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**Women's Work :  
Challenging and Changing  
the World**

by  
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**And Still We Rise! Union Sisters Organize**

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# WOMEN'S WORK : CHALLENGING AND CHANGING THE WORLD

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## Introduction

Remember the 1996 Women's March organized by the Canadian Labour Congress and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women? Women's energy, resilience and commitment to change rebounded from one end of the country to the other. The March sparked the coming together of the labour movement and social activists in hundreds of communities in a united struggle to advance women's equality.

Little did anyone realize at the time that our Women's March was a precursor to massive opposition to global capitalism, as was the ongoing mobilization in many countries in the southern hemispheres. In 1998, a spontaneous international coalition defeated a secret trade deal, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. The success led

### The March

The CLC-NAC Women's March was at the beginning of a wave of international resistance to economic globalization and the growing inequality it has spawned everywhere in the world. The mobilization of peoples and movements hasn't stopped since.

### Global Resistance

The diversity of the participants at the Peoples Summits, the World Social Forum and the World Women's March — trade unionists, youth, the women's movement, peasant and indigenous peoples movements, the peace, social justice and environmental movements — is unprecedented and represents a strength in linkages and solidarity once only dreamt about.

people around the world to believe in the possible, and a fledgling global solidarity peoples' movement was born. In 1999, a huge international protest in Seattle derailed a crucial meeting of the World Trade Organization.

Over 6,000 women's groups in 161 countries organized the 2000 World Women's March against violence and poverty. Millions of women around the globe participated. The work of the March continues today in all corners of the world.

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was marked by stunning protests against the architects of global capitalism — multi-

national corporations, governments and international financial institutions. No matter where those who control the world economy went — Washington, Prague, Sao Paolo, Quebec City, Genoa — an international community was there to demand change.

In 2001, this emerging movement came together at the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to define how and by whom the world economy could be governed. About 51,000 participants, including 15,000 youth, from 131 countries, speaking 186 different languages, took part in 2002, and participation doubled this year. Built on the theme “*Another World Is Possible*,” the goal is to change the world by creating economic alternatives to serve people instead of corporate greed.

## Backlash

Threats to the established order often spark backlash. Over the last decade, we've witnessed a concerted attack against the women's movement or feminism. Pundits declare the women's movement raised awareness of the 'women's situation' but all the problems are solved. The barriers have fallen! Women have gained equality! The women's movement is no longer needed. It should just politely fade away, in keeping with the rightful place of women, you understand.

The mainstream media, owned largely by wealthy white men, eagerly perpetuates this myth. In June 1998, *Time Magazine* declared feminism dead. *Newsweek* called feminism the great experiment that failed. The *National Review Online*, in June 2002, asserted that 99% of the work of feminists has been accomplished.

### Backlash Thrives!!!

The impact of this emerging international movement, in conjunction with ongoing local activism for justice and equality, explains the wave of backlash against the women's movement and other movements organizing for radical and lasting social, economic and political change.

“Unions were once a good thing, but they've outlived their usefulness.”

“Feminism is dead — a farce — wrong — we're in a 'post-feminist' generation.”

Anti-globalization protestors are maligned as “merely violent troublemakers outside of mainstream society.”

### **So, What Is Feminism, Anyway?**

Feminism is a movement for social, economic and political change with the goal of creating equality. It challenges ideologies, political and social structures, and conditions which disadvantage the vast majority of women.

To truly win equality, feminism must challenge all forms of discrimination. Feminists in Canada realize that inequality resulting from racism, homophobia, ableism, ageism, or classism is profoundly connected to the inequality generated by sexism. Inequality, no matter the form, maintains the economic, social and political power of the wealthy minority. Women who face discrimination on more than one ground are in the forefront of the feminist movement.

An integrated feminist analysis shows how the lives of women and girl children are shaped in political ways by culture, government and the labour market simply because of their gender, class, race, age, or sexual orientation. This ensures that rich, white men occupy almost all the positions of economic and political power.

Feminists believe that women have the right to participate fully in society in ways of their choosing, to earn fair wages, to have control over their bodies, and to have a voice in the decision-making process — in the home, workplace, community, and in the public domain.

“Our movement will strengthen as we deal with systemic and white supremacy, the sexism and patriarchy, the heterosexism and homophobia, the ableism, the educational and economic classism, and the ageism that exists here in Canada, and hence, within our movement.

We are creating a feminist lens, a feminist praxis that weaves all of who we are and what we are into a magnificent web.”

Joan Grant Cummings,  
former NAC President

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At the extreme, backlash against advances in equality reveals a deep-seated hatred of women.

Headlines include why feminism is wrong or based on lies. A worldwide, anti-feminist network publishes on the Internet. The 'Xmission' Web site tells 'Feminazi's to stop their incessant bitching.'

A well-funded propaganda campaign called 'Take Back the Campus' recently invaded U.S. colleges. It calls feminism a cult and supplies misinformation to students designed to halt progress on preventing violence against women, to keep women silent about sexual assault and to deter young women from becoming feminists.

Backlash hides a terrible truth — there is fear and loathing of feminists and women because we are a threat to the order of things — to the holders of power. It threatens to retract hard-won victories and makes organizing around equality and human rights issues much more difficult, both in unions and the community.

Feminist Katha Pollit says that the attack on unions and the women's movement mostly comes from those with privilege who stand to lose some of their power or economic resources if those movements were to be successful.

The emerging international social justice movement shows that the ideologies which create inequality for women also create it for working class people, racialized people, people with disabilities, youth, people in developing countries, Aboriginal Peoples, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people no matter where they live.

**During the CLC Women's Conference, we need to understand:**

- C the backlash and opposition to women's equality;
- C the connections between movements organizing for equality;
- C our role as union women;
- C where we are today and the gains we've made broadly and in the labour movement; and
- C our challenges to organizing for change.

Be sure to read the companion piece to this overview, "Is Work Working for Women?" It's chock full of data on women and work.

## So, Who's Right? Have the Women of the World Made It?

If it's true that the work of the women's movement is finished, then the world should be a pretty rosy place for women. Right? Let's take a look. Clearly, our work is not finished, despite the many gains the women's movement has made in advancing equality rights.

- C 1.3 billion people in the developing world live in severe poverty — 70% are women and girls [UNDP];
- C 80% of the world's 50 million refugees and displaced persons are women;
- C women represented only 11% of parliamentarians worldwide in 1999 — the United Nations links this to the large numbers of women in poverty;
- C women provide about 70% of unpaid work in caring for family members [UNIFEM];
- C violence against women includes rape, sexual and physical assault, honour killing, infant girl infanticide, dowry violence, and genital mutilation (two million girls a year);
- C the trade in sex generates about \$7 billion a year, and every year, four million girls and women are bought and sold into marriage, prostitution and slavery [UNIFEM];
- C two-thirds of the 300 million children with no education are girl children — two-thirds of the billion people who are illiterate are women. Ten million girls aged five to 14 work worldwide, not including domestic tasks [World Women's March];
- C the NIKE factory in Indonesia employs 75,000 workers — 70% are women aged 17 to 21 — income is US\$360 per year;
- C the lack of economic and social resources takes a large toll on women's health — 600,000 women die yearly of preventable causes related to pregnancy, and another 100,000 die from unsafe abortion; 300 million women in developing countries have no access to contraception [Status of Women Canada; *The Guardian*];
- C export manufacturing zones in developing countries employ 27 million workers, mainly young women. They work for very low wages for long hours with few labour standards, and attempts to organize a union are met with violence.

Women world wide remain in lower paid jobs and continue to be concentrated in a few occupations, to hold positions of no authority and to receive less pay than men.

The World's Women: Trends and Statistics, 2002,  
United Nations

These statistics bear witness to the inequality faced by women as a result of violence, lack of economic and social resources, ill health, employment and family relationships, and human rights abuses broadly.

Inequality based on gender is not an accident. Neither is the inequality and double or triple discrimination experienced by people of colour, those with disabilities, Aboriginal People, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, and those who are poor.

Inequality exists because of systemic practices which assign appropriate social roles, economic activity and human rights for women. Understanding the role economic, social, cultural, and political forces play in shaping women's lives is critical to understanding the struggle for equality.

## Women's Equality in Jeopardy in Canada

Inequality is wrong no matter where or to what degree it occurs. It is harmful in terms of how it affects health, security, and full enjoyment of basic human rights. It affects participation in all spheres of life — home, community, workplace, union.

Women's economic inequality is the fundamental cornerstone of discrimination against women. It affects every aspect of women's lives — access to food, housing, education, training, jobs, legal justice, freedom from violence, the means to ensure the well-being of children, and participation in the decision-making processes which shape their lives. At the extreme, inequality affects the very survival of women.

In Canada, as elsewhere, women experience economic and social inequality as a result of the social norms which assign particular roles for women — family caregiver, responsibility for child rearing and an add-on to men. We call this sexism.

When sexism is combined with racism, homophobia and ableism, the economic and

Kimberly Rogers was a victim of Ontario's oppressive welfare law. She was convicted of receiving student loans and social assistance at the same time. Her conviction meant a three-month loss of welfare income and confinement to her apartment during a sweltering heat wave in Sudbury.

Ms Rogers died in her apartment, eight months pregnant.

2001

social disadvantage is much greater. Age is related to inequality as well. Young women experience economic and social inequality, as do the majority of elderly women.

Factors which perpetuate inequality include governments, the workplace and the home. Public policies, both social and economic, are not gender neutral and have a different economic impact on women and men.

For example, the federal government put infrastructure programs into annual budgets over the 1990's to re-build roads, water and sanitation infrastructures. These are important works, but largely do not improve women's economic situation.

Economic, social, labour market and workplace policies which do not address gender-bias, racism, homophobia and ableism will always fail women by perpetuating or deepening their inequality.

A social infrastructure program, such as a national child care or home care program, would result in economic and social benefits for women. This type of infrastructure has not been part of the public policy agenda of governments, but our roads aren't bad.

Cutting back on public programs, such as legal aid, health and child care, social housing, home care, welfare, disability support, post-

secondary education, women's shelters, and Employment Insurance, make women's inequality worse.

The same is true when minimum wages are kept low; when labour legislation doesn't address factors affecting women's work participation; when laws make it more difficult to organize unions, and when pay and employment equity programs are cut. The following statistics tell the story of women's inequality in Canada.

### **Women's Poverty**

- C 18% of women live in poverty compared to 15% of men
- C 37% of racialized women are poor compared to 35% of racialized men
- C 43% of Aboriginal women are poor compared to 35% of Aboriginal men
- C 71% of all seniors with low income are women
- C 43% of women over age 65 who live alone are poor compared to 31% of men
- C 46% of families headed by single-parent women are poor compared to 23% of single-parent families headed by men
- C 48% of recent immigrants are poor (no gender breakdown)
- C 46% of young families where the head is under the age of 25 are poor as are 60% of individuals
- C women with a disability earned just \$15,600 on average in 1994
- C it would take about \$7,000 more in income a year, on average, to move out of poverty

Sources: Statistics Canada and Women In Canada, 2000-2001

### **Women and Child Care: An Equality Issue**

Child care is one of the most pressing needs of women in Canada. Lack of affordable care contributes to women's economic inequality because it limits participation in paid work. Child care is important as an anti-poverty strategy, but it's equally important for children's healthy development.

The federal government promised, but has not delivered a national program. Regulated child care is the only guarantee of care quality, yet, only 1 in 10 children under age 12 are in regulated care. Households spend \$2,428 yearly for child care on average, but costs are much higher in child care centres.

Seventy per cent of women with children under age 16 are in the paid workforce, including 64% with children under age six. Over 90% of women return to work within one year after giving birth.

Lack of affordable child care is particularly hard on young women because their incomes tend to be low. Aboriginal women have families of higher than average size which increases their care-giving responsibilities and the need for affordable child care.

Almost 96% of child care workers are women. Their average wage was \$20,600 in 2000. This is a prime example of how women's caring work is undervalued and underpaid.

**The Wage Gap : Women Need Pay Equity Now!**

- C Overall, women earn 63.9 cents for every dollar men earn, and women who work full-year, full-time earn 73 cents for every dollar men earn.
- C In 2000, average annual earnings of all women was \$23,796 or \$13,000 less than men's.
- C 54% of all people earning low-pay (less than \$20,000) are women — the poverty line for one person is \$19,261 and \$29,944 for a family of three.
- C 6% of women work for minimum wages, as do 9% of women aged 20 to 24 compared to just 3.7% of men. Sixty-two per cent of all minimum wage earners are women.
- C 84% of people earning over \$100,000 a year are men; the number of women of colour in this category is statistically too insignificant to even count.
- C The wage gap for women with a university degree increased from 75.9% of what men earn to 69.8% between 1995 and 2000. This is a troubling sign of growing inequality.
- C The wage gap for racialized women was \$3,000 less than other women in 1995, \$6,000 for Aboriginal women, and just over \$5,000 for women with disabilities. (Latest data available.)

