



**ARTICULATING AND FIGHTING FOR OUR RIGHTS:
Examples of the Canadian Women's Movement Experience in Advocacy**

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Experience in Advocacy**

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Abstract:

The author addresses the issue of advocacy from the women's movement perspective. She maintains that advocacy can be described as a three-stage process that includes relationships within the movement, between the movement and outside forces, and between the movement and the state. While many similarities can be found between the problems and situations faced by Canadian, Central, and Latin American women, this paper examines the advocacy issue primarily from a Canadian perspective. Moreover, particular focus is placed on three examples with the Canadian women's movement advocacy experience: the National Action Committee; the preparation of the Alternative Federal Budget; and the struggle for equal pay. Each example is examined within the context of each of the three stages of the advocacy process.

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to introduce members of the Women's Forum for Central American Integration (FORO) to the Canadian women's movement's experience in advocacy. It is written in the spirit and hopes that it will be useful for your reflections on the problems and possible solutions identified in Central America, and their results, as well as be the basis for future direct exchanges between Central American and Canadian women.

Advocacy is analyzed as a three-step or three-stage process in this document. The first is the internal process within the women's movement to build a consensus around its interests and struggles. The second is at the internal-external level at which the women's movement struggles for the support of other sectors of civil society – either from inside or outside those sectors. In the third level, the women's movement engages the state directly. These are not necessarily stages that have to be followed in chronological order, nor are they mutually exclusive. While each level has its own dynamics they are also interdependent. Each one has a particular relevance in its particular way to overcoming gender discrimination and unequal power relations.

The demarcation of these three levels of advocacy is based on the very strategies being used by the FORO in relation to the Central American Gender Equity Agenda. After coming to an agreement on the content of the agenda, the next stage is to look for support from civil society (for example, the Central American Reference Group activity and the presentation of the Agenda at the national level). Following (and based on) these two steps, is getting the Agenda approved by the Central American Presidents Summit as the official SICA (Central American Integration System) gender policy.

SICA is the official name of the regional structures and processes. Although

the North American Free Trade Agreement between Canada, the United States, and Mexico could be considered to be more relevant since it is also a regional integration experience, the specificities of the organization and coordination between the women's movements of the three countries indicate that this would not be the most fruitful comparison.

Three recent examples will be used to shed light on the Canadian women's movement advocacy. The National Action Committee's (NAC) experience with integrating racial diversity is the example of the internal level. The women's movement advocacy in the preparation of the Alternative Federal Budget (AFB) will be analyzed as an example of the internal-external level. The external level will be presented based on the struggle for equal pay. For each of these examples, the goal and strategies of the women's movement are presented and then the internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and obstacles will be analyzed to help determine how they affected the outcome of the advocacy campaigns. The analysis concludes by providing some lessons that can be learned from these experiences with regards to the demands and struggles of the women's movement to transform the power inequalities in gender relations.

I. THE INTERNAL LEVEL: INTEGRATING RACIAL DIVERSITY IN NAC'S MISSION

There is an organization in Canada that brings together more than 700 women's groups in a permanent structure for debate, analysis, advocacy, and lobbying which functions more as a parliament than a coalition. Founded in 1972, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) is practically the only organization of its kind in the world. Just as many women's groups have had internal problems or obstacles, one of the most difficult for NAC has been the need to

integrate women of colour and their demands into the organization. Despite the difficulties, NAC is meeting its goal and has resulted in the transformation of its mission, an increase in its membership, and a stronger presence in national politics.

There have always been women of colour involved in NAC and the committee has carried out actions to address the issues they have raised. For, however, almost the first 20 years of its existence, the concerns of women of colour were not central issues and there was no recognition in terms of leadership positions within the organization. In 10 years NAC has changed from being an organization of white, middle-class women to an organization representing the grassroots and great diversity of Canadian women and women's groups.

NAC members pursued two strategies. One was to increase the number of women of colour in leadership and decision-making positions. The other was to integrate the demands of women of colour into the mission, goals, and strategies, as well as all the activities of the organization. That is, they wanted to integrate them into the central and priority issues.

By 1992, half of the national executive and many leaders were of the "new force" – that is, those who identified themselves as women of colour, indigenous women, women with disabilities, or by sexual preference. Action to obtain and guarantee a greater presence of women of colour was focused on NAC's existing internal procedures and regulations. Before the 1993 AGM, the outgoing president publicly stated what many members were already articulating that it was now time for a woman of colour or an indigenous woman to be president of NAC. Also in 1995 and 1998, many internal resolutions were approved to guarantee the presence of the "new force" women in the leadership of all the committees as well as the creation of 4 vice presidents to represent each of the four designated groups. In 1995, NAC adopted an internal antiracial discrimination policy, both in terms of staffing as well as within the decision-making structures of the organization.

In 1993, Sunera Thobani, an immigrant from Asia, was the first woman of colour to be elected president. Sunera had to withstand strong criticism from both inside and outside the organization. Some women in the organization (including some in leadership positions) argued that NAC would lose political credibility. The media attacked her and one member of parliament accused her of stealing jobs from Canadians. Such racist criticisms have slowly quieted down and some individual women who had left the organization have now returned. Sunera was president for three years. In the next election, there were two candidates, one who represented the "old guard" and one from the "new force." Joan Grant-Cummings, a Black woman, won.

NAC is also succeeding in integrating racial diversity throughout the organization. This has had positive and negative effects, both within the organization and with its relationships with other actors. In 1993, NAC published a report on the experiences of foreign domestic workers in coordination with INTERCEDE, an organization that advocates for the rights of foreign domestic workers living in Canada under specific labour migration programs. For many years, NAC, through its international solidarity committee, has promoted solidarity with women in the third world. The participation of women of colour and immigrant women has strengthened the policies and campaigns of NAC with regards to solidarity in general and the globalization of the economy and its negative effects for women, in particular. NAC has led the international struggle of women against APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation). Based on its analyses and actions organized with Chilean women's groups, NAC has been invited to organize a conference on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, the United States, and Mexico (to which Chile will soon join). The continental organization committee (Chile, Argentina, and Mexico) has accepted NAC's proposal for "gender mapping."

The most significant obstacle to achieving integration in practice has been the

danger of losing its privileged position as a women's interlocutor with the state. NAC walked out of the Federal Panel on Violence against Women (an initiative of the federal government) because the government refused to recognize racist violence suffered by many women at the hands of the police – a key demand of many women's organizations. The decision was difficult, but in the end, NAC won the respect and support of many national women of colour organizations.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for NAC was its decision to fight for the "no" side in the 1992 federal referendum on the constitution in opposition to the position of all the federal political elites. NAC fought for the "no" side precisely because the proposed constitutional changes denied the rights of indigenous peoples. Moreover, its framework did not recognize new Canadian social and political actors. In the end, the "no" side won. NAC also won great respect from non-traditional sectors and recognition as a strong political actor on issues of national scope – not just supposed "women's issues."

Recognizing diversity has been a challenge for the women's movement. What we Canadian women have learned is that quotas and designated positions help to achieve full integration but do not necessarily guarantee it. A basic principle has been the recognition that differences among women are not only descriptive, but that some are also based on unequal power relations amongst ourselves. To put into practice this basic principle, we have to analyze our perspectives of the whole world. Often "women's interests" reflect only one perspective – the dominant one (white, middle-class women) – without recognizing that, as women, we experience different forms of discrimination that, in turn, require different strategies to fight them. This means that, as well as fighting for recognition of "women's interests" as including the economy and integration, there is also an effort to analyze and fight against racial discrimination as an issue for all women. Risking privilege has resulted in strengths for the Canadian women's movement in terms of new leaders and new alliances.

II. THE INTERNAL-EXTERNAL LEVEL: THE ALTERNATIVE FEDERAL BUDGET (AFB)

The 1998 Alternative Federal Budget, or AFB, is an example of the Canadian women's movement success in advocacy at the internal-external level – within civil society – and as a step forward in its advocacy strategy with the government. It is also an example of how to create practical alternative feminist economic policies in this neo-liberal age when the political and economic elites say there are no options other than those prescribed by international financial institutions (IFIs). Despite the fact that there is still some distance to go, important steps in the construction of an alternative, left-wing federal budget with feminist content have already been taken.

