

# Fundamentalism erodes the rights of women

*Re Should Ontario allow sharia law?*

Opinion, June 1.

Ali Hogben's plea for Canadians to help Muslim women fight the Arbitration Act is being heard. Thanks for the reminder that the universality of access to rights and freedoms for women must never be taken for granted, and that the erosion of women's rights may take many particular cultural forms but, regardless, remains insupportable.

We feel strongly that it is not

only Islam or Muslim family law that presents this threat. A rise in a fundamentalist version of all the major religions is eating away at the status of women around the world and right here in Canada

Access to safe and legal abortion is being challenged by a form of Christian fundamentalism that has the ear of the president of the United States and also seems to be a read-between-the-lines element of Canada's Conservative health critic's call

for third-party intervention in this hard-won decision between a woman and her doctor.

The ranks of fundamentalist Judaism have also seen a swell in numbers, likewise reviving the practices of segregation and exclusion from the places that men exercise power.

Excluding women from the centres of religious practice and public space is never neutral. This is the meaning behind the famous suffragist Nellie McClung saying, "A woman's

place is wherever the hell she wants to be."

We must challenge the notion that a return to purity in religion requires the disproportionate sacrifice of women. This loss of rights has nothing whatever to do with women's individual faith. But it has everything to do with the power structures of religious institutions. While it is arguable that these institutions have a role to play in the social life of a nation, they have no business in the laws of the land.

Women's rights have never been freely granted. We have always fought for them. It is only because of the extraordinary efforts of women that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees that when the inequalities of social practice infringe on the equality of women, there is recourse. We are ready to fight for this all over again if necessary. Heather McGregor, Executive Director, YWCA Toronto