### **Earn Less - Retire With Less: Women and Pensions**

Women live longer than men; have higher rates of chronic illness, and generally have less income than men. This adds up to inequality in pension protection for women when they retire.

- C 71% of all seniors with low income are women
- C 39% of women have work-related pension plans — 42% of men have a work pension
- C women work for 75% of their potential work years, whereas men work 94%
- C with women's average earnings at only \$23,796, the majority can't afford to contribute to RRSPs
- C public pensions are a crucial source of retirement income for women, making up 60% of this income; only 22% of single-parent mothers have a pension
- C women's average income over age 65 is just \$16,898, which is \$2,300 below the poverty line for an individual compared to \$26,833 for men

**Inadequate pension income is a key source of women's inequality, especially for single women.**

### **Housing: A Fundamental Human Right**

Adequate housing is a fundamental right enshrined in international human rights laws because housing is so basic to human dignity, physical and mental health, and security of the person.

Since women are more likely to have lower incomes, affordable housing is a key issue for women's equality. Between 1989 and 2000, 10 of Canada's 15 major cities had average rent increases of 20%, while household income grew by just 3%.

Twenty per cent of people pay more than 50% of their income on rent, putting them in core housing need. Single-parent women, young women, older single women, women with a disability, Aboriginal women, and racialized women are most at risk of being in housing need because of low income and widespread discrimination. Racialized women and families report paying up to \$5,000 in house finder fees.

The number of families with children seeking refuge in homeless shelters increased by 45%. This is directly connected to the soaring rates of low income among young families. Youth and Aboriginal people make up a significant share of the homeless — the majority leave home to escape violence.

The federal government cut all funding for social housing. As a result, the number of affordable housing units built each year fell from 25,000 to 8,400. It has recently reinvested minimal dollars for social housing. We need a solid commitment to build 20,000 units a year.

### **Violence Against Women**

Economic and social inequality is both a cause and a consequence of violence against women. It has serious economic, health and social consequences for women, families and society. Violence against women is under-reported, but we know it's pervasive and persistent.

- C 51% of women report at least one instance of physical or sexual assault over their lifetime once; 25% by current or former partner/spouse
- C between 1993 and 1999, 690,000 or 8% of Canadian women were assaulted by their partner or ex-partner; 25% of Aboriginal women were assaulted, as were 6% of immigrant women, and 7% of racialized women
- C 39% of women have been sexually assaulted over their lifetime; only 10% are actually reported
- C 16% of women have been sexually assaulted while on a date
- C there are now 470 women's shelters in Canada compared to 18 in 1975
- C 65% of women say they're afraid for their safety after dark compared to 29% of men
- C studies estimate that the economic cost of violence against women is in the neighbourhood of \$5 billion a year, almost the cost of a national child care program

Assessing Violence Against Women: Federal/Provincial-Territorial Ministers  
Responsible for the Status of Women, 2002

## Women, Work and Inequality

Long-standing wisdom holds that the best form of economic security is a full-time job. However, over the last two decades, significant restructuring took place in the labour market — permanent layoffs, contracting-out of jobs, an increase in part-time, non-standard, precarious work, and an increase in self-employment.

Governments continue to privatize public sector jobs, jobs which traditionally have been a source of good jobs for equality-seeking groups because of higher pay, good benefits and high levels of unionization.

For far too many people, especially women, racialized women, youth, Aboriginal women, and women with disabilities, jobs fail to provide a living wage. This is reflected in growing income inequality.

The 20% of families with the highest incomes increased their share of the total income pie from 40% to 44% between 1981 and 1997. The 20% of families with the lowest incomes saw their share of the income pie drop from four to two per cent!

While full-time work used to be the norm, increasingly jobs no longer fit this mould. Full-time, permanent work declined from 67% of total employment in 1989 to 63% in 2001 — a sign of an increase in non-standard work. (Cranford, Vosko, Zukewich, 2003.) This type of employment is characterized by job insecurity; low income and benefits; little control over the labour process, and the greater likelihood of the workplace being non-unionized. (Vosko, 2003.)