In Canada, the roots of the alternative budget emerged in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Since 1994, two research and policy centres, CHOICES and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) have been producing an alternative federal budget. The process of writing the budget takes approximately 8 months. The final public presentation of the AFB takes place just before the federal government presents its own proposal to parliament. The AFB consists of the budget itself ("the framework document") and a supplement of various analytical essays about the federal government's budget. The CCPA contracts CHOICES to write a draft of the budget and well-known economists to write the chapters of the supplement. Various commissions organized by a sector of the economy contribute to the development of specific policies. A steering committee with representation of various sectors (trade unions, NGOs, churches, NAC, anti-poverty groups) guide the process. There is a gender equity policy in place in all the committees.

During the development process, various open fora and "budget schools" are held to educate interested sectors (unions, cooperatives, others), and also to gather their

suggestions and contributions. The AFB is then sent to an independent firm of economists and statisticians for their validation. This firm analyzes whether the AFB can achieve the targets set. Later, they ask economists for their backing. With such support, a national media activity is held to present the AFB to the public and the government.

The 1998 AFB achieves the following: (a) maintains a balanced budget (without a deficit); (b) increases social program spending; (c) maintains the same quantity of tax income while improving fiscal justice (by increasing taxes to companies and reducing them for low income individuals); (d) reduces the debt; (e) reduces the poverty level; (f) proceeds towards “full employment”; and (g) protects the environment through some fiscal measures.

The goal of the women’s movement has been to advocate that its own budget demands be included in the 1998 Alternative Federal Budget and for a gender analysis of the effects of the government’s budget. Its goal was not just to include the word “women” here and there in the document (for example, only discuss women in sections about social programs), but that the AFB have a gender analysis integrated into all its positions. The AFB is a means of promoting its feminist economics demands and analyses so they will be recognized by (1) left-wing sectors who participate in the writing of the AFB or who use it in their education and awareness-raising programs with their membership or for the general public; and (2) serving as an important resource for communicating its demands to the federal government with the goal of recognizing their feasibility as well as the support it has received from other sectors of civil society.

Thus, the basic strategy of the women’s movement for advocacy in the 1998 AFB has been direct lobbying of the directors of the initiative. The leading lobbyists have been members of the “Women and Work” committee of NAC and the NAC president during the writing stage of the draft. For example, concrete suggestions were made for including a gender analysis of unpaid work

(that is to say unremunerated housework) and for visualizing the negative impact of the federal government’s budget on women. They also provided information on NAC’s own budget demands.

One of NAC’s strengths is the specialization of its groups and individual members in developing a feminist analysis of the political economy. For example, ECEJ (Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice) has carried out various studies with a gender perspective on unpaid work that became the basis of their contributions. NAC also took advantage of its position on the steering committee to include its current priority campaign on state funding for women’s organizations (the quantity and its focus). NAC was able to take the initiative based on the opportunity provided by the heads of the AFB.

NAC’s greatest weakness is the lack of resources (financial and human) to better develop its arguments regarding economic policy. NAC’s interventions have been made based on its own interests and initiative.

A fundamental opportunity for the women’s movement in this process is the CCPA’s openness to equitable participation of women in the steering committee and working groups that advise the preparation of the document. This openness has also been expressed in their contracting of two feminist economists (Isa Bakker and Diane Elson), who are internationally reputed for their gender analysis of the macroeconomy, to write an essay for the AFB supplement

Nevertheless, the AFB has had some limitations with regards to fully integrating a gender analysis supported by the women’s movement. The fundamental obstacle is that the economic framework used by CCPA and CHOICES is Keynesian, not feminist. Adding a few paragraphs or projects does not necessarily change that essence. Bakker and Elson’s analysis is the first attempt to integrate into the heart of the AFB a gender analysis. Unfortunately, it resulted as only a supplement to it because of timing. The CCPA, however, is committed to integrating this analysis into the next AFB. Another obstacle is that all the feminist contributions

were included at the last minute so they were therefore not included in the AFB preparatory activities.

