

**Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**  
**Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada**  
**Women's Issues Network (WIN)**  
**2002 Genders Colloquium**  
  
**University of Toronto,**  
**May 29, 2002**

Good morning, I am honoured to be speaking at the opening of today's Gender Colloquium. This morning I would like to look at where we are now in our pursuit of equality, and how we can move forward to meet the challenges of this millennium.

I think most of you would agree with me that we've come a long way over the past 4 decades. Forty years ago, very few women worked outside the home. Thanks to the feminists who worked so hard to move our agenda forward, some of whom may be gathered in this room today, by 1987, women were moving into the so-called non-traditional occupations such as law, and medicine, in significant numbers. We were even beginning to make inroads in the engineering profession. Legally, our status had also been enhanced by the ratification of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982.

A few weeks ago, the Charter's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference was held in Ottawa. One of the issues the Conference focused on was the equality provisions in Section 15, and the effect that this provision had had on our society over the past two decades. Section 15 reads as follows:

**15.** (1) *Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.*

Section 15, combined with Section 28 of the Charter, which many women's activists lobbied hard for, states that "notwithstanding anything in this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally

to male and female persons”, have had a major impact on the lives of women over the past two decades.

At the Conference, Marilou McPhedran, co-founder of Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund or LEAF, spoke about how this provision in the Charter had been used to further women’s equality. She cited a number of cases where Section 15 had been mobilized, including the “No means No” case that clarified what “consent” meant in relation to sexual assaults. In this case, LEAF argued that, to endorse the notion of “implied consent”, presumed men’s sexual access to women’s bodies, and denied women equal protection under the law.

However, Ms. McPhedran also noted that access to resources, since Charter cases could drag on for years, and lack of legal literacy, meant that some women who needed the Charter most – for example, single women, living in poverty, were not able to harness the equality provisions in the Charter. As well, we are far from our goal of equality in the political arena, in business, or in the university faculties. As long as there are such gross discrepancies in power balances, women will continue to struggle for equality in this country.

In conversations with some of my more traditional friends, they feel that their daughters are doing well and that equality has been achieved, and nothing more needs to be done. This seems to be the general sense among women who live in a protected environment. However, the picture is very different when I speak to women in the workforce, the boardrooms and in politics. Women are still often treated as “the other”. This attitude persists despite the fact that we make up 51% of the population.

So, my message to you today is that conditions have improved for women, but we still have a long way to go before we achieve the ideals represented by the equality provisions in the Charter. The Charter, and gender equality in Canada, remain a work in progress.

Before I go any further, I would like to touch on the meaning of gender equality. Too often, I find that men and women think that “gender” refers to women only. Women consult other women; projects for reform are designed to include women only. We need to start including men as well. We need to have men attend Conferences like this one, and include them in our discussions. I note that today we are including a discussion of the reality

for individuals who are transgendered in this colloquium. It is, of course, laudable that we are expanding our conception of what gender means. But we do need to include topics that address the reality that men face on a day-to-day basis.

Many young women I have spoken to, to my surprise, expect to have all the rights, but no responsibilities. In other words, they expect to be supported financially by their men, without needing to work. There are also women who work, but do not share the household costs. At the same time, they also expect to be treated the same as women who contribute financially to their families and society. To them, equality means a double standard. This, unfortunately, gives women who struggle for equality a bad reputation.

As Christine Grimard wrote recently in the *Ottawa Citizen*, “*the price of equality is just that...equality. ... Women have to wake up and realize that we have new responsibilities. Men are not there to be the providers anymore, but to be our partners.*”

Gender equality should not take anything away from anyone. It should give everyone more choices, and more options. It should allow both men and women to choose new roles. I believe most men still feel that they cannot choose to stay at home and raise their families. They still feel they must be the primary breadwinner. We need to explore new models for women and men in the areas of work, so we can all enjoy the rewards that come with sharing work, and raising a family. In order for roles to evolve, society as a whole - government, employers, and the education system - will need to re-conceptualize the nature of the workplace and family life. For those of us who are parents, we also have a responsibility to give our children - boys and girls - the full-range of options so that they can choose how they wish to live their lives, free of the pressure to conform to gender stereotypes.