### Women Work Because They Need To!

- C 56% of women held paid jobs in 2001
- C 70% of all women with children under age 16 work
- C 67% of women single-parents are employed, but only 46% of these mothers are employed when their children are under age three
- C 27% of women work part-time compared to 10% of men
- C women account for 70% of all part-time workers; one-quarter want, but cannot find, full-time work, and 20% work part-time to fulfill family responsibilities; only 25% say part-time work is a personal choice
- C the majority of families are dual-earner; if women in these families were not employed, the poverty rate for this type of family would have been 18% instead of 5%
- C 52% of employed women had work-related medical benefits compared to 65% of men
- C women account for 52% of those who hold more than one job

Women are more likely to be in these jobs. They remain concentrated in narrow job categories which tend to be lower paid. Seventy per cent of jobs in teaching, nursing, health, clerical, sales and services, and administration are held by women. In 2002, only 44.5% of working women were in full-time, full-year jobs compared to 56% of men. More women than men work part-time with women holding 70% of all part-time jobs. Almost 14% of women are self-employed. Overall, 1 in 5 women are in very precarious or non-standard jobs and one-third of women receive low pay.

Self-employment has grown to almost 11% of all jobs. The average annual income of women who are self-employed on their own account was just \$13,032 compared to \$19,769 for men in 1999. Self-employed workers lack important benefits, such as pensions, LTD and medical benefits. Self-employed women have no access to pay or employment equity programs, or to union protection which greatly improve economic security.

Aboriginal women and women with disabilities experience deep inequality and poverty. In 1996, 43% of Aboriginal women had incomes below the poverty line compared to 20% of non-Aboriginal women. On average, the income of women with disabilities was just \$15,600 in 1994 — \$5,000 below the average income of women without disabilities.

Racialized women workers have lower pay than other women. Almost 53% have incomes of less than \$20,000 compared to 38% of racialized men and 32% of all other men. They're less likely to have a pension — 35% compared to 39%. Discrimination, racism and sometimes language play a significant role in this inequality.

Young workers are concentrated in areas of work most vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination as evidenced by high rates of poverty, especially among young families with children. The inequality experienced by young women can be accounted for by low-income jobs, minimum wages far below the poverty line, lack of affordable child care, limited access to Employment Insurance (EI), and discrimination.

All of these changes, together with cuts to income-support programs and social programs, have left families and individuals either poor or more vulnerable

Women's economic inequality primarily stems from the labour market which makes the 'social

Despite higher levels of skills and post-secondary education than non-racialized Canadians, racialized workers experience greater income inequality. Many racialized immigrants, especially recent women immigrants, find themselves trapped in low-wage, insecure jobs.

Women simply do not have the

resources to pay for private care, so access becomes unequal.

The lack of child care, home and elder care deepens women's economic inequality by limiting time for paid work. Social assistance rates are far below the poverty line. Less than 30% of women qualify for Employment Insurance (EI).

to becoming poor. Rather than a source of good jobs with higher wages, the labour market perpetuates women's economic inequality.

It is not an accident that women are concentrated in part-time, precarious work. Women retain the primary responsibility for the family and do the bulk of unpaid labour, affecting their participation in work. This has not been taken into account through policies which better balance work and family. Women's economic inequality can be summed up as a combination of low wages and no wages for women's work.

Unionization is one answer. As much as the labour market contributes to inequality, unionized women have an advantage. Union women make \$5.44 per hour more than non-unionized women on average. The advantage extends to benefits. For workers of colour, the difference is equally significant. Unionized women of colour workers had average earnings of \$27,908 in 1999 or \$7,136 more than those not in unions. Public policies, as shown below, would also help.

**Women-Friendly Policies — Building the Social Wage**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| C child care                            | C anti-violence against women strategies             |
| C home and elder care                   | C policies focussing on young women                  |
| C pay equity legislation                | C anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies   |
| C employment equity legislation         | C income support policy for people with disabilities |
| C enhanced and enriched maternity leave | C strategies to address Aboriginal inequality        |
| C unemployment insurance                | C family responsibility standards in employment law  |
| C pensions                              | C access to education and training                   |
| C reform social assistance              |  |
| C immigration and refugee policy        |  |
| C increased minimum wages               |  |
| C laws facilitating union organizing    |  |

## Economic Globalization: Driving up Inequality

What's happening in Canada is part of a worldwide drive by capitalism to create a single, global market economy with a single set of rules to ensure mega profits. It has profoundly deepened and expanded inequality and poverty worldwide. The architects of this economic globalization are the owners and shareholders of multi-national corporations.

