

The Harper government's reorienting of Status of Women Canada

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THE HARPER GOVERNMENT'S reorientation of the women's program at Status of Women Canada (SWC) is clear. In 2006, the first Harper (minority) government changed the mandate of the federal organization's women's program. Funding for research and advocacy was eliminated. Twelve of 16 regional offices were closed.

This case study shows how, by 2015, funding that used to go to women's organizations, as well as research and advocacy about women, now goes primarily to programs led by, or partnered with, business groups with a much narrower, primarily economic focus. This shift moves the focus toward getting women working in non-traditional, resource and high-tech industries and away from the work of research and advocacy.

Conducting research means discovering new knowledge, insights and perspectives. It brings forward factual information even though it may be inconsistent with government policies. Research provides analysis that can identify underlying structural problems that need to be addressed in order to fix surface problems. The practice of advocacy allows people to use research findings to make a strong and compelling case for lasting, systemic changes rather than superficial, band-aid

solutions. Governments are often important if not key players in bringing about these solutions.

The loss of funding from SWC has caused many feminist organizations (especially national ones) to shut down. This has severely undermined the physical and intellectual spaces where women once gathered to develop alternative, feminist voices, policies and practices. As a result, women's organizations and feminist perspectives have been shut out of policy development federally and have less presence and capacity to engage in making change at the provincial and local levels as well.

This chapter reviews what has transpired with SWC's women's program funding since the Harper government was re-elected in 2008. It analyzes the programs funded in 2013–14 (the most recent data at the time of writing) in order to show who the money is going to now.

Background: 2008–2011

The Harper government reoriented SWC's women's program funding in phases. First, the mandate of SWC was changed in 2006. In the years that followed, SWC began to deny many long-standing feminist organizations project funding. It was a clear statement that women's organizations — including those SWC helped create — could no longer rely on this federal program for funding.

Women's groups across the country spoke out. Federal opposition party women's critics raised questions in the House of Commons and the standing committee on the status of women (FEWO) investigated funding decisions made by SWC.¹ Committee members grilled the minister about how SWC funding decisions were made, and heard from representatives of women's organizations denied funding. By May 5, 2010, 12 women's groups reported that Status of Women Canada had denied their funding request for the first time in their histories.² By June 10, 2010, the list had grown to 28 organizations.³

Parliament provided an opportunity for women's organizations to ask the standing committee on the status of women to investigate, generate public attention and press for changes. The pressure brought by women's organizations and opposition parties, and the publicity the hearings generated, caused the government to make a few changes to the women's program mandate.

For example, the government reinserted the term "equality" into the mandate of Status of Women Canada. It allowed a continuous intake of funding applications, rather than only accepting them at specific deadlines. After cutting funding to long-standing women's organizations four years earlier, the government fund-

ed 34 groups for the first time and argued it was “increasing funding for Status of Women to its highest levels ever.”⁴

After the Conservatives won a majority government in the 2011 election, with the balance of government-to-opposition members on committees shifted in their favour, parliamentary committees in general stopped calling attention to and questioning government decisions as they had during the minority years.

Current Status of Women Canada program funding

My research shows that business and men’s organizations have derived the greatest benefits from the dramatic change in funding by Status of Women Canada.⁵ In 2013–14, the women’s program at SWC had three priority areas:

- Ending violence against women and girls;
- Improving women’s and girls’ economic security and prosperity; and
- Encouraging women and girls in leadership and decision-making roles.

These three themes provided a framework for specific projects under the “Targeted Funding” program, as well as projects funded under the “Continuous Intake” stream. As *Table 1* shows, more than half of funding went to increasing economic security and prosperity, 40% to ending violence against women, and only 2% to increasing women’s role in leadership and decision-making positions.

Women’s economic security and prosperity

Within the theme of economic prosperity and security for women, two-thirds of the \$9.3 million went to projects with business-oriented organizations (see *Table 2*). These grants were intended to fill jobs by increasing women’s recruitment, retention and advancement in non-traditional jobs and in the advanced technology sector.

Most of the \$1.7 million in project funding for “women into technology” went to industry groups such as the Calgary Council for Advanced Technology, and Communitech Corporation in Ontario’s Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge region. The remaining \$4.4 million for “women into non-traditional employment” went to a combination of industry and women’s groups.

All of these projects were geared to developing strategic alliances with employers and sector stakeholders to advance the employment of women and develop pilot projects. Industry sector action plans made rare mention of women’s organizations as key stakeholders.

TABLE 1 SWC Projects Funded in 2013–14

Themes	Amount Funded	% of Total
Increasing women's economic security and prosperity	\$9,313,494	58%
Ending violence against women and girls	\$6,263,997	40%
Encouraging women's leadership and decision-making	\$370,000	2%
Total	\$15,947,491	100%

Source Calculated by the author

TABLE 2 SSWC Projects Funded Under Theme of Increasing Women's Economic Security and Prosperity, 2013–14

Project Goals	Amount Funded	% of Total
Advancing women in non-traditional occupations	\$4,427,207	48%
Women in technology	1,760,861	19%
Increasing economic options for women	\$1,787,992 ^e	18%
Improving prosperity for immigrant women	1,337,434	14%
Total	\$9,313,494	100%

Source Calculated by the author

The remaining third of the funding envelope under the economic prosperity theme (for smaller amounts of money over a shorter time period) was divided between projects that engaged women and communities in developing plans for women to access jobs or other economic options, and projects to enhance the economic prospects for immigrant women. Both areas included projects that were geared to helping women entrepreneurs.

Violence against women and girls

Less than half (\$6.3 million) of the total SWC women's program funding in 2013–14 went to address violence against women and girls (see *Table 3*). Within this theme over one-third of the total amount went to community-based organizations, primarily sexual assault and rape crisis centres, to enhance co-operation and collaboration between service providers dealing with sexual violence. Over one-third went to community-based projects addressing cyberbullying of young women and girls. The remaining portion (almost a quarter) went to five diverse projects received through the continuous intake stream.

TABLE 3 SWC Projects Funded Under Theme of Preventing or Responding to Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls, 2013–14

Project Goals	Amount Funded	% of Total
Preventing or responding to sexual violence against women and girls through access to community services	\$2,439,191	39%
Preventing and eliminating cyberviolence (e.g., cyberbullying, Internet luring, cyberstalking) against young women and girls	\$2,408,740	38%
Continuous intake	\$1,416,066	23%
Total	\$6,263,997	100%

Source Calculated by the author

Responding to sexual violence against women and girls is a laudable objective, but no funding was provided in 2013–14 for the pressing problem of murdered and missing Aboriginal women. Even when the money went to women’s organizations here, it was largely for enhancing the provision of social services.

A federal-provincial/territorial initiative with adequate federal cash transfers to provinces for social services could do much more to address violence against women. For example, by working together the parties might share and learn from models and pilot projects across the country in order to identify best practices to enhance co-ordination and co-operation of service providers involved in violence against women.

The single largest project dealing with violence against women went to organizations of men – the White Ribbon Campaign, which worked in partnership with the Toronto Argonauts football team to deliver a gender-based violence prevention initiative in secondary schools in the Greater Toronto Area. In 2013–14, the campaign received almost \$1 million from Status of Women Canada: \$600,000 for the project with the Toronto Argonauts and an additional \$300,000 to “build a community of practice among nine organizations currently receiving funding from Status of Women Canada to address violence against women and girls by engaging men and boys.”⁷ The project received three times as much money as the new Network of Women’s Shelters & Transition Houses, which is “advancing the co-ordination and implementation of high quality services for women and children accessing shelters in Canada through collaboration, knowledge exchange and adoption of innovative practices.”⁸

Conclusion – looking back and looking forward

The changes in program funding by Status of Women Canada under the Harper government show a reorientation toward an individual, entrepreneurial, business-orientated focus for project funding and away from funding women's organizations geared to meeting women's needs in a collective manner. It is important to have industry and sector employment plans that include diverse women. But this does not need to be the main focus of SWC.

There used to be federal sector councils, which brought together key stakeholders (employers, unions, sector advocacy organizations) to develop employment plans. Rather than strengthening sector councils and ensuring an intersectional, gendered component in all plans, the Harper government dismantled them. These councils need to be brought back, and they should develop plans to ensure women, and other under-represented groups (e.g., Aboriginal, racialized, disabled, LGBTTI) are in higher-paying jobs in all sectors and regions of the country. This would accomplish two goals: first, to create and sustain diverse workforces; and second, to free up money for SWC to support feminist programs and women's organizations.

Similarly, there is a tremendous need to tackle the problem of violence against women and fund appropriate programs to that end. But more should be done in conjunction with provincial/territorial social services across the country. The Harper government has walked away from federal-provincial/territorial tables where pan-Canadian initiatives could be proposed and developed, that would provide substantial benefits to women and girls across the country.

There is much to do to create greater equality for women. For example, a federal agency devoted to improving the status of women could play a key role in driving this change. Government could also spearhead a major public discussion about policies and actions needed to create greater equality for women, as it did almost 50 years ago when Canada launched the Royal Commission on the Status of Women.

Federal commitment to intersectional gender equality is essential to help (re)build a network of grassroots, regional, provincial/territorial and national women's and feminist organizations working to advance equality for diverse women. In order to do this, government will need to engage with women, their organizations and others to reverse the damage done in the past decade, and to reimagine what this and other federal programs should look like in the 21st century.

References

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Endnotes

1 Parliament of Canada. Hansard. 40th Parliament, 3rd session. Irene Mathysen, 2011-01-31 p.7504, 2010-09-20 p.4160, 2010-06-07 p.3513, 2010-06-07 p.3514, 2010-04-27 p.2037; Anita Neville, 2010-04-20 p.68; 2010-04-29 p.2149.

2 Mathysen, Irene. Parliament of Canada. Hansard. 40th Parliament, 3rd session. 2010-05-05 p.2396.

3 Private correspondence, June 10 2010

4 Status of Women Canada. “Government of Canada Increases Direct Support for Canadian Women and Girls”. News Release. May 6, 2010.

5 Status of Women Canada. Funded Projects. Call for Proposals 2013–14. <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/fun-fin/projects-projets/index-eng.html>

6 Includes \$150,000 from the Continuous Intake program.

7 Status of Women Canada. Funded Projects. Continuous Intake 2013–14. <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/fun-fin/projects-projets/index-eng.html>

8 Status of Women Canada. Funded Projects. Disclosure of Grant and Contribution Awards. <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/trans/account-resp/pd-dp/dgc-dsc/2013-2014/gc-sc-788-eng.html>