On the other hand, women, like men, should not be regarded as a special interest group, and we must stop perceiving ourselves in this fashion, or allowing others to designate our concerns as special interests. We have a profound effect on society as a whole, because, at the moment, many of us are still the primary influence on the next generation.

So what we need is “gender mainstreaming”. This term came into widespread use with the adoption of the 1995 Beijing *Platform for Action*, which emphasized the importance of mainstreaming a gender perspective in

all policies and programs, so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men respectively. It implies that women's issues should not be marginalized, but rather integrated into every aspect of life. For example, according to the Swedish government, Sweden has committed to the "creation of a society in which women and men enjoy the same rights and opportunities, and bear the same responsibilities, in all areas of life." To this end they have created a Ministry for Gender Equality, which governs the Council on Equality Issues, the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman, and the Equal Opportunities Commission. In addition, "all ministers have the responsibility for gender equality within their respective policy areas". In Sweden, women are treated as the norm, not as representatives of a minority. Not surprisingly, Sweden also has some of the best social programs in Europe, and this makes it easier for women to combine work and family life.

In Canada, women's issues have been largely marginalized. While Status of Women does good work, its mandate is limited in scope. There has been some progress in breaking down statistics by gender, and in creating women's offices in different government departments, However, despite target-setting, men still make up more than two thirds of the executive in the civil service, with women over-represented in the administrative support category.

If one looks at gender mainstreaming in the United Nations Development Program for developing countries, a significant feature is its focus on implementing mainstreaming at the decision making level, rather than at lower-levels of project design. This highlights the importance of altering the gender makeup of decision makers in Canada. While Sweden has the highest percentage of women in Parliament in the world at 43%, in Canada, women make up only 20% of the House of Commons. Of these women, few hold positions of real influence in the government. As the M.P., Dr. Carolyn Bennett, former head of the Liberal Women's Caucus noted publicly this year, white males remain a dominant force on Parliament Hill.

So, an important component of gender mainstreaming, is to increase the presence of women in politics so that government policies will move gender equality beyond the current rhetoric. However, the percent of Canadian women interested in running for federal politics has declined in recent years. In the last Canadian election, in November, 2000, although the

numbers of women elected stayed the same, the number of female candidates dropped dramatically.

Faced with women's declining interest in politics, a grassroots movement has sprung up to train women in politics. In late April, the fourth annual women's campaign school was held in Vancouver. Sixty women from across Canada, and as far away as Serbia, took part in the four-day curriculum. At the school, young women are initiated into the realities of political life where male culture rules. Dr. Carolyn Bennett, who lectured at the school, described Parliament Hill as having a culture akin to a man's locker room. Faced with that kind of environment, women can either become like men, and join in the backslapping comradeship of the locker room, or they can move women's issues forward.

It is important to note that having a few women at the top, whether in the public or private sector, is not the issue. It has been shown, again and again, that many women, after gaining positions of power, don't help other women to move forward. They surround themselves with men to protect their own power bases. We need only think of Margaret Thatcher or Benazir Bhutto to realize the truth of this statement. So, what we need are women who will move women's issues forward; and we need lots of us. This week, the papers were heralding the news of Jean Augustine's appointment as the Secretary of State responsible for the Status of Women and Multiculturalism with the headline "*women's rift repaired*". While I am happy that Jean has been appointed to this portfolio, I would hope that this is the beginning of a series of such appointments.

I was not aware of how much resistance there is, in certain segments of our society, to the equality of women in Canada until I started a debate in the Senate last year that addressed the issue of sexism in the third line of our national anthem which reads "in all thy sons command". The response was amazing. There was an outpouring of feeling on the subject in letters and emails to my office, as well as in letters, and articles in the media. To me, it makes common sense that the national anthem, as the anthem that symbolically represents everyone in Canada, should not exclude women. It was less obvious to some individuals who argued that tradition justifies women's exclusion. If this argument had carried the day at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we would still not have the vote, nor would we be allowed to serve in the federal and provincial legislatures or in the Senate.

