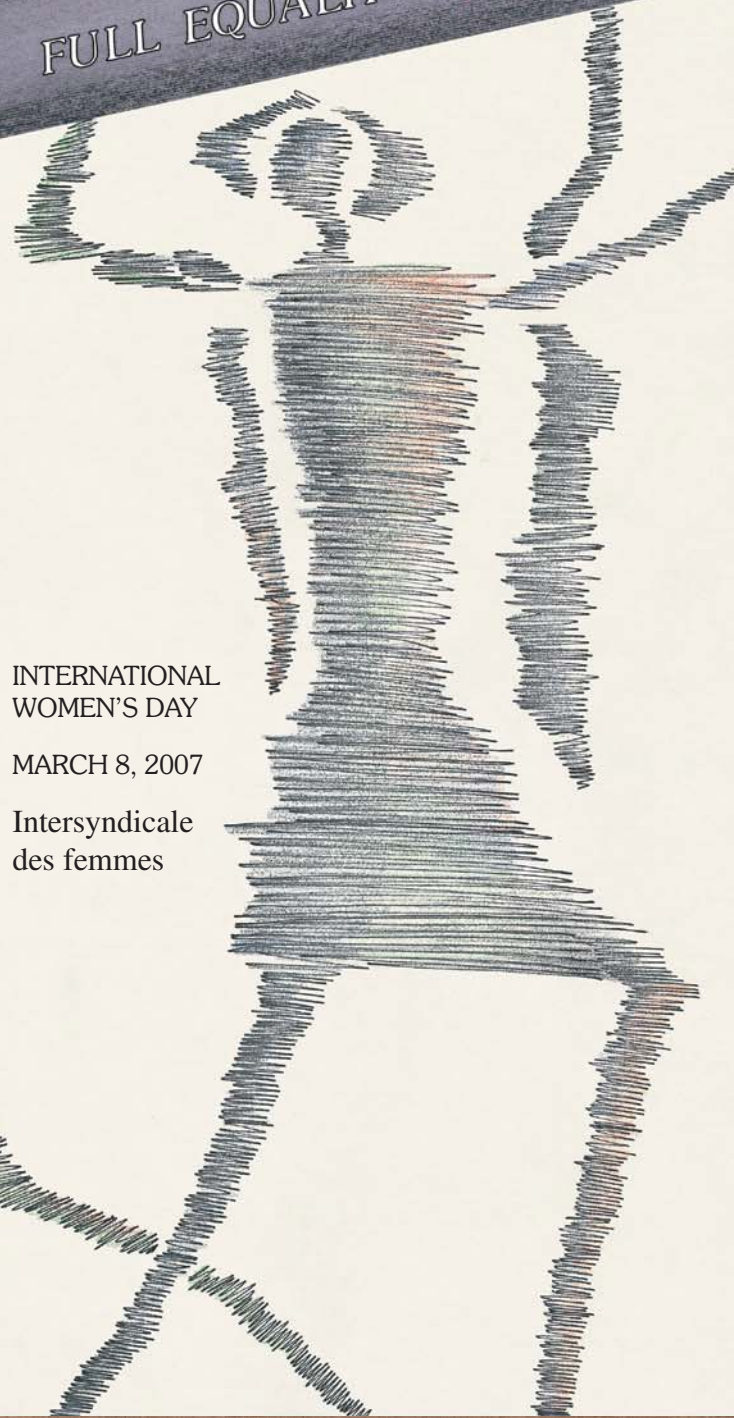


FULL EQUALITY

EQUALITY
FOR ALL



INTERNATIONAL
WOMEN'S DAY

MARCH 8, 2007

Intersyndicale
des femmes

MISSION NOT
ACCOMPLISHED!

Full equality,
equality for all:
mission not
accomplished!

Whether 30 or 40 years ago, or only yesterday, women have fought for and won rights denied for centuries, one by one: the right to education, the right to work, the right to legal equality, the right to contraception... If you're over 50, you'll remember. If you're under 30, ask your elders. Much has been done that we can celebrate. Much also remains to be done. We can begin by rectifying a few myths... and setting the record straight!

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Myth 1: Women earn as much as men for work of equal value

YES, the salary scales in the collective agreements treat men and women equally.

- And Quebec adopted the *Pay Equity Act*.

BUT do women really earn the same as men? According to Statistics Canada, women, particularly because of their family responsibilities, continue to suffer from economic inequality, with an average annual income of \$22,885 compared to \$36,865 for men.

- Women are still concentrated in certain traditional sectors of employment, which are lower-paid and often not unionized.
- A quarter of women work part time, not always by choice, often because they are mothers or natural caregivers. Since many of them earn the minimum wage, they are below the poverty line.
- In the public service, most women are on the firing line, the first to be affected by reorganizations and job cuts.
- With or without a postsecondary degree, women earn 70% of the average male salary.
- In the service and sales sectors, just like commerce and transportation, women's salaries fall to 55.7% of what men are paid.
- Fifty percent (50%) of businesses were still not in compliance with the *Pay Equity Act* 10 years after its adoption.

Myth 2: Women now have the means to bridge the gap between work and family

YES, Quebec has a better record than the rest of Canada on parental leave and childcare.

- The new *Quebec Parental Insurance Plan* makes the child's first year easier for parents, including self-employed workers.
- The CPE network now offers nearly 200,000 childcare places at \$7 per day...

BUT there is still a shortage of places in the subsidized childcare network, as the waiting lists prove.

- There is an ever-growing number of women who work atypical schedules and can rarely benefit from subsidized childcare services.
- The public sector hiring freeze, the increased availability requirements imposed on workers in the service sector, and staff shortages in certain professions often limit the choice of vacation time and compromise the granting of certain leaves provided for in collective agreements. All this makes it more complicated to bridge the gap between work and family.
- While the *Act respecting labour standards* grants 10 days of leave without pay for family obligations, it does not give non-unionized workers any control over their working hours. With some exceptions, employers favour corporate productivity over employee needs.
- Women continue to have primary responsibility for household tasks: they spend 4.3 hours a day on housework, compared to 2.5 hours for men. They also take care of sick relatives, while the health and social services network has not improved its supply of home-care services. This results in more absenteeism and fewer promotions.
- All this essential but invisible work is neither paid nor socially recognized.

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Myth 3: Now that equality is achieved, women no longer need affirmative action and only have to take power

YES, women now account for 31% of the members of the Quebec National Assembly and, in 2004-2005, 37.5% of the upper management of the Quebec public service.

- A law will soon oblige 24 government corporations to appoint 50% women to their boards of directors.
- 57% of television newscasters are now women, and women account for over 50% of students in law, medicine and journalism.
- Women, who make up 50.4% of the population, account for 46%, nearly half, of the active workforce.

BUT reality resists the best legislation and discrimination persists. Women are still a long way from political parity in Quebec and Canada, contrary to countries which have adopted corrective measures, such as Norway with its 40% female members of Parliament.

- Political parties have not yet implemented action plans to facilitate the election of women.
- With the creation of the *Regional Conferences of Elected Officers* (CRE), there are now more elected municipal officers (80% men). Women have lost ground in this sphere of political power.
- In 2005, in the 500 biggest companies in North America, women held only 16.4% of executive positions.
- Women journalists over age 50 only account for 7% of television newscasters. Only 15% of the partners in major law firms, and only 25% of judges, are women.
- In some unions, women's committees and their equal opportunity programs are being called into question.
- Women's groups demanding equality are seeing their federal grants reduced, as the Harper Government claims that "women's equality has been achieved". The word "equality" has been dropped from the Women's Program and the budget of Status of Women Canada has been chopped by 40%.

Myth 4: Women have access to education and training everywhere, in every region of Quebec

YES, the proportion of women in university has never been higher.

- And tuition fees are lower in Quebec than elsewhere.

BUT 26% of teenage girls drop out before graduating from high school.

- Others still head – or are steered – to traditionally female, lower-paid sectors, instead of seeking better paying “male” jobs.
- In outlying regions and regions with shrinking populations, single mothers or women in financial difficulty who attend CEGEP have access to fewer programs because they can’t move to the large urban centres to study.
- In some employment sectors with a high concentration of women, such as office work, there is little encouragement to obtain a CEGEP degree, which leads to higher pay.
- Everywhere, young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially young mothers, face almost insurmountable obstacles in gaining access to postsecondary education: childcare services are inaccessible or do not offer flexible schedules; there is insufficient financial assistance and, like social assistance, it is not indexed to the cost of living; debt mounts rapidly, and they are obliged to work part time, etc.
- Some populations are still subliterate, especially immigrant and aboriginal women, yet the federal government is reducing funding for adult literacy.

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Myth 5: Women are getting richer

YES, unionized women are richer when they retire than their mothers, especially if those mothers were housewives without any income or *Quebec Pension Plan* contributions.

- The government has increased the minimum wage to \$7.75 an hour; 66% of the people affected by this measure are women.

BUT people living on social assistance, a majority of them women who are often heads of single-parent families, have seen their benefits shrink in constant dollars since 1995, falling below the poverty line and negating their fundamental rights to food and housing.

- Because the eligibility criteria for employment insurance have been made more restrictive, fewer and fewer working women can benefit from the employment insurance plan to which they paid contributions.
- Usually, nobody pays for registered retirement savings plans (RRSP) for mothers at home, who become poorer as a result.
- Half a million Canadian children live with very low-income mothers.
- Because of legal aid restrictions, low-income mothers are deprived of access to justice and may lose their support payments, custody of their children or their right to contest.
- The federal government has just abolished the Court Challenges Program, which helped particularly poor people who are victims of discriminatory laws.

Myth 6: Women are better equipped than before to denounce and combat violence

YES, psychological harassment in the workplace is now condemned by the *Act respecting labour standards*.

- Since April 1, 2006, the Quebec Civil Code allows a women who is a victim of conjugal violence or sexual assault to cancel her lease.
- Police are better trained than before to intervene in situations of conjugal violence.
- The Quebec government plan to combat violence against women provided for \$90 million between 2003 and 2009.

BUT, according to the *Centres d'aide et de lutte contre les agressions à caractère sexuel* (CALACS), nearly 112,000 Quebec women are still victims of sexual assault each year.

- Violently abused women continue to live with their aggressors due to a lack of affordable or safe social housing.
- Aboriginal women are eight times more at risk than non-aboriginal women of being murdered by a violent spouse.
- In health and social services, violence by clients is increasing.
- The CSST is very reluctant to recognize work-related psychological injuries.
- The resurgence of sexual stereotypes in popular culture and the primacy of image are insidious forms of violence against teenage girls and women in general, damaging their self-esteem and often endangering their health, and sometimes their lives.

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Of course, reality isn't black and white. It is more complex and more exciting than the alarmist appeals of some and the triumphant claims of others. **Yes**, we have made real progress, commensurate with the tremendous struggles we have waged. **BUT** these gains are not set in stone and many political and economic factors can quickly erode them. Thus, Stephen Harper's Conservative government has not eliminated the possibility of recriminalizing abortion, following in the footsteps of the American Right. We are also beset by new challenges. The proliferation of demands for "reasonable accommodation" on the part of religious minorities confronts working women with difficult choices that challenge our values: when we're on the job, how do we deal with requirements that deny gender equality?

YES, we must resist the myths, **BUT** we must also remember how far we have come. **YES**, we must continue to demand and insist on equality for all, **BUT** wisdom also means knowing when to sing of our victories. Together, in solidarity.

HAVE A GREAT INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY!

Sources

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The *Intersyndicale des femmes* is composed of the following groups:

- Alliance du personnel professionnel et technique de la santé et des services sociaux (APTS) www.aptsq.com
- Centrale des syndicats démocratiques (CSD) www.csd.qc.ca
- Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ) www.csq.qc.net
- Fédération autonome du collégial (FAC) www.lafac.qc.ca
- Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec (FIQ) www.fiqsante.qc.ca
- Syndicat de la fonction publique du Québec (SFPQ) www.sfpq.qc.ca
- Syndicat de professionnelles et professionnels du gouvernement du Québec (SPGQ) www.spgq.qc.ca