Economic globalization cannot take place without the participation and compliance of governments. It is a right-wing, ideological approach to how the economy is structured and it's solely a political choice. Nothing is inevitable about it. Many other choices could be made, but they would threaten the obscene accumulation of wealth that this economic model has generated. Those with economic and political power do not want these choices to be made.

Creating a global economy is a tall order, and mechanisms are needed to make it happen. There are four basic elements forming the foundation of the global economy:

1. All barriers to economic growth, access to markets and thus, to profits, must be torn down, even if they have positive objectives, such as a healthy environment, safe food, the protection of jobs, access to water, human rights, or public health care.

2. Government laws which stand in the way of this or decrease profit margins must be eliminated.
3. Intellectual property rights for corporations must be given protection through patent laws.
4. Every economic activity must be turned into a commodity for sale in the market, including public goods, such as health, education and child care.

"The reality is that in taking down barriers to trade, new barriers arise in the availability of public goods and services."

Naomi Klein

Right now, the World Trade Organization (WTO) is forging a trade deal on services which could put all public services on a commercial footing. (GATS) Public services are essential to women's equality because they raise living standards.

The primary vehicle for putting these elements in place are international trade agreements which set aside environmental, social, economic, and cultural goals in favour of trade and investment priorities.

The building blocks of economic globalization are standard around the world, and are most often called Structural Adjustment Programs. This simply means changing the economy in ways which maximize economic growth and profit.

- C privatize public institutions and social services and lower taxes

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are international organizations made up of governments.

They direct the development of the global economy on behalf of governments which, in turn, are beholden to corporate interests.

The IMF and the World Bank provide loans to developing countries. In return, countries are bound to implement the elements of economic globalization.

The WTO creates and implements trade agreements.

- C exert downward pressure on wages
- C reduce environmental protection standards and laws

- C weaken or eliminate protections for workers — labour laws
- C thwart or prohibit free trade unions — organizing and collective bargaining
- C weaken regulatory rules which cost businesses money
- C weaken human rights protection
- C strengthen intellectual property rights through patent protection

The impact of economic globalization has been hardest on people in developing countries where absolute poverty and inequality has grown massively and, in particular, on women who are the most economically vulnerable everywhere in the world.

According to the World Bank, the average income of the poorest 10% of the world's people has declined from 30% of the national average to 24.7%. Over one billion people live on less than a dollar a day; three billion more live on less than two dollars a day, and many more on less than five dollars a day.

Economic globalization has threatened subsistence agriculture in countries in the South and has jeopardized the food security of millions of people in developing countries. It has spawned maquiladora (free trade zone) workplaces in which the majority of workers are women and where working conditions are horrific. It has caused massive unemployment worldwide, especially for women.

Economic globalization has led to millions of women, mainly younger women, being forced into a new form of slavery — domestic work. Often sold by agencies to families in countries around the world, these women become migrant domestic workers who have few, if any, legal rights, making them totally dependent on the 'good will' of their employer. They work long exhausting hours for wages that are a pittance, with inadequate food and no private life. Many are abused physically and psychologically.

Economic globalization is being carried out through national immigration policies as most countries are importing or exporting workers. Canadian immigration policy defines a growing number of people coming into Canada as 'non-immigrant' or migrant workers. Migrant workers are a separate legal category of people who have no permanent residency status and are denied the services and protections available to citizens and immigrants with permanent residency status. Thus, the government is creating a racialized and gendered labour market in which these workers have fewer rights than other workers.

It's clear that trade agreements aren't just about trade. They are about imposing a global economic and social order which is unrestrained by the national laws of governments. They're about gaining absolute economic and political power. International trade agreements and economic globalization are about rendering democracy meaningless.

Women's movements and social justice movements are increasingly international to respond to this global threat to economic well-being and to equality.

## Challenging and Changing the World: Women's Work

**So, the women of the world haven't made it...  
but, we will!**

**The challenge is great, but not impossible.**

Over the course of history, women who have never held much economic or political power, achieved remarkable change. We have made improvements in the lives of women in all areas — economic, social, cultural, political. Pioneering feminists, from the 1800's up to today, changed the world!

