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CANADIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

INSTITUT CANADIEN DE RECHERCHES SUR LES FEMMES

Submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on Canada's National Machinery for the Advancement of Women

Submitted by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women/L'Institut canadien de recherches sur les femmes (CRIA-W-ICREF)

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www.criaw-icref.ca | info@criaw-icref.ca

This submission is in response to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's (CEDAW) review of Canada during its 89th session. The focus of our submission to CEDAW is related to the national machinery for the advancement of women.

Canada's National Machinery for the Advancement of Women

The federal government created Status of Women Canada (SWC), an agency, in 1976 in response to the recommendations of the 1970 Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW). The creation of SWC was the beginning of a formal national machinery for the advancement of women in Canada, and it was created due to feminists' advocacy and lobbying for both the RