



A Generation Later ... How Are Canadian Women Doing?

Is it time for a new Royal Commission on the Status of Women?

In 1970 ...

Half of all senior women lived in poverty.

54% of all families headed by sole-support mothers were poor.

Today ...

Half of all senior women live in poverty.

56% of all families headed by sole-support mothers are poor.

What is a Royal Commission?

A Royal Commission is a comprehensive research and public consultation process commissioned by the federal government for policy development and/or political purposes. A generation ago, Florence Bird chaired a Royal Commission on the Status of Women.

The Commission began its work in 1967. After inviting participation and direction from women across the country, it produced a final report in 1970. It contained 187 recommendations for changes that would move women towards equality.

Where did the idea for a new Royal Commission come from?

The 1970 Royal Commission recommended that the federal government establish an arms-length organization to advise on women's equality issues. In response, the federal government set up the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW).

Provincial and territorial governments established similar bodies in their own jurisdictions. Budget cuts and restructuring in the 1990s resulted in the closure of the CACSW. There have also been many changes in the way provincial and territorial advisory councils work.

Without the national voice that used to come from the CACSW, provincial and territorial advisory councils endeavour to work on issues that have national significance and that also impact their own jurisdictions. The Councils use their own limited resources to meet once a year so that they can place their concerns in a national perspective as a coalition.

Still, they feel frustrated. They are certain that they are not getting a complete picture of how Canadian women are doing.

At their 2002 meeting, the Coalition hit upon a possible solution and called on the federal government to re-examine the state of women's equality in Canada and to assess the risk of worsening conditions in the future.

The Coalition wants to ask individual women and equality-seeking women's organizations: Is it time for a new Royal Commission on the Status of Women?

Is it time for a new Royal Commission on the Status of Women?

Why are women talking about a Royal Commission now?

The most important reason is that so much has changed over the past thirty years. At the same time, we know that many recommendations from the 1970 Royal Commission have been ignored.

Women's lives are different. Political circumstances are different. Our entire society is different.

It makes sense to re-examine social, economic, and legal equality issues within the context of Canada in this new century.

What has changed?

More women are likely to be combining paid work with at-home responsibilities.

More women are raising children on their own. More women such as women with disabilities, lesbians, residents of remote and northern communities, Aboriginal women, and members of immigrant groups and visible minorities are asserting their rights.

Politically, Canadians have seen the adoption of an economic agenda that puts budget cutting ahead of social justice.

Status of Women Canada is the federal body responsible for moving the country towards equality. It has removed core funding from grassroots women's equality organizations, replacing it with project funding that limits responsiveness and flexibility.

The federal government shut down the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, leaving provincial and territorial groups scrambling to connect with each other to work in a unified manner on national issues.

At the same time, many provincial governments have incorporated advisory councils into their own bureaucracies, limiting the councils' previous roles as arms-length advisors.

All this has been happening within the context of broader social change. Back in 1970, we were not dealing with globalization and rapid technological change. The social safety net was being built, not dismantled. The wage gap between rich and poor was not so wide.

We did not openly discuss violence against women. And, there was no *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* to serve as a legal foundation for the work of the 1970 Commission.

What has not changed?

Women still earn less than men, still live with violence, have difficulty accessing child care, have varying degrees of access to appropriate health care, live in poverty (especially if they are single mothers or senior women), and are under-represented in government and business decision-making roles.

Canadian women need to talk about *all* issues - new, old, and future.

What if there was a new Royal Commission?

What would it look like? How would it work?

Those are questions that women themselves need to answer, but it is important to point out that women have a well-deserved reputation for being able to get a lot done with very few resources. And, women can do things with great creativity and style.

One need only look at the successful approaches employed by the 1970 Royal Commission to see how such an endeavour could appeal to women at the grassroots level and, at the same time, generate national attention, new learning, and political direction.

Is it time for a new Royal Commission on the Status of Women?

How did the Royal Commission work last time?

The first Royal Commission received about 500 briefs and 1000 letters of opinion, and it held public hearings across the country that were open to the media.

The Commission's work was based on two general principles:

1. Everyone is entitled to the rights and freedoms proclaimed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.
2. There should be equality of opportunity to share the responsibilities in society as well as its privileges and prerogatives.

Using these principles, the Commission underwent a research and public consultation process. It shook up traditional thinking about the place of women in society. It gave women a strong voice and educated the public about equality issues. It was one of the most dynamic and interactive Royal Commissions in Canada's history.

The final report focused on redressing wrongs in the existing economic and legal structures. After providing a comprehensive review of the problems facing women, it proved that discrimination against women was widespread.

In their presentations, women shared their concerns about education, employment, and family life. They asked for programs, policies, changes to legislation, and access to specific information.

The report directed the federal government to address these concerns and requests by implementing 187 specific recommendations that called for a complete rethinking of attitudes and policies towards women.

These recommendations provided the blueprint for change over the next three decades.

Were the recommendations implemented?

In 2000, the Ontario Women's Justice Network prepared an analysis called *The Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women: Where Are We After Thirty Years?*

The report examined the success in implementing the 187 recommendations. They noted that many were implemented very quickly. For example, provinces and territories amended their laws to recognize the concept of equal partnership in marriage. And, employers could no longer recruit for positions based on sex and marital status.

The report notes, though, that a disturbing number of recommendations, often those dealing with women in the most vulnerable situations, are still not implemented.

For example, the recommendation for a national, universal child care program has been ignored. And, unpaid workers are still not allowed to contribute to the Canada Pension Plan.

Clearly, there is still work to be done to achieve real equality.



The national coalition logo created by Lisa Murphy of PEI is inspired by the beauty and practicality of quilt making, a product of traditional women's work. The actual bird shape is drawn from a quilt block entitled "Flying Swallows" created by Naomi Parkhurst. In the logo there are thirteen birds united in flight representing the coexistence of Canada's individual and diverse provinces and territories as they strive to advance the status of women together. The circular flight pattern features the letter "C" for Coalition. There is an upward elevation in the flight of the swallows which depicts the aim of the Coalition to build on past equity work and raise the status of girls and women onward and upward toward equality.

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What could happen this time?

Over thirty years later, women could do an even better job to facilitate a thorough and honest exchange on issues relevant to women's equality.

Because of funding cuts, women have been denied this opportunity for at least a decade. They have a lot to say and they are seeking a forum that has been missing for some time.

The words "Royal Commission" may conjure up images of hierarchal structures, stuffy hearings, and dull reports but women tend to work in a different way.

Women work to include everyone. Women understand that participants may require practical supports such as child care and assistance with transportation.

Women want to welcome diversity by inviting women from varied

economic, cultural, and social backgrounds; women of all ages; women of all sexual orientations and learning how to remove potential barriers for participation to ensure that everyone has a voice.

Women can work face-to-face or they can use technology to connect them. There are already thousands of grassroots gathering places that could serve as starting places for the discussion.

Women's centres that have survived budget cuts are logical starting points. Given adequate resources, they could gather participants and facilitate discussion more effectively than formal proceedings.

Women use the internet for discussion all the time. Forced to do so because they cannot afford to travel and meet together, they are comfortable with exchanging views on-line.

Women living in remote and northern communities could be

included using satellite technology that did not exist in the late 1960s.

All these things could be happening simultaneously. Maybe, instead of having one chairperson, several leaders could move the process along.

At the same time, there could be some fabulous participatory research happening on the issues prioritized by women.

Imagine the energy that could be generated.

Think of the learning that would take place and consider the benefits for all women.



What are the next steps?

Canadians who want to promote a new Royal Commission on the Status of Women can:

- Talk with other women.
- Share reading materials with other women.
- Write to your Member of Parliament or to the Prime Minister of Canada and ask for a Royal Commission on the Status of Women.
- Write to an Advisory Council to offer your support for the idea.

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