In Canada, union women have been part of all the struggles — fighting for our rights as workers and as women. It has never been easy — it never is when challenging entrenched power and changing the world. Women have faced anger, personal attacks, ridicule, and even violence in their struggle, but they were not to be deterred. And, neither shall we.

Here are only a few examples:

- C working women fought for the right to vote; suffrage organizers carried a 'Votes for Women' banner in the 1913 Labour Day Parade — Aboriginal people fought until 1960 for the right to vote
- C Annie Buller, jailed in 1931 for setting up a defense fund for striking workers
- C we fought for the right to work: 1870, the first woman ever employed in the federal public service; 1955, women workers won the right to continue working after marriage; 2002, 1 of every 4 women workers are in the public sector
- C women workers demand equal pay: equal pay for the same work, 1951 in Ontario (1952 - 1975 for other jurisdictions); equal pay for work of equal value in 1985, Manitoba; 1988, Ontario; 1996, Quebec and it continues...
- C we have always been part of the women's movement, at all levels: 1975, Grace Hartman, first woman president of CUPE and second president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women
- C slavery officially abolished in Canada, 1833; the last segregated black school closed in Canada, 1965; 1980's, Coalition of Black Trade Unionists formed to fight for representation within union structures; Lynn Jones elected first woman of colour CLC Vice-President, 1992
- C the decriminalization of birth control 1969

- C 1946, restrictions against Chinese women immigrating are finally relaxed; Chinese men had been employed building the railroad, but women were not allowed
- C we have always organized: 1877, Helena Gutteridge was organizing women workers in BC; 1941, Eileen Tallman organized the first Canadian bank strike; in 1978, young women workers struck Fleck and faced heavy police assaults to win union recognition; so many examples
- C Disabled Women's Network founded 1985: CLC launches MORE Campaign 2002 to demand unions do more in the fight for disability rights
- C Sister Bonnie Robichaud's case changes Canadian law to make employers responsible for a harassment-free workplace
- C same-sex benefits — Nancy Rosenberg and Margaret Evans, union members challenge federal law, and win
- C in the 1970's, union women win their movement to support women's right-to-choice in abortion
- C 1988, the Supreme Court ruling (during the CLC Women's Conference) removed abortion from the Criminal Code
- C union member, Tawney Meiorin's fight for equality resulted in a proactive obligation on employers to ensure workplace policies and practices are free from discrimination

**Canadian women of vision and strength have struggled hard to advance women's equality rights for more than a century. Unions and union women have been and are central to the struggle for equality.**

Union women recognized early on that the inequality women experience in the workplace is not and cannot be isolated from women's inequality elsewhere — in the home, in decision-making processes and in the realm of political leadership.

The factors which create inequality — systemic discrimination, racism, homophobia, ableism, male privilege and power, and societal norms — form a continuum affecting women in all aspects of their lives. The fight for equality rights must take place on many fronts in coalition with the broader women's movement so that the full breadth and depth of inequality is visible and connected.

What seems like such a simple conclusion was not simple for everyone. In fact, this approach to equality was the essence of the struggle to put equality rights at the centre of the labour movement's agenda.

Traditionally, unions collectively defend the rights of working people against exploitation in the workplace. Their central role is to fight for better wages and working conditions. Union women had the large task of getting the labour movement to understand that 'women's issues are union issues' and, at the same time, are broader than just the union and the workplace.

The work of women trade unionists in the early 1970's focussed on the key issues of child care and women's right-to-choice regarding abortion, very difficult issues at the time. This was a major victory for several reasons as noted by Sue Genge in *Union Women are Leaders — Their (Our) Impact on Social Movements*:

- C It was understood that control over one's own body is the critical cornerstone for women's ability to control all aspects of existence.
- C It developed a general understanding in the labour movement that working in coalition with community and social justice organizations makes us stronger and more effective in fighting for progressive change.
- C It was critical to the development of social unionism.

The importance of this shift in thinking within the labour movement cannot be underestimated. It set the foundation for integrating equality rights into all the work of the labour movement and for solidifying the shift from 'business or shop floor' unionism to social unionism.