The content of the AFB reflects almost all the specific contributions made by NAC as well as the essay by Bakker and Elson. Their budgetary analyses explain the direct effects that cuts to social programs have on the increase of women's poverty, women's responsibilities, violence against women, and on the stability of women's centres and groups. It demonstrates that the Canadian government has not lived up to the commitments it had formally accepted by signing the Beijing Platform. Bakker and Elson show that budgets are not "gender neutral" but rather "gender-blind" because they do not recognize that the roles, responsibilities, and abilities of men and women are socially constructed. Their analysis is based on the unpaid and caring work that women do in their homes and communities and how the lack of pay affects the national economy.

One of the most important results for the women's movement is that the 1998 AFB supported many of NAC's demands.

Another success is the federal government's commitment is to pay the money it owed to public sector women workers according to an equal pay case (see the next section). It includes the creation of a \$30 million fund called "Women in Democracy" as well as another \$50 million fund for women's centres that fight against gender violence. A third fund of \$100 million will create the Equity Participation Foundation to fund organizations which defend the rights of women, people of colour, immigrants, indigenous people, lesbians and gays, and people with disabilities.

This feminist content of the AFB allows the women's movement to advocate indirectly with other sectors of the population, especially trade unions, NGOs, and student groups who use the AFB to support their own demands or as an educational and organizational tool. In terms of the second stage of the women's movement advocacy – that of seeing their demands reflected in the real federal budget – up until now the

government has only partially recognized the AFB, but slowly, it is gaining press coverage. The government, however, has not implemented its policies.

The content of the AFB serves to compare strategies (or perhaps apply or borrow part of them), taking into consideration the different contexts. The process of feminists' participation in the writing of the AFB is also relevant. Without a doubt, the presence of feminist women in the various working groups and decision-making bodies has been important for maintaining the openness towards a gender analysis. Nevertheless, the specific feminist content was written separately from the rest and included in the final stage of preparing the AFB. The successes of the women's movement are based on its independent development of a feminist analysis and alternatives and for taking the initiative to lobby for its inclusion, while at the same time, taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the organizers themselves and their participation in the key consultative body.

III. THE EXTERNAL LEVEL: EQUAL PAY

The struggle for the right to "equal pay for work of equal value" as carried out in two Canadian contexts, by Ontario at the end of the 1980s and by PSAC (the Public Service Alliance of Canada) in the 1980s and 1990s, are two important examples of the women's movement's advocacy directed towards the state. This is an example of fighting to guarantee a fundamental right for women – a right which could resolve to a large extent the chronic problem of feminization of poverty in Canada. It is important because it teaches us some of the fundamental obstacles that the Canadian women's movement has faced in its advocacy with the state. It is not just a struggle for the state to recognize this right, but also so that the state puts it into practice to improve the living conditions of Canadian women workers. Unfortunately what stands out are the external obstacles and failures

rather than the successes, which have been difficult.

In 1972, the Canadian federal government ratified Convention 100 of the ILO (International Labour Organization), which recognizes the principle of equal pay for women and men doing work of equal value. Federal legislation on the matter came into effect in 1977. In 1978, NAC successfully lobbied the government to have equal pay included in the new Canadian Human Rights Act. The first provincial equal pay laws in the 1970s were complaint-based. Workers or their union had to file a complaint against the employer. In 1976 the Equal Pay Coalition was formed (with women from trade unions and others) in Ontario. In 1984, PSAC began to advocate for the right to equal pay for some 80,000 of its members.

Since 1984, the objective of PSAC has been to get the government to apply the law. Fourteen years later, the case has expanded – now 200,000 people are involved in the case. Moreover, a ruling of the Human Rights Tribunal and an electoral promise by the government has been added although it has not been complied with.