This February, I introduced Bill S-39, an Act to amend the National Anthem Act to Include All Canadians, which would change the words “in all thy sons command” in the national anthem to “in all of us command”. The debate in the Senate, and on the streets, continues. Some Senators, and members of the public believe that our anthem should never be changed under any circumstances. This makes me wonder about the meaning of gender equality in Canada today.

Fortunately, I have found that most men, faced with the fact that even the dyed-in-the-wool traditionalist, Justice Stanley Weir, included women in the original anthem in 1908, writing *O Canada* to read as “thou dost in us command”, on the same verse of the same line as our current anthem, have come around to the view that the “tradition” argument holds no weight.

The advancement of women’s rights has historically been linked to society’s needs, such as during the last two World Wars when women were brought out of their homes, and into the workplace to fill-in for the men who were sent to the front lines. Now, the need is there again, not because we are at war, but because of globalization. People are moving across borders at an increasingly rapid rate. In order for us to maximize our human resources, and find and keep the very best innovative minds, women are once again needed, and therefore must be given equal opportunities to contribute to society.

In the universities, in order to accommodate both women professor’s desire to start and raise families, and the university’s need to retain talented faculty members, some women professors are participating in shared tenure positions. In the private sector, many companies are becoming more sensitive to the needs of their employees of both genders. It is recognized that the most successful and profitable companies are the ones that look after their employees in a holistic manner, like families that look after their members. Having good day-care facilities for female employees, as well as maternity, and paternity leaves for parents of newborns, are some of the keys to success in these corporations. For example, some companies not only provide their employees with on-site daycare, but also allow employees to work from home to accommodate the needs of their families. Unfortunately, our government is lagging behind the private sector when it should be taking the lead in such initiatives.

Numerous reports have shown that governments, anywhere in the world, where there are significant numbers of women in Parliament, especially in Cabinet, have more compassionate social agendas. This became very apparent to me when I participated in the Global Summit of Women, in September, 2001, in Hong Kong, where I met business, as well as government leaders from all over the world. I was impressed by the Scandinavian countries' social agendas, and particularly impressed by the South African cabinet where over 30% of the Cabinet is made up of women who have contributed enormously to the growth and development of post-apartheid South Africa.

In conclusion, we need to let Canadians know that when we speak of equality, we also mean responsibility. I believe that the future of the women's movement must be one of building networks across genders, and across generations. As I mentioned earlier, many women today, particularly young women, seem to think that we have accomplished all our goals, and there is no more to be achieved. The media tends to perpetuate this perspective. And some men also echo these views. But if you look at the numbers, we still have a long way to go to achieve true equality in Canada. Gender mainstreaming has not taken hold.

So what's to be done? First, we need all women to realize that new challenges await us in this millennium. We need to develop a strategy to move forward, and meet these challenges head on. We can start by offering women special training so that we can make it into the legislatures and into the boardrooms. We also need women and men who are willing to act as mentors to others, and build networks of support for women. A step was taken in this direction with the formation recently of an all-party coalition of women M.P.s and Senators on Parliament Hill who meet to discuss issues that impact women in politics. I believe there is a role for male politicians to play here, and they must not be excluded. After all, these men have daughters who may be interested in entering the political arena.

Aside from guidance and support, we also need to band together to provide concrete resources – namely money – because this is what women often lack when they are entering politics.

Ultimately, we need a critical mass in government that more accurately reflects our representation in the population because, after all, that's what true democracy is about. When that day arrives, there will no longer be a need for a Women's Caucus, a department called 'Status of

Women”, or special gender sensitivity training for our military, so their personnel understand how to deal with women in war-torn countries.

Our future Canadian society should be one in which boys and girls grow up as equal partners, realizing that there are equal rights, as well as responsibilities, both in the workplace and in the home.

A few months ago, while eating sections of a peeled orange in our kitchen, our 2½ year old granddaughter pointed out two large sections, and told me that they represented a mommy and a daddy. She pointed to the “Daddy” and said, “there’s a baby in his tummy.” I tried to explain to her that only mommies have babies, but she insisted that daddies can too. Perhaps, in the brave new world of tomorrow, when men can give birth to babies, then we will truly have equality in our society!

Thank you for inviting me here today, and I look forward to participating in the conference with you.