



A TURNING POINT
FOR WOMEN



Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights
Sheraton Centre Toronto Hotel
123 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2M9
Conference Rooms B & C

Re: Canada's international obligations in regard to the rights and freedom of children

Thank you for the opportunity to express the views of YWCA Toronto, the city's largest multi-service organization by, for and about women and girls, on one of the areas the Standing Senate Committee has identified for examination: whether Canada's legislation, as it applies to children, meets our obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

YWCA Toronto would like to acknowledge the Committee's work in recognizing the rights-based approach to children's human rights, focusing on children as active agents in society with their own set of individualized needs. However, as direct service providers to children - many of whom are victims of violence in the home and/or witnesses to woman abuse - we have identified a gap between the federal government's understanding of the theory that "children are not just the future but are citizens today," and the ways in which it is put into local practice via support to childcare and protection provisions.

It is our position that the federal government has not placed the challenges confronting today's children at the fore of the legislative agenda. In addition to weakly promoting awareness about the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the federal government fails to make the connection between children's rights and the rights of their caregivers and providers, most of whom are women. Based on our unique position as the single largest provider of shelter for women, and the second largest provider of childcare, we can speak to the absolute interconnection between the two issues, as they are the underpinnings to the services we provide, ensuring that women and children have the ability to escape violence and rebuild healthy lives, while offering housing options, employment and skills development, as well as extended social services for women and girls across the Greater Toronto Area.

As we indicate in our national study, *Effective Practices in Sheltering Women: Leaving Violence in Intimate Relationships*¹, the federal government must accelerate its efforts to provide adequate levels of funding for shelters that will fully support the needs of abused women and their children, many of whom are escaping immediate and lethal violence. To this end, we recommend that the federal, provincial and territorial governments answer the concerns raised by the United Nations Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women, by sufficiently funding post-shelter services for abused women and their children to address their safety needs after they return to the community - not only while they reside in emergency housing. These services would include follow-up, outreach and reintegration programs.

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Of course, improved access to safe and affordable, permanent housing to assist women and their children both to leave an abusive relationship earlier (before needing to go to a shelter) and to leave the shelter with the appropriate resources, is essential to making the transition to a violence-free life and a protective and safe home for children. Canada is one of the few countries without an affordable housing strategy, with one in every six children living in poverty in this country. In First Nations communities the child poverty rate is even higher, with one in every four residing in poverty.² Lack of affordable and permanent housing is a factor that can often result in the placement of children with the Children's Aid Society or delay their return to home, costing the agency about \$18 million annually.³

In our study, *Building a Community Architecture for Early Childhood*⁴, we draw the links between abuse and the factors that prevent women from leaving abusive partners. In it, we argue that access to affordable, high-quality child care will provide women with improved options when considering whether to leave an abusive partner and will also increase their ability to establish an independent, violence-free household by giving them leave to earn a steady income. Canada's expenditures on child care as a percentage of GDP are the lowest among OECD countries. As it now stands, regulated child care spaces meet the needs of less than 16% percent of Canadian children and with the cancellation of federal child care agreements, there is little prospect for improvement.⁵

The introduction of the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) in 2006 by the federal government, with the aim of providing all families with \$100 per month for each child under age 6, has been detrimental to child care provisions and children in this country. While the attempt to give parents a choice in the child care option that best suits their needs is a laudable idea, in practice it has resulted in a nationwide shortage of licensed, affordable, and quality child care and the almost total collapse of government funded child care provisions in rural and remote communities.⁶

In cancelling the child care agreements with the provinces, the federal government took \$3.6-billion away from Canadian communities. This funding was earmarked to expand early learning and child care options for over 100,000 families, improve access for low income and rural families and for children with special needs, and enhance intervention services for children at risk. Aboriginal children were hardest hit, singled out for a \$25-million cut.⁷

Universal, quality, affordable childcare in a non-profit regulated setting is every child's right. By enshrining this right in legislation, every child, regardless of means, geographic location and background can be ensured access to the fundamental building blocks provided in an Early Childhood Learning and Care System (ECLC). We recognize a publicly funded universal child care program as an entitlement of all Canadian children.

We cannot overemphasize the importance of the interconnectedness between Canada's legislation on children's rights and its legislation on women's rights. We urge the government to take a holistic view of the complexity of these issues, and see the linkage between violence against women and children, poverty, affordable housing and the universal childcare. Recognizing this correlation, we recommend that the federal, provincial and territorial governments take immediate steps to:

- Increase services and protection for women and children escaping violence and offer them reintegration programs following shelter stays.
- Develop a permanent and affordable housing strategy for women and children.
- Establish a sustainable government-funded universal child care system.

In the Committee's suggestions for reform, it recommends that the federal government develop a more effective means of incorporating and implementing services and funding for programs

affecting children and their rights. It also recommends that the federal government work with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to develop the mechanisms and funding necessary to foster an effectively functional and cohesive voluntary sector for the protection of children's rights in Canada.

YWCA is the largest national provider of shelter for women and girls and the second largest provider of childcare, offering regulated services to over 10,000 children annually in 4,550 licensed child care spaces. This translates into some 1.5 million hours of care every year, supplemented by our camps and after school programs which host more than 20,000 children annually. In addition to providing quality child care services, YWCA offers support to families through parenting programs, education and support services. As such, we would be happy to work with the federal government on developing the policies, procedures and best practices necessary to implement this vision. By protecting children from violence, offering their families affordable and permanent housing, and giving them access to standardized childcare we can help ensure that the rights of the child are not just theory but practice designed for their lives today and tomorrow.

On behalf of YWCA Toronto, I wish to thank you for your consideration of this brief and inviting us to participate in these important hearings.

Yours,



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¹ *Effective Practices in Sheltering Women: Leaving Violence in Intimate Relationship*. Phase II Report, Submitted by Leslie Tutty, PhD, YWCA Canada, 2006.

² *Oh Canada! Too Many Children In Poverty For Too Long*. National Report Card on Child & Family Poverty, Campaign 2000.

³ In one in five cases (20.7%) the family's housing situation was a factor that resulted in placement of a child into Children's Aid Society of Toronto care. This is a significant increase over the last decade (18.4%). In 11.5% of the cases, a child's return home was delayed due to a housing-related problem. Of approximately 450 cases, housing was a factor in the admission to care. In 2000, this cost the Children's Aid Society of Toronto about \$18 million. Centre for Urban and Community Studies, 2001. University of Toronto, <http://www.casmt.on.ca/Publicationsmainframe.htm>

⁴ *Building a Community Architecture for Early Childhood*, YWCA Canada, 2006.

⁵ *Oh Canada! Too Many Children In Poverty For Too Long*. National Report Card on Child & Family Poverty, Campaign 2000.

⁶ Fact Sheet: Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada www.childcareadvocacy.ca

⁷ Press Release May 2, 2006, Ottawa www.childcareadvocacy.ca