

The B.C. CEDAW Group

December 17, 2008
Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

Dear Prime Minister,

Re: Stimulating the Economy by Investing in Women: Smart Approach to Economic Recovery

We write to you as you prepare a new budget and an economic stimulus package for Canada at a time of global economic instability. We ask that you ensure that Budget 2009 take into account the needs of Canadian women, and Canada's commitments to the advancement of the human rights of women.

As you are aware, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recently released its Concluding Observations on Canada, following the Committee's review of Canada's 6th and 7th reports on compliance with the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*. The Committee outlined significant government actions that are required to improve the conditions of women living in Canada and to bring Canada into compliance with its human rights obligations. One of the most vulnerable groups of women in Canada has been, and continues to be, Aboriginal women. There needs to be direct, immediate, political action to address this inequity in Canadian society to remedy the socio-economic conditions which keep Aboriginal women from achieving all that they can economically.

We are writing to you now because the economic stimulus plan and the upcoming budget provide immediate and critical opportunities to concretely address the recommendations of the CEDAW Committee. This is not a moment to set aside Canada's obligations to advance the equality of women for attention at another time. Rather it is crucial to incorporate these obligations into Budget 2009 and new spending plans. Targeted spending on social infrastructure is fundamental to women's equality, to women's participation in the economy and to promoting economic recovery. Taking steps towards a more equal Canada will be best for the economy in both the short and long term.

As the World Bank has recently concluded "the business case for expanding women's economic opportunities is becoming increasingly evident; this is nothing more than smart economics."¹ Women, and particular vulnerable groups of women, are hardest hit during times of economic crisis and also have the greatest potential to contribute to the economy. The 52nd UN Commission on the Status of Women "notes the growing body of evidence demonstrating that investing in women and girls has a multiplier effect on productivity, efficiency and sustained economic growth and that increasing women's

¹ [Gender Equality as Smart Economics: A World Bank Group Gender Action Plan](#), September 2006

economic empowerment is central ...to the eradication of poverty.”² Investing in women translates into investing in local communities and in the Canadian economy.

All political parties have committed themselves to evaluating government spending through a gendered lens, and the Standing Committee on the Status of Women also recently recommended that Finance Canada take concrete steps towards gender budgeting.³ Therefore, it is essential to consider if the economic stimulus plan that will be presented in the 2009 Budget provides women with the financial and social tools they need to contribute to the economy and to aid in Canada’s economic recovery.

Preliminary indications are not encouraging. To date, the economic stimulus proposals that are on the table focus on infrastructure investments such as road-work and transit, and on corporate aid to the automotive, banking and forestry industries. The federal government has already committed 35 billion dollars to the financial industry, and 33 billion dollars towards construction work through the building of roads, highways, transit, bridges, and sewers over seven years.⁴ What is missing from this list are investments in social infrastructure.

A focused investment on social infrastructure will support communities, promote women’s economic capacity, bolster women’s participation in the economy and strengthen women’s resilience at a time of economic downturn. This is a crucial moment and new investment in social programs is needed. Social programs act not only as “shock absorbers” for families during periods of instability, they also provide good jobs for women, and “act as fiscal stimulus when times are tough for the economy: Social programs put money directly into the hands of large numbers of Canadians whose collective spending can restart the economic motor.”⁵

For example, increasing social assistance rates, as recommended by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, would be a timely and smart intervention. Women are the majority of the recipients of social assistance. They cannot afford decent food and shelter with the welfare incomes they currently receive and they spend their incomes on their families, on basic needs, and in their home communities. The federal government has a role to play in this policy area through its spending powers.

Effective fiscal stimulus must also contribute to long-term economic goals. Spending on social infrastructure that advances equality for women also encourages productivity and increases living standards both in the short and long term, thus contributing to a stronger economy.

Priorities to Stimulate the Economy

² Report of the Fifty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2008
<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/290/62/PDF/N0829062.pdf?OpenElement>

³ Towards Gender Responsive Budgeting: Rising to the Challenge of Achieving Gender Equality. Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, June 2008

⁴ Department of Finance Canada, Fiscal Stimulus: Budget 2009 Consultations.
http://www.fin.gc.ca/scripts/prebudgetsurvey/selectMainPriorities_e.asp

⁵ The Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Forgotten Fundamentals. December 2008.

An economic stimulus plan which would ensure that Canadian women are more able to contribute to the recovering economy includes a series of universal and targeted measures, as follows.

