



# DISCUSSION PAPER

## YOUNG WOMEN AND THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

### DIFFERENT FORMS OF OPPRESSION EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN

These days, we often hear remarks like: "women have achieved equality with men," "women have the same opportunities as men," and "feminists have made progress for women, but it's time to move on." Some people even claim that women have too much power and are now turning the tables on men, imposing on them the same oppression we experienced. These ideas are false and must be corrected.

If equality has been achieved, how come, in 2008, Canadian women are still poorer than men? Why is birth control still women's responsibility and why is abortion not freely and universally available in every province in Canada? Why do women still do the lion's share of housework, and why are most single-parent families headed by women? Why do women represent the majority of people in insecure jobs (part-time, casual, on-call) and receiving the minimum wage? How is it, that in 2008, women are still victims of violence in multiple forms (domestic violence, sexual assault, murders, etc.)? And, what about the fact that Canada is a hub for the traffic in women and children, with women still being objectified in the media and in the collective Canadian imagination?

Women endure discrimination, our rights are violated, our bodies are targeted for violent attack and our integrity is threatened. Added to this are all the other types of oppression to which women may be subjected. Think about the situation of lesbians, women who are disabled, women from racialized communities, First Nations women, young women, single mothers, etc. These women live every day in Canadian society bearing the burden of multiple forms of discrimination.

### THE ROOTS OF THESE FORMS OF OPPRESSION AND THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

The different forms of oppression women endure are not an accident. Discrimination is not an isolated event. Just the opposite! It is the logical outcome of how our society is structured. The powerful elite in Canadian society seeks to maintain its political, social, religious, economic and moral privilege by promoting conservative, patriarchal, capitalist and racist values, all at the cost of women's rights. Naturally, most of the members of this elite are white men, although some women (and men of colour) have joined their ranks.

The persistence of gender inequality is not only the fault of the elite class. Simply because we are women, we are at a disadvantage compared to men, and this is true in all social classes. Within the less privileged social groups, women are generally more disadvantaged than men; for example, women from poor backgrounds are often dominated by the men close to them. In short, gender inequality exists in all social classes and the existence of different forms of oppression means that we must all stand together and act collectively to put an end to it.



## DISCUSSION PAPER

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### Neoliberal values dominate our public life!

Individualism and the values of competitiveness, performance, and efficiency are promoted everywhere in Canada. The ideals of social justice and equality and the defence of the common good are widely considered to be dated. Inequality is seen as the inevitable and necessary social price of economic prosperity.

Right-wing governments are in power in Ottawa and in several Canadian provinces. And we're not just talking about explicitly morally conservative governments! So-called liberal governments are also promoting ideas and policies that exacerbate poverty and social inequality in the name of "economic prosperity." Everywhere, we see the State withdrawing from public services (health, education, etc.). Now, after many years of budget cuts, more and more people believe that private enterprise is the only way to save essential services like health care. The principle of "pay for services" is gaining in popularity, at the expense of the principles of universality, gratuity and accessibility. According to this logic, it goes without saying that school fees should be increased, that education should be accessible only to those who can pay, and that scholarships be granted exclusively on the basis of "merit."

The 1980s marked the ascension of neoliberal ideology. These ideas were incarnated in the elections of Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States. In Canada, Brian Mulroney, a Conservative, instituted the first neoliberal reforms. "Governments have come and gone, but the 'market is supreme' trend has persisted. Today, the private sector is playing an increasingly influential role in government affairs. Following numerous cuts to social programs and large-scale deregulation, the establishment of the private sector as the saviour in the management of public affairs has set the stage for partial and total privatization."<sup>1</sup>

The mass media is one of the principal channels for the spreading of neoliberal values. It helps to maintain messages of hopelessness like "we can't change anything, because inequality will always exist" and "we must be competitive to succeed" and "collective action is something invented by idealist women who don't know how things really work." The media promotes these ideas more subtly by valuing competition, domination and exploitation and presenting those—mainly men—who succeed in dominating others as "winners" who deserve our admiration and who we should try to emulate. They try to make us believe that these people owe their "social success" to their personal talent, and therefore deserve their privileges and wealth. In reality, while personal talent can play a role, there is an entire system that supports the creation of an elite. And the members of this elite appropriate all the privileges and wealth on the backs of other members of society, who end up impoverished and marginalized.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of an excerpt of *Le privé à la rescousse de l'état: une stratégie organisée* by Anne-Marie de la Sablonnière, Training kit, *Le bien commun n'est pas d'intérêt privé*, Carrefour de participation ressourcement et formation (CPRF), 2006.



