

THE ART OF BEING A WOMAN

by Isabelle Christian, Chairperson of the PEI Advisory council on the Status of Women

A hundred years ago, International Women's Day (IWD) had its origins in the labour movement, where women fought for better wages and working conditions. It found



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potency in the struggle of women for voting rights and political participation around the globe. In the 1970s, the United Nations officially declared International Women's Day worldwide, to recognize the continuous commitment of women's movements and everyday women to enhance human rights and all forms of equality among people.

On IWD in Prince Edward Island, we balance recognition of women's struggles with celebration of our successes and achievements. We celebrate the many ways that living in the world as a woman brings unique perspective, meaning, purpose, and joy to our lives. This year on PEI, an IWD event focuses on women in the arts. We celebrate the ways that women and their work shape our culture and heritage. We also celebrate the women who have won the freedom on our behalf to have a voice through art, because it was not always so.

International Women's Day has a particular history of examining women's work and wages, and we also must confront the fact that women artists in Canada have not reached equality. A recent statistical profile of artists in Canada shows that there are more female than male artists in Canada, but that on average, female artists earn 28% less than their male counterparts. This, in a sector in which a typical artist earns less than half the typical earnings of all Canadian workers, with median earnings of just

\$12,900 a year, well below poverty line. While artists are on the whole getting better educated, they continue to reap less economic reward than other workers for their investment of time, energy, money, and creativity in their studies.

Artists are more valuable to our society than these purely economic numbers can express. They write, tell, sing, dance, paint, shape, film, act, and play our individual and collective stories, the stories that are the core of our human identity. How essential it is that these stories describe women's experience as equal to men's in shaping the world we share.

Still, statistics that show artists struggling, and women artists struggling in particular, are important, not only because they apply to creative thinkers and builders who we need to make and re-make our society and our world. They are also important as a pointer to women's continued economic inequality in Canada in many sectors. We celebrate women's day-to-day work towards equality on International Women's Day, but it is clear this work is unfinished.

In a message for this year's IWD, the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, says, "We can no longer pretend that discrimination against women and girls does not affect us or somebody we know. We see it on television, we read about it in the media, and millions of women experience it in their daily lives."

One particular theme the UN's Commission on the Status of Women is focusing on this year is equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS. In Canada, where women continue to bear a greater share of caregiving work, we know this fact increases vulnerability to unemployment, poverty, and poor health. In Africa more urgently, in the context of HIV/AIDS, we see a continent of orphans, with 14 million orphans being raised by their grandmothers. By 2010, we expect the numbers to reach 18-20 million. On IWD and throughout the year, Canadian grandmothers, including PEI's G'ma Circle, reach out to provide encouragement and financial aid to African grandmothers.

The other focus of the UN Commission on the Status of Women this year is equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels. On this matter, we cannot be complacent in Canada. Despite continuous effort, women make up less than a

quarter of most elected bodies in our country. During this financial crisis, women are drastically under-represented among finance ministers and in the leadership of financial institutions and corporations. To quote UNESCO's Mr. Matsuura again, "Quite simply, it will be impossible to construct - let alone implement - appropriate responses without the full involvement of women as well as men."

On International Women's Day on PEI, equality-seeking organizations on PEI invite us to reflect on the often understated leadership of women in the arts. We should consider the value of their points of view as expressed in their individual artistic works, but also how they lead by collaborating with others, offering mentorship and encouragement; how they organize with others artistically and politically; or how they make women's perspectives known among citizens, artists, and decision-makers.

If there were ever a time in the world when we should value and celebrate creativity, such as that we see among artists and artisans, the time is now. I invite you to take a moment on March 8th this year to consider all the ways women here and abroad create and re-create our world. And I invite you to take part in a celebration of Leaders Among Us: Champions in the Arts, featuring a panel discussion of some of Prince Edward Island's artist advocates who envision a world of greater creativity and unique vision, to address challenges that face the world's women and men and our shared environment.



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