In 1985, after several years of negotiations, the government and PSAC committed to a joint investigation regarding equal pay for its workers and to respect and implement the findings. In 1990, after the government proposed an inferior agreement than what was recommended, PSAC made a complaint to the Canadian Human Rights Commission. Parallel to this legal strategy, PSAC also pursued the issue in labour negotiations. Since 1997 it has stepped up its parallel communication, organization, and mobilization campaigns. It has increased its support from other sectors (women, trade unions, others). It has also started a virtual campaign: PSAC has its own web page and has organized an electronic protest on the web pages of government ministers. It has held press conferences, study sessions with its members, collected signatures, and held workshops with experts.

During the 1970s in Ontario, women trade unionists in the Equal Pay Coalition fought to get “affirmative action” recognized

as a priority issue by trade unions. Their goal was to make collective agreements the target of their strategy to improve the working conditions and wages of women workers. Legislated pay equity was a lesser option but was prioritized after the majority of trade unions accepted it in the 1980s. With the approval of the legislation the Coalition turned to advocating around the technical process of comparing jobs by participating in the relevant state institutions.

In the case of Ontario, ten years after its creation, the Equal Pay Coalition succeeded in getting the government to approve the most advanced and feminist legislation in the country. They took advantage of the social democratic party’s (NDP) position as the official opposition and a minority government. Various members of the Coalition were members of the NDP or had some influence on party members. They also used this opportunity to create an intermediate solution to the basic problem of comparing job classes, especially those that are traditionally for women or men: the state Pay Equity Commission was created to carry out research and make recommendations. Some members of the Coalition were contracted to the government women’s institute, the Pay Equity Tribunal and the Pay Equity Commission.

In the case of PSAC, the union has benefited from the continued support of the Canadian Human Rights Commission. In 1991, the Commission accepted PSAC’s claim and set up a special human rights tribunal to hear the case. In July 1998, the Tribunal found in favour of PSAC. By law the government must respect and implement the Tribunal’s decision.

After the change in strategies by the Ontario Coalition and the approval of the law, new experts in the field of job comparison predominated negotiations. Other organization and trade union strategies were no longer priorities in the Coalition’s agenda.

In Ontario, the governmental Equal Pay Office had to confront two obstacles. First, the Office guarded its professional image by preserving a “technical” perspective on its role as advisor. It did not allow women

who wanted to advocate for a feminist interpretation to participate. Second, in the provincial government organizational structure, the Office, which was independent, was marginalized from the normal decision-making process between ministers and chief bureaucrats of the civil service. The Coalition lost control of the fight. Later, in 1995, the newly elected Conservative government shut down the Pay Equity Commission.

At the federal level, the biggest obstacle has been the government itself, which has thus far looked for ways not to pay what it owes for 14 years. One way that it has been able to do so was by criticizing the validity of the joint study. Twice it appealed the competence of the Human Rights Tribunal and twice it lost. In August 1998, it appealed the Tribunal sentence in favour of PSAC but a decision has yet to be made. The government has also threatened to change the legislation. In parallel negotiations with PSAC, throughout the case, the government has attempted to change the interpretation of the legislation and the court ruling in order to pay significantly less. Nevertheless PSAC has kept up its fight, supported by the backing of the Human Rights Tribunal and Commission.

Both of these cases have some elements in common due to the legislated nature of the solution proposed to the lack of women's economic equality. One element is the complexity of the legislation and the regulations for comparing jobs. The problem lies in that jobs of equal value have to be compared across sectors that are traditionally divided by gender. The results can be quite different depending on which of the three established means for doing this comparison is selected. This complexity has led to the creation of a mini-industry of experts that understand the technical language needed to participate in negotiations. This has two negative consequences for women workers. First, this weakens their organization and mobilization because if they are not experts they will not understand the process of their own campaigns. Second, a large quantity of money is spent on experts instead of on improving the salaries of the women workers.

Another and greater obstacle is the supposed neutrality of the technical process of job comparison. Experts search for instruments and language that is "gender-neutral" to make comparisons based on a 4-element formula: skills; effort; responsibility; and working conditions. But it is very difficult to develop this mechanism given the discrimination that exists against traditionally female jobs. A larger barrier is the very cause of unequal pay: the fact that traditionally "women's work" has less social value, especially jobs that entail caring for people. For example, police work is valued as more dangerous than caring for patients with contagious diseases (and therefore is paid more). Not only must the sexist language be changed, but one must also get to the root of discriminatory approaches.

After about 20 years of struggle, there have only been partial and costly gains for women workers. For the most part women workers in the public sector have benefited, while those in the private sector, which is much larger and where salaries are lower, are still waiting. In the end, the solution used by both of these Canadian governments is very expensive to administrate given the very few direct beneficiaries. The struggle has become technical, thereby creating a new specialization of experts, demobilizing workers from their own struggle, and creating the myth that real changes are being achieved because it is difficult to know how to criticize and monitor a complicated process that we do not understand.

There is a legal recognition of the right to equal pay, but little willingness on the part of governments to implement it. In Ontario in 1987, legislation was approved that was very advanced, less costly, more effective, and had broader coverage. Employers were responsible for ensuring pay equity and in addition, both the private and public sectors were covered. Regardless, its positive effects for women workers have been limited. And now this fundamental right has to confront neoliberal threats on the part of the government and the private sector. No longer is there the same opening for social demands that existed in the 1980s; and the federal

government still continues to deny its legal obligation even after 14 years its legal obligation (both at the national and international levels) and its own policy to settle one case in particular. It is still looking for obstacles to erect.

Once the women's movement accepts the legislative route, its struggle is confined to this path. In 1986, women trade unionists in the Ontario case argued that equal pay should only be part of a package to gain economic equality for women. Other components were obligatory childcare centres, worker re-training, higher minimum wage laws, and easier access to unionization. These demands are still being fought for, but now they are divided and have not had much success.

One important lesson we can learn from these experiences is our relation to the state. There was a greater opening for the women's movement on the part of the state during the social welfare era (before neoliberalism). But even during that supposed apogee, the solution has not been the most appropriate. Some feminists question whether we can really expect the state to be an instrument of our struggles when the framework imposed takes away their feminist essence.

The struggle for economic equality has to be much broader than legislated equal pay so that more women workers can benefit more easily and quickly and a simpler solution is found which allows women workers to better appropriate their demands.

CONCLUSIONS

These three lessons serve to analyze the specificities of Canadian women's struggles. Although it is true that there exist many similarities between problems faced by women in Canada and Central America, the differences imply the need to develop specific advocacy strategies. In both places, there is racial and cultural diversity as well as feminization of poverty and the existence of structural adjustment programs. But these problems do not exist outside the political, economic, social, and cultural contexts that

frame the lived experiences of women and the options available to transform them. It is precisely because of these differences that comparisons can be rich. They help us to not only understand another reality, but also to reflect on the specific dynamics of our own.

Separating the three levels of advocacy contributes to recognizing the problematics of each one. The internal level is an acknowledgement of the political work that has to be carried out amongst ourselves. It cannot be assumed that because we are all women that we all live the same problems and that the same solution will be adequate for everyone. Neither can we assume that we have the same perspective on the world – in fact what is feminist for one is not necessarily for the next. The internal-external level is quite complicated. Here we find ourselves amongst supposed allies, but we always have to take the initiative and be proactive. Often this alliance goes just so far – to the point where a gender analysis has to be integrated, not just added on at the end. Certainly this is a difficult task, partly because we still do not have the final answers. In our advocacy with the state there is also a contradiction. We want the state to recognize and guarantee our rights and many times the state shows its willingness to do so. But we have to struggle against other interests already represented by the state – the very ones that we want to transform.

Doing advocacy on the basis of a gender analysis, in order to change unequal relations of power, is an ongoing struggle. We need to and must have equity in decision-making processes – both amongst ourselves and in mixed groups – but this alone will not guarantee transformation and neither is the law a sufficient instrument for our ends. Not only that, with each of our gains, new obstacles emerge to counteract a fundamental change in how power is exercised. We have to be clear: ours is a power struggle, it is not a struggle to improve opportunities. Investigating gender assumptions on an ongoing basis is an important way to analyze our situation that will allow us to better understand the problems, obstacles, and weaknesses with the hope of having better and sustainable successes.

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