## DISCUSSION PAPER

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### **Conservative ideas and the "natural" roles of women**

Conservative ideas and values regarding the relations between women and men are increasingly prevalent in the Canadian public arena. The "traditional family" is touted: family meaning white heterosexuals, where the "natural" role of the "loving and kind" mother is to remain at home looking after the children and household tasks, complementing the "strong breadwinner" role of the father.

These values drive measures and policies that restrict women's equality rights. An example is Bill C-484, a bill supposedly aimed at protecting pregnant women, which will restrict women's access to abortion if it is passed. Another example is the cuts and changes to the mission of Status of Women Canada, a government agency that until recently was charged with the promotion of women's equality and the improvement of women's living conditions throughout Canada.

Another manifestation is the increasing prominence of fathers' rights advocates (masculinists), who minimize the extent of violence against women while claiming that men are the victims of feminism. Masculinists manipulate statistics on suicide, child custody and academic failure in boys, to portray men as collectively victimized by the feminist movement, which they claim has taken too much ground. Although false, these ideas are increasingly insinuating themselves into public opinion. This regressive context has marked our generation of young women and presents problems for feminist organization.

In recent years, Canada has significantly increased its military budget and used women's rights as a justification for its intervention in Afghanistan. This is actually a false claim: the goal of the Canadian incursion into Afghanistan was never the defence of women's rights. Further, the army is increasingly visible, conducting a massive recruitment campaign that glorifies images of masculinity that reflect aggressiveness, hierarchies and domination. The obsession with security has multiple negative consequences on different groups of women. It has justified the institution of stringent immigration reforms, making it even more difficult and complex to emigrate here. All this supports the emergence of human trafficking networks. These restrictive measures on migrants are driven by a racist ideology and legitimized by a pro-natalist discourse that promotes women's return to the home. Groups and public figures talk about the "excessive" immigration rate that is threatening the "national" identity of the European colonizers. Their conclusion: it is up to women to save the traditional Canadian "white fatherland" by staying at home to raise children.

### **Standards of beauty**

Women receive a double message: on one hand, we're supposed to be good, loving and kind mothers, and on the other hand, sexy lovers who correspond to the model institutionalized in pornography. The collective Canadian imagination sustains the image of women as objects of desire to be bought and sold. At the service of the fashion, cosmetics and pornography industries (to name just a few), the objectification of women affects us all, and at an increasingly young age. For many of us, it has an extremely



## DISCUSSION PAPER

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negative impact on our self-esteem, and even our mental and physical health!

### THE RIGHT

Young women and feminists in Canada are confronted by the rise of the Right. What do we mean by the Right? All the examples we have given so far are illustrations. In general, the Right proclaims the importance of tradition and hierarchy and the belief that inequality is necessary and natural (inequality of the rich and the poor, women and men, whites and people of colour, etc.). The Left, in contrast, aspires to greater social solidarity and works for greater social justice. This being said, the main distinction between the Right and the Left is the issue of equality. "We can distinguish the Left from the Right above all by its high egalitarian ideals."<sup>2</sup>

"The anti-egalitarian stance [of the Right] is expressed through a call to order: religious, political, economic and patriarchal order." In addition to promoting the idea of a feminine and masculine nature, the Right (in its call to patriarchal order) defends traditional family values "the transgression of which is at the root of not only same-sex marriage and gay families but also genital herpes, juvenile delinquency, boys' high drop-out rate, divorce and the sinking birth rate among white people."<sup>3</sup>

The Right, with its conservative values, is increasingly gaining ground, both politically—where its values influence decision-makers and policy—and economically, through neoliberal "market is supreme" policy. Not only that, conservative values are influencing religious, moral and social opinion. This trend threatens the achievement of equality and the advancement of women's equal rights. Young women are in the best position to assess the impact on our lives and we hope that the pan-Canadian young feminist gathering, *Waves of Resistance*, will be an opportunity for us to construct a shared analysis of the situation and strategies of action and resistance.

## WAVES OF RESISTANCE: RESISTING TOGETHER

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<sup>2</sup> Translation of an excerpt of "Distinguer la gauche de la droite," introductory political training session created by Regroupement d'éducation populaire en action communautaire (RÉPAC) 03-12.

<sup>3</sup> Translation of excerpt of "Les nouveaux visages de l'antiféminisme en Amérique du Nord," by Diane Lamoureux, in *L'autonomie des femmes en question : Antiféminismes et résistances en Amérique et en Europe*, ed., Josette Trat, et al., Paris, l'Harmattan, 2006, p. 35.