times over. Women have not been adequately represented in Canada's federal parliament, either. Following the 1988 election just 27 of its 282 seats are held by women. And yet, it is in politics that women in that country have had the greatest success. In the early 70s, a number of governmental agencies dealing with women's problems were set up in Canada, such as the National Co-ordination Council on the Status of Women (1971), National Council on Equal Opportunities (1972), and Consultative Council on the Status of Women (1972), and the Office of Minister for the Status of Women was established (a position currently held by Barbara McDougall). Five members of the Canadian Cabinet are women, and there are some women among the members of the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal. The last Governor General was also a woman.

## The Right to Abortion

One of the issues high up on the agenda of the Canadian women's movement is the issue of making abortions legal. Unlike women in most other countries, (the US Supreme Court, for instance, legalized abortion in 1973) Canadian women are not free to decide for themselves to bear a child or to have an abortion. Such a right of self-determination is of great importance to them, now that women have been getting more active in politics and in the workforce. There has been no effective government aid to the family, growing numbers of families have the woman as the sole bread-winner, and there is a 'feminization of poverty'. In such conditions Canadian women often prefer to terminate pregnancy rather than bear a child, and so they need medical aid.

The abortion campaign has already yielded certain results. Following the upsurge of the women's movement in the 60s, the legislation banning abortions without exception was amended. In 1970 Article 251 of the *Canadian Criminal Code* was endorsed, permitting termination of pregnancy if special hospital commissions consisting of at least three physicians arrived at the conclusion that a pregnancy was hazardous, or could endanger the life or health of the pregnant woman in the future. In all the other cases abortion was punishable under the law.

Though the 1970 law signified certain progress, repealing the categorical ban on abortions, very few Canadian women could have an abortion. Abortion commissions were set up at just 15 percent of the hospitals in Canada, and these could not handle all the patients. Besides, such services were distributed very unevenly indeed, with two of the provinces, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland, left without one. Nor were such clinics to be

be found in Northern Ontario, or in rural localities anywhere in Canada.

The legalization campaign has enlisted the efforts of progressive women's organizations, trade unions, and the New Democratic Party. Particularly active is the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. With a membership of around 4 million, it is the largest and most influential of Canada's women's organizations and represents the interests of women of all ages, occupations and persuasions. Affiliated with it are around 500 groups and organizations championing women's equality and responsible attitudes towards motherhood and birth control.

Under pressure from the abortion campaigners, Canada's Supreme Court repealed Article 251 of the criminal code as 'unconstitutional' in January 1988. However, it cannot be said that the matter has been ultimately settled. Provisions are yet to be worked out as to the maximum length of pregnancy acceptable for termination, the funding of the clinics and provincial governments' contribution. The abortion issue will obviously be high up on the list of priorities during the next election campaign.

### Family or Work?

This question might sound strange to many, considering that most Canadian women do not think there is any alternative. Women account for 40 percent of Canada's workforce. And it is noteworthy that in the 1981-1986 period alone the share of workers in the female population grew by 51.8 to 55.9 percent. But of late the forces advocating women's return 'to the kitchen, to the family' have become very active indeed. They are led by the women's organization REAL. Its slogan, "kitchen, children, church" presupposes that women's sole mission in life is to be dedicated keepers of the family and home.

REAL censures all manifestations of women's liberation, naming them as the cause of all women's problems in society. Representatives of that organization have gone as far as saying that the Constitution, which proclaims equality of men and women, "artificially abolishes the distinctions between the sexes." They have criticized the campaign for equal pay for women, asserting that if that demand is granted, it would result in a loss of jobs

among women because they cannot compete with men. Instead of establishing a network of preschool childcare institutions, REAL suggests direct payments to the parents, who would be free to choose how to use that money. REAL's official leader, lawyer Gwen Landolt, cleverly exploits in her speeches a popular stereotype, presenting feminist women as booted man-hating creatures who undermine the family and infringe upon the interests of the children. It is most illustrative that the organization came into being shortly after Mr. Mulroney took office.