Union members live in the world as well as in the workplace. Social unionism better serves working class people because it connects the impact of larger political decisions to the workplace, and demonstrates that change must occur at this level as well as on the 'shop floor.'

It shows that the only way to achieve political change is to build strong alliances with community activists, the women's movement, social justice movements, and human rights movements. These alliances, both locally and globally, bring the strength and solidarity required to change the world.

Integrating equality issues into the agenda of the labour movement couldn't take place in isolation from the structure of the labour movement. Essentially, men trade unionists had all the leadership positions. Given the growth of women in unions, the need for women to become activists and leaders was recognized — a difficult, partially successful struggle, but critical to advancing equality rights throughout the movement.

Social unionism has been the defining feature of the Canadian labour movement over the last few decades, and the women's movement helped support the move in that direction... like the struggle for equality, social unionism is not sufficiently entrenched in the Canadian labour movement.

There are still pressures to return to "what unions do best"... we call this backlash.

Sue Genge, *Union Women Are Leaders*

So, it began with the organization of caucuses at conferences and conventions which led to the establishment of women's committees — at the CLC and in international, national and local unions. Armed with the arguments that union issues are women's issues, and that women in the movement had to be involved and in leadership positions, change occurred over time.

Many unions now have women's departments and greater resources to do equality work and foster women's involvement in the union. In the 1980's, both the CLC and the Ontario Federation of Labour established seats for women in leadership bodies which gave them access to the political decision-making process. Women worked hard to win leadership positions in their unions.

Similar seats have been established for workers of colour, Aboriginal workers, workers with disabilities, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender workers. This reflects the impact of an inclusive equality rights agenda which recognizes that sex, class, race, disability, and sexual orientation are interconnected and at the root of inequality and discrimination. The 2002 CLC Convention established a youth seat on Executive Council in recognition that young trade unionists were being shut out of the movement.

Young people flocked to the emerging international social justice movement because they get it — they see the connections — they have a passion for justice and equality, and they have a voice. Our goal must be young people flocking to unions. We can reach that goal by organizing young workers and by setting the conditions for their active and effective involvement in the labour movement.

One of the key lessons over the years is that union women can't win the equality fight alone. An independent, evolving women's movement is needed to raise new issues and challenges. Trade union feminists bring an understanding of working class issues and politics to work with the women's movement and to other social movements. Working together to achieve common goals brings solidarity and strength in action.

## Where Are We Now and What's My Role?

Feminist trade unionists understand that gains in equality are fragile and must be defended against backlash, from within and outside of the labour movement. When there are difficult economic times or when world-shaking events occur, such as terrorism, war, or a shift in the policy of the United

There is a tendency still to view women's equality rights as frills or expendable — a signal that the vision of equality and human rights remains misunderstood. The achievement of these rights are fundamental to a world founded on true social and economic justice.

"The bad news is that as neo-conservatism takes hold in Canada, the equality that's been won is being threatened. Our biggest challenge right now is to be vigilant enough so that equality issues aren't pushed to the background because of the obsession with competition and deficiencies and the juggernaut of international capital."

Judy Darcy, President, CUPE

States towards unbridled aggression, there is a risk that work on our equality agenda will be put on the back burner. In the labour movement, there is pressure to go back to focussing on 'the bread and butter' issues.

In face of threats to preserving and expanding equality rights, it is up to us to continue the struggle for equality. We have the potential to solidify gains and achieve new rights. We can consolidate international solidarity and activism. We have an opportunity to be a part of building the foundations for changing the world.

We know we can do it!! We've done it before!! We'll carry on in the tradition of women feminists and trade unionists before us. We know the future of our movement depends on it! And, working

We'll march when we have to. We'll lobby with intensity. We'll protest publicly.  
We'll integrate equality issues into all our work. We'll support women in leadership positions before and after they win.

**We'll do what women do best — ORGANIZE!**

We'll organize new union members because we know that there is an advantage to being unionized in terms of wages, working conditions and rights.

We'll organize with all the women in our unions to take the equality fight forward!

We'll organize to get equality issues on the collective bargaining table.

We'll organize in our communities to build solid alliances with the women's movement; the anti-racist movement; the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movement; the social justice movement; the disability rights movement, and other activists for change.

**We can change the world!**

**We will change the world!**

for equality rights brings joy and satisfaction to our lives.

Sooooo .....

*Women's Work : Challenging and Changing the World*

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