

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Why Should I Worry About Cuts to Status of Women?

It has been announced recently that the federal government will cut the budget of Status of Women by \$5 million. It was further announced that Status of Women Canada will no longer provide funding for equality-seeking activities.

The first thought that crosses many people's minds when faced with federal cuts to a program is: why should I worry about this? Unable to see the possibility of direct personal impacts, many people shrug and put it out of their thoughts. Quite frankly, I worry that you're not worried about these cuts.

The rights and privileges that women on PEI enjoy did not magically arise, nor were they the 'inevitable' outcome of a liberal democracy. Even the most basic idea, that women are 'persons' was not a certainty in Canada. In 1929, a small group of Canadian women had to go all the way through the Canadian system and on to England to have women declared 'persons' under the law. The status of 'personhood' and the right to run for political positions was a battle from beginning to end – the 'famous five', as they are known, had to lobby and advocate for years. Consider this: there are Canadian women alive today who were not considered a 'person' when they were born.

In the past, women who wished to work in non-traditional fields had to endure ridicule, harassment, and sometimes violence. In 1989, women were murdered for seeking work in a non-traditional field; the incident was later called the Montreal Massacre. Currently, the glass ceiling still exists, with men being paid more for similar work and with the highest positions still largely being held by white men. The reason women can be lawyers, doctors, politicians, business owners, is because the women before us lobbied, marched, advocated, and simply refused to be told no. What we take for granted now was not a 'given' – it was the result of diligence.

The fact that women (and men) can now have a full year at home with their new child is due to the hard work of women who believed that it was best for parents and children. The fact that family violence is finally being talked about is due to the hard work of women. The fact that child sexual abuse and sexual assault are no longer just a woman's (or child's) dirty little secret, but a social issue, is because of the work of women.

The work of women to level the playing field, address issues of inequality, and challenge sex roles has had an incredibly positive impact on all women, men, and children. For

men, it is now acceptable to be involved in primary childcare; to work in non-traditional jobs; to show emotions. It also means that men in opposite sex relationships no longer have to carry the financial burden alone.

The social and political work of women is linked to the social and political work of people of colour, people from the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community, people living with physical and intellectual disabilities, people who live with issues of poverty, and many more.

These cuts and the decision to eliminate funding for advocacy work will have a direct and personal impact on each and every Islander. It will impact on the ability of women's groups to work toward prevention of sexual and physical violence in families. It will impact on the ability of women's groups to work for better EI benefits, increased minimum wage, and other issues related to work. It will impact on the ability of women's groups to advocate for improvements to the justice system's ability to respond to family violence and for increased accessibility of Legal Aid. No matter what aspect of life you consider, these cuts will impact on our collective ability to work for positive

change for all Islanders and all Canadians.

A lot has been achieved, but a lot remains. Next time you vote, next time you go to your class at university or college, next time you apply for maternity / paternity benefits, next time you hear of someone going to the Rape Crisis Centre or to Anderson House, next time you go to work, next time you walk down the street and feel safe, think about these cuts.

None of what we have has ever been guaranteed to us. We have what we have because people worked long and hard to get it. And until no more First Nations women go missing, and until no more women are killed by their male lovers / partners, and until no more new mothers are forced to keep working because her maternity benefits are too low, and until no more women are paid less for similar work, and until intersections of sex, race, class, ability, sexuality are addressed in all facets of Canadian life, we are not equal.

All Islanders have a stake in this. Please contact your local MP and Minister Peter McKay to voice your concerns.

Kelly E. Robinson

On behalf of the PEI Rape & Sexual Assault Crisis Centre

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*Assignment Editor*

### HIV Hitting Campuses Hard

The number of youths with HIV is growing at an alarming rate, with UPEI's campus being no exception. AIDSPEI's Troy Perrot, a community leader in AIDS awareness, had much to say on the subject.

"In the eighties AIDS was mainly a problem within the gay community, today 25 per cent of new diagnosis are white, middle class girls age 15-25. While awareness has increased within the homosexual communities, university students still seem oblivious to the dangers of the common residence lifestyles.

"University students on P.E.I. have unprotected sex and think nothing of it, no one is aware of how widespread sexually transmitted diseases are here. Students get drunk and have unprotected sex all the time. Girls think, oh I'm on birth control, we don't need a condom but in 2004 the estimate of HIV infection in Islanders

was 42, today two years late that number is around 250."

Perrot is especially concerned with PEI's methods of HIV testing.

"In such a small community, many are uncomfortable taking an AIDS test from their family physician, maybe their mom goes to the same doctor, maybe they've know the doctor since birth. Some people go off Island to be tested, others, with no anonymous testing put it out of their heads and continue spreading the disease."

Susan, a 2nd year UPEI student whose name has been changed to protect her identity, was diagnosed with HIV in March of last year.

"I contracted HIV from my first boyfriend last year. We had been together for four months and didn't use condoms because I was on birth control. He had only had sex with one other person so it didn't even cross my

mind that he might have an STI.. It still doesn't seem possible."

Susan has kept her diagnosis a secret from her family and even her closest of friends believing that she'll lose everyone she cares about if the truth was known.

"I'm scared to tell anyone because people think this only happens to girls that sleep around and are reckless, or drug users. I contracted HIV the very first time I had sex but I don't think anyone wants to believe that can happen, they want to believe that it only happens to those who deserve it so I keep it a secret. I want people to still like me. I'm worried that people won't want to go see movies, or that my friends won't hug me when I'm upset"

Susan is not surprised that young girls are one of the age groups most affected by the virus.

"One of my friends just told me that she had sex with her boyfriend without

a condom because he said that it feels better without a rubber. I yelled at her for so long. Girls are always trying to please their guy. That's what happened to me, that's why I have a death sentence. I wish girls would think about themselves first."

While Susan is still very upset and angry about her diagnosis, she's happy that she and her boyfriend found out early. She feels there are many out there who aren't aware that they've contracted HIV and urges all students to get tested annually.

"My doctor suggested that I have an STI test whenever I became sexually active and thank God I listened because to have HIV and not know it is so dangerous, it puts both your health and possibly others in danger. I know people who have come into contact with different types of STIs and have ignored the symptoms because they truly believed that it couldn't happen. It can happen."