REAL's calls have found certain support among Canadian women. This can be explained by their discontent with the government policy regarding mother and childcare, protection of women's rights, and measures to enable women to combine work and motherhood without strain. Canada has no national mother-and-child welfare legislation. Such matters are under provincial jurisdiction, and the way they are handled largely depends on the number of women within the electorate and the importance assigned to their support. Their dissatisfaction with the situation in employment and mother-and-child care has resulted in many Canadian women doubting whether going to work is reasonable at all. So, REAL's calls for the protection and consolidation of the family, aid to 'close-knit' families, and tax privileges for non-working women sound ever more attractive to them. However, far from every Canadian woman can stay at home even if she wishes to. Ever more families in Canada have women as the sole bread-winner, and 42 percent of such families are below the official poverty line.

As has already been mentioned, establishment of a network of preschool childcare institutions is also a relevant issue. Today, the nurseries and daycare available in Canada accommodate less than 10 percent of all children. As a result, mothers of young children have to stay at home or work shorter hours (which many of them cannot afford). Yielding to pressure from the women's movement, early in 1986, the government set up a special parliamentary commission on daycare, which worked out recommendations. On 3 December 1987, the Canadian parliament made public a program based on those recommendations and costing an estimated 5.4 billion dollars. That pro-

gram certainly signified progress towards improved child welfare, since it provided for more extensive government aid to families with children. At the same time, the report did not address the need for a network of accessible and low-cost nursery schools and daycare centres. In criticizing that project, representatives of progressive women's organizations, trade unions and the New Democratic Party, noted that government subsidies to governmental child-care institutions would have meant effective aid to families with children.

As mothers, Canadian women are, as a rule, entitled to a 15-week maternity leave in the course of which they receive 60 percent of their usual pay. Women working less than 15 hours a week or earning less than 85 dollars are not entitled to such a leave. And it must be noted that only those who have worked for the government for a year or more are guaranteed that the job will be waiting for them when the leave is over.

### Work for Peace

Canadian women have been active not only in the feminist movement, but also in the peace movement. Women comprise approximately 50 percent of the leadership of major peace organizations in that country.

For instance, women are to be found among the leadership of the Peace Research Institute in Dundas, and the Toronto Disarmament Network which unites 78 organizations. It is to be noted that the number of women among these organizations' rank-and-file members has also been growing.

For all the differences in their social backgrounds, political affiliations, outlooks, standards of education and awareness, the majority of Canadian women stand for peace and are aware of the importance of averting the nuclear war threat. Many of them hold far more progressive views on war and peace than men. For instance, the percentage of women who spoke out against US testing of cruise missiles in Canada in 1983 was a great deal higher than that of men (59 percent against 41 percent), and just 48 percent of women spoke in favour of SDI (Strategic Defence Initiative), as against 65 percent of men.

Apart from joining peace marches,

demonstrations and other peace actions, Canadian women have initiated various peace campaigns of their own. For instance, in 1983 they set up Canada's first peace camp on Parliament Hill in Ottawa to protest the US cruise missile tests and the government's military policy. They also initiated a campaign for a ban on toy weapons. Before the Christmas holidays, women's organizations put out postcards calling upon parents not to buy their children weapon-like toys.

Canadian women's organizations such as the Congress of Canadian Women, the women's section of Project Ploughshares, the Voice of Women, and the Women's League of Quebec, were broadly represented at the World Congress of Women held on June 23-27, 1987 under the motto: "Toward 2000—Without Nuclear Weapons! For Peace, Equality, Development!" That forum was attended by more than one hundred women delegates from Canada. Many of them admitted later that the Congress made them reassess the stereotypes about the 'Soviet military threat' and 'closed Soviet society' and was a major event in their lives.

### Campaigning Against Violence

Canadian women also protest against the growing rate of crime and acts of violence which have become so typical of Canada's domestic life. The past few years have seen a really alarming trend: mounting evidence of violence in Canadian families. That phenomenon has become so widespread that it has been getting extensive media coverage. A book by Linda McLeod on a shelter for women was published in 1987. According to a special survey in 1987, the number of women beaten by their husbands reaches a million annually. Though the number of shelters for women has grown three-fold in the 1980-1987 period, they still cannot cater to all who need such accommodation. According to *The Globe and Mail*, up to 20,000 women take refuge in those shelters every year and about as many are denied help because of a lack of space. At the same time, great numbers of Canadian women have to stay with their tormentors out of fear of becoming homeless. The National Action Committee on the Status of Women has demanded bigger state allowances for women who suffer from cruel treatment, and called upon the gov-

ernment to establish a network of educational centres on the ethics of family life.

The cult of violence is being inculcated by the media, the movie industry, TV and pornographic literature. With video and US productions dominating Canadian TV and movie distribution, pornography has inundated the screens. The porno business boom met with mass protest from Canadian women. The first actions of protest date back to the early 1980s when the porno-film "Powder" was being shown. The anti-pornography movement gained momentum by the mid-1980s. Canadian women were outraged by the plans to start a paid Playboy TV channel. Seeking to please women and maintain their image as champions of morality, the Conservatives submitted to the House of Commons in May 1987, a bill which was meant to check the spread of pornography. That bill makes distribution of pornographic literature and films punishable under the law. This concerns in the first place the use of children in pornographic productions (the penalty for this will be ten years in prison under the new law), scenes of sexual perversion and brutality towards women. However, the critics of the Bill assert that a broad interpretation of the term "erotica" leaves loopholes for sneaking in scenes of doubtful content.

### New Problems

Today Canadian society encounters new problems stemming, in part, from the development of various branches of science including breakthroughs in medicine, paradoxical as it may seem. While such breakthroughs as early diagnostics and prevention of serious congenital diseases are indisputably a boon, the benefits of surrogate motherhood through artificial insemination are most dubious.

The practical use of the advances of micro-surgery and genetic engineering to combat infertility has brought forth the ethical aspect of the matter, which is particularly important for women.

Though surrogate motherhood is not widespread in Canada, medical and law-enforcement agencies and the media have been giving that matter a lot of attention. The Canadian medical research council is currently working out the guidelines of medical ethics, with artificial insemination high on the list. An international conference on bioethics held in Canada in

April 1987, and attended by representatives of the seven leading capitalist countries, stressed the need to put artificial insemination under state control. Today, such centres in Canada are accountable to special "ethics" committees at universities and hospitals (while in some other capitalist countries they are run exclusively on a commercial basis).

The Canadian approach to surrogate motherhood is not the same as elsewhere. While most English-speaking countries show caution and reserve in working out legal norms for such an unusual social phenomenon, and are even inclined to ban it, the Ontario legislative reform deemed it advisable to legalize surrogate motherhood on the grounds that since such practices could not be eradicated, legalization would afford better control and help escape harmful medical consequences. A special report handled the legal, medical, social and economic aspects of that matter, ranging from the child's legal status and her/his social parents' responsibilities to such details as the surrogate mother's financial rights. The bill provides for the woman's right in certain cases to refuse to hand over the baby she has born to the social parents. But most Canadian women consider it inhuman to use women as incubators.

This is a far from complete list of the problems facing Canadian women in the late 1980s. Those problems must be solved and it is obvious that there is a long and exhausting struggle ahead. The Canadian women's movement has failed so far to secure a solution to any of the outstanding problems: discrimination against women, lack of an adequate national mother-and-child care system, or the abortion issue. At the same time, it is obvious that with Canadian women active in every sphere of the life of society, the country's ruling circles cannot ignore their demands or their sentiments.

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