



SHAPING PUBLIC POLICY THE WOMEN'S AGENDA

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

THE ASK

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Let me put this session in context: This national conference on community economic development and social economy brings together 600 people for 3 days in 50 sessions, examining economic sustainability through growth rooted in the community

Some people might ask: What does the women's agenda have to do with this?

I'm here to say the women's agenda *is* about development. It's about achieving economic sustainability rooted in sustainable human development. I'm here to suggest ways to focus that agenda to get better traction. I'm here to help you think about The Ask.

First let me put the women's agenda, and this speech, in context; a context of time. We just marked the 10th anniversary of the Beijing commitment: an international convention to reduce barriers to women's equality, signed by 189 nations in Beijing in 1995. Canada was one of those nations, and that same year, 1995, the federal government produced a Platform for Action to honour those commitments and operationalize them. That same year, 1995, produced a watershed federal budget, a budget that has transformed the very nature of the federal government. It's been 10 years since those promises were made, and that budget was tabled. During those intervening 10 years, far from moving ahead, the women of Canada have lost ground in their struggle to attain greater social, economic and political equity. This has occurred despite a 9-year string of huge federal surpluses that are unprecedented in our fiscal history, and unparalleled around the industrialized world.

We just marked International Women's Day. In Toronto that meant thousands of people protested in the streets about the plight of the working poor, particularly immigrant, visible minority, mostly educated women who can't make a living wage from their full time jobs as hotel workers. The tourism trade is a growth industry in our town, in our country, around the world. Despite this being a growing driver of the global economy, and increasingly lucrative, having a job in this sector doesn't guarantee sustainable economics for households that make their living from it. The feminization of poverty continues apace, around the world and at home, for waged and unwaged women alike.

We are in the middle of an “All-Khandahar-All-The-Time” public relations campaign that is saturating our media with the importance of doing “development” work in the war-torn nation of Afghanistan, not overlooking, but not focusing on the military work there.

We are on the brink of another federal budget, where we can expect that none of the commitments made to women 10 years ago or since will be honoured. If it is a budget like the provincial budgets of the last few weeks, it will largely ignore the needs of half the country’s voters, women.

Let me make clear my intention for the next few minutes: To remind us what the women’s agenda is, and to link it to the work of development, at home and abroad.

Without an agenda, you can’t shape The Ask.

The Ask is what we demand of our governments. It is only as successful as it is powerful, it is only as powerful as the message is focused, concentrated.

Our concentrated, focused message to ourselves, and our politicians, for the past two generations has been this:

Women are economically vulnerable, one man away from poverty. Women need to become more economically independent.

Women responded by getting more educated; joining the paid labour force in ever greater number; working ever longer hours; getting jobs in non-traditional occupations.

We still earned a fraction of men’s earnings. We were still largely absent at the tops of organizations, where all the decision-making takes place.

We organized, agitated for and got pay equity legislation and employment equity legislation. Those laws have been eroded - through commission and omission - or repealed.

We fell short, despite our best efforts, of significantly reshaping social policy in ways meaningful to women’s day to day realities.

Women face violence in a way that men don’t. More women than men are poor, and that’s as true in Canada as it elsewhere. Women are working harder than ever, doing more paid work and more UNPAID work.

We were unable to stop the roll-back of social policy provisions that benefited women.

True, we are better educated than ever before. In fact now the majority of this generation’s university students are women (58%).

True, we earn more than ever before, because we work in record numbers in the labour force, and for longer hours at paid employment than ever before, and because more women are working more than one (paid) job.

More women are self-employed, running own-account businesses and hiring others.

More women are in the paid workforce, whether they have young kids or not. In fact you could call it a social revolution in the role of women - thirty years ago 1/3 of women with kids were in the labour force; today more than 2/3rds are.

Fewer women are choosing to marry.

Fewer young women are choosing to have children, or as many children.

More women, of all ages, are living on their own.

We still earn less than men.

We still don't have widespread publicly supported programs of child care and early child development.

We still can't count on access to shelters when we face violence or abuse.

We're scrambling more than ever to figure out ways to care for our elderly, our ill, our selves.

We still occupy fewer positions of power and influence, we still lack effective political voice.

Greater economic independence has not yielded greater economic security.

Security has both economic and social dimensions, and these dimensions affect women's participation and economic self-sufficiency. In short, you can't remove barriers to gender equity without improving the degree of security women enjoy.

What aspects of our lives are systematically less secure for women as compared to men?

A safe, decent place to live; availability of good options for child care; education, training, upgrading, and recognition of skills; unemployment insurance benefits when work runs out; welfare in times of economic crisis; access to legal aid, settlement services, and health care, including counseling for victims of abuse and mental illness

Improve access to any of these, and you enhance a woman's security and ability to engage in the world around her.

Make access to any of these things harder, and you take away the path to security and development for some women, the most vulnerable women. Erode women's security and you undermine the security and development of the communities in which they live. What's happening in Afghanistan is critical to Canadian women, and I'll come back to that thought in a moment.

Virtually everything on that list of things that enhance security was cut in the mid 1990s as our governments got their fiscal houses in order.

It is often said that the poor paid the highest price in the war on the deficit. It can be argued that women actually did.

If women paid a higher price than men, it is also true that certain groups of women paid an even higher price: women with disabilities; women who are visible minorities; aboriginal women

That price was paid twice: once through sacrifice - what women gave up in the name of the wrestling the deficit to the ground - and once through effort - what woman did to move ahead, advances made by individual efforts and individual efforts alone.

Let me reinforce this central fact: Whatever progress women have made over the past decade has been on their own steam. Public policy changes have tended to work against women, not support them.

Women have invested their own money in their own education; women have traded off their time with their families to put in more hours at work; women have invested heavily in private retirement schemes and in homes, even though many pension schemes have collapsed in value and housing costs are soaring.

Women are becoming more like men when it comes to economic independence. And still they are not benefiting.

Women are still more economically vulnerable, perhaps more vulnerable than a decade ago, and so are their families. Why?

Because of cuts to the social safety net, cuts made a decade ago, cuts designed to restore fiscal balance and still not yet reversed though we are swimming in surplus.

What was cut? Unemployment insurance; social housing; social assistance; budgets for home care, long term care, rehabilitation and mental illness, children's aid, legal aid, training and upgrading, immigrant settlement services; maintenance and infrastructure expansion budgets for public services.

The cuts were so deep that budgets were balanced *years ahead of schedule* at the federal level. Today only 2 provincial governments are not in a balanced-budget-or-better situation this year, and Ontario may announce in a few weeks it has arrived there (PEI is the other one) That means virtually all Canadian governments, except municipalities, are running surplus budgets.

So where did all this money go? Why aren't things better?

Surplus budgets have produced \$250 billion in tax cuts since 1996. Since 1996, only \$108 billion went to new health spending. Concerns about Medicare remains the number one voter issue in election after election. You do the math.

\$63 billion went to paying down the debt in last 8 years at federal level alone. No one was elected on that platform.

There have been two major areas of spending other than health.

- a. Major new investments in research and development have been the hallmark of the "innovation" agenda. About \$25 billion was slated to be spent through "Canada Opportunities Strategy" between 1997-8 and 2003-4. Did you know about it? They stopped talking about it by Budget 2004, but still finance elements of it.
- b. Spending on national defence and security almost doubled between 1996 and 2006. Defence alone grew from \$8.4 B in spending in 1996-7 to \$14 billion in 2004-5. Last year's federal budget gives Defence a \$20B budget by 2010-11).

There is money by the tens of billions for tax cuts, debt reduction, defence and innovation, but the cupboard is still bare when it comes to finding enough for a national child care program. We're still scrambling to find enough money for the basics like clean water or housing.

I'll just list again for you what was cut a decade ago: unemployment insurance; housing; social assistance; subsidized home care, long term care, rehabilitation and mental illness, children's aid, legal aid, training and upgrading. No plans are afoot to restore these areas of spending.

These are all things that can make or break lives, that build or deplete communities.

Next federal budget expect some more infrastructure money for roads and border crossings (not hospitals and schools), lots more tax cuts, maybe some more debt reduction - and not much else. The big ticket item? Expect more money, and lots of it, for the Defence budget. That's why it's all Kandahar, all the time.

That brings me back to the idea of security, and what General Hillier and Brigadier General Fraser say needs to happen to rebuild the devastated nation of Afghanistan -

They say Canadian troops are there to build peace, by working with - get this - women's groups, community groups. They say they're there to listen to their problems, build capacity, drill wells, build schools, etc. etc. They have actually said this is about "the next generation" and giving these kids a chance.

I bet the Aboriginal population in Canada, with 150 reserves living with “boil water” advisories, is mighty pleased that the Canadian government is so seized with the basic building blocks of development, and willing to invest in Afghan communities for what? 10 years? 20 years? “Whatever it takes” is the word.