Employment Insurance Benefits

Amend eligibility rules in the *Employment Insurance Act* to improve access to insurance benefits for women. Currently, two in every three working women who pay into EI do not receive any benefits if they lose their jobs⁶. This is especially disconcerting as the unemployment rate is rising.

Child Care

Invest in a national child care program will provide needed early learning for children and allow for women's fuller participation in paid employment. As the December 2008 UNICEF report and others have pointed out, Canada ranks last in child-care provision among developed countries. Budget 2009 should provide:

- Adequate and sustained transfers to provinces and territories to increase access to quality, affordable child care spaces and services;
- Accountability mechanisms with provincial plans, timelines and targets for lowering parent fees and adding public or community-owned spaces. In addition, federal transfers should raise wages for trained staff, alleviating the current recruitment and retention crisis in Canada by providing a living wage and raising service quality accordingly;
- It is important that training and adjustment programs are accessible to women and extend beyond the industries immediately impacted. Spending on training for child care and other services should also be part of any training initiative.

Ensuring Adequate Social Assistance

Increase social assistance rates to reflect the real costs of food, shelter and other necessities. Social assistance puts money directly into the hands of women, and supports vulnerable women, including lone mothers, who will spend it on their families, promptly and locally. Budget 2009 should include:

- Common standards of adequacy for social assistance attached to the Canada Social Transfer to ensure that social assistance rates in all jurisdictions are adequate to meet current real costs of food, clothing and housing;
- An increase to the Canada Social Transfer, specifically targeted for increases to social assistance rates;
- A bar to the provinces and territories clawing back the National Child Benefit Supplement from families receiving social assistance.

Affordable Adequate Housing Plan

Provide funding to support a new National Housing Strategy. This strategy should include:

- Consultation with housing and women's organizations, to concretely address women's housing needs. Affordable, adequate housing options for women and girls must be an integral part of a new National Housing Strategy.

⁶ Women's Inequality in Canada. Submission of the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, September 2008.

Pro-active Pay Equity Legislation

Institute pro-active pay equity legislation in federal jurisdiction, which would apply to both private and public employers. The pay-equity guarantee should be established and administered by a Pay Equity Commission and a Pay Equity Tribunal. Ensuring that there is an effective pay equity law is a matter of legal obligation under the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. It will also provide an obvious stimulus to the economy, as women have more money to spend directly on their families and in their communities.

Civil-legal Aid for Family and Poverty/Employment Law

Provide targeted funds to the provinces and territories for civil-legal aid. Civil legal aid is critical to women as it enables them to access child support payments and property after partnership dissolution, once again putting money directly into the hands of women and increasing their opportunities for training and employment.

Accountability and Transparency

Ensure accountability for public funds directed at various industries and economic sectors. Funds should be contingent upon compliance with domestic and international human rights obligations and with practices that ensure environmental responsibility and sustainability.

These recommendations are not exhaustive, but they highlight the need for an integrated, gendered approach to developing Canada's economic stimulus plan and Budget 2009. The current federal government has committed itself to developing a gender Action Plan "that will advance the equality of women across Canada through the improvement of their economic and social conditions..."⁷ Such a plan must be fully integrated to ensure that all government policies and processes, including economic stimulus and related spending, are coordinated and comprehensive. Policies must work together to ensure that the rights of women are protected and advanced, particularly more vulnerable groups such as Aboriginal women, racialized women, immigrant and refugee women, and lone mothers.

As we enter a period of economic uncertainty, it is imperative that public funds are invested in social infrastructure and in ways that will advance the equality of women, in compliance with Canada's international commitments under the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*.

Sincerely,

Joanna A. Czapska, on behalf of The B.C. CEDAW Group:

Carrie Humchitt, Aboriginal Women's Action Network
Susan Harney, Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC
Alison Brewin & Kasari Govender, W. Coast Women's Legal Education & Action Fund
Annabel Webb and Joanna A. Czapska, Justice for Girls
Narmeen Hashim & Leilani Farha, Women's Housing Equality Network (Canada)

⁷ Federal Budget 2008 www.budget.gc.ca/2008/plan/chap3c-eng.asp

Margot Young & Shelagh Day, The Poverty and Human Rights Centre
Jacqueline Gullion, Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter
Lee Lakeman, Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres (B.C. & Yukon Region)
Cenen Bagon, Vancouver Committee for Domestic Workers and Caregivers Rights
Caryn Duncan, Vancouver Women's Health Collective
Michelle Dodds, North Shore Women's Centre