I bet the people fighting child poverty through Campaign 2000 and all those people trying to build capacity for early child development for the past 30 years are heartened that the military is driven by such purpose.

I bet the women who were marking International Women’s Day on the very day these soldier uttered these sentiments raised a loud Allelujah at the epiphany that must have preceded such statements from the Department of National Defence.

Stephen Harper says Canadians don’t have a tradition of “cutting and running ” from these kind of commitments. He’s right. And nor should our elected officials cut and run from the individuals, families, communities that have similar needs here in Canada for clean water, schools, people who listen to the problems women are facing with violence and lack of representation in decision-making.

Who’s going to make that case? We are.

How are we going to make it? With focus focus focus.

We have lived through a focused 10 year campaign for tax cuts. We seem to be on the verge of a new mind-set that says it’s time for spending again - so long as it’s spending on the military. It’s time to link these pieces together.

On the one hand, there is money. On the other hand, there is a growing sense of mission to build community, capacity, a responsibility to protect, to do “whatever it takes” to give kids in Afghanistan a chance; a mission to increase the sustainable development of communities. That agenda for change looks an awful like the women’s agenda in Canada. Let’s bring it home.

We need to do that development work in Afghanistan and elsewhere. We need to do it at home too. We need to build a mighty “army” here, who take seriously the “responsibility to protect”, who are committed to stay the course for 5, 10, 15 years, “whatever it takes”.

That’s the focus our agenda. I’m not going to tell you how to focus The Ask. Whether the focus should be on child care, or shelters for women, or “EI” improvements.

Here’s why. I’ve been involved for almost two decades in the women’s movement, and I know how hard it is to ask people who have been pushing for the needs of their clients, their loved ones, their families, their communities to give up their particular fight and put their weight behind another struggle.

But let me tell you that the business community in Canada did not get over \$100 billion in tax cuts (that’s **\$100 billion** - think of the child care, the housing, the help that could buy, and the difference that could make.....) They didn’t get tax cuts because they were talking about something else.

We DO need many things, and we COULD make tremendous progress if we concentrated on one thing and one thing alone, like child care. And child care is a live political issue, a potent concern in working women’s lives. And most women with children are working women (about three quarters of them).

The corporate sector has a focus, but the focus didn’t eliminate diversity. They sought cuts to corporate income tax rates, increases in tax credits, cuts in capital taxes, raising RRSP limits, elimination of foreign ownership limits, cuts to capital gains taxes....the list goes on. They got it all. The cross-cutting issue? Paying less in taxes.

The cross-cutting issue for all women is the fact that we're still waiting for our fair share of public resources. There's no reason to be denied. The surpluses are there, and they are there because of sacrifices women made.

Hundreds of millions of new dollars are being devoted to new initiatives, but the cuts to the programs that enhance women's lives have not been restored.

In good times and bad, women have been told to wait. There is no reason left to wait. In fact, there is a solid case to be made that waiting further is a bad decision for ALL Canadians and for the sustainable development of Canadian communities everywhere and Canadian society as a whole.

We should be making our case for a fair share of available resources.

We can ask for a better process of determining what that fair share should be - through parliamentary committees, through gender budgeting analysis, through pushing for better representation from our elected politicians.

We can ask for better process from ourselves too. Raising our economic literacy about the real tradeoffs that need to be made, feeling confident that The Ask is feasible, reasonable, eminently doable, knowing it not just in our gut, but in our minds.

It's time to educate ourselves and work harder to find tough, practical and fair ways of putting women's issues on the political agenda, because they aren't just women's issues, they are development issues. They affect us all.

Maybe then women, and their loved ones, will see a path to sustainable development.

Not just economic independence, but economic security, the type of security that allows us all to flourish.

The security agenda is not just a military concern. It's a social concern. And it is the hallmark of what women have been seeking for generations.

Let's not just ask for it. Let's demand it.

Speaker's Bio

Economist and media commentator **Armine Yalnizyan** has worked with governments at the federal, provincial and local levels, with international NGOs and community-based organizations and coalitions, always with the goal of making policies better respond to the needs of the most marginalized members of society. After 10 years as program director with the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, she authored a ground-breaking report in 1998 on income inequality in Canada, entitled *The Growing Gap*. In 2002 she became the honoured first recipient of the Atkinson Foundation Award for Economic Justice and received the Morley Gunderson Prize in 2003. Armine's recent focus has been on the economics of health care, which is deeply integrated with her work over the last decade monitoring governments' allocation of resources in the light of their explicit commitments to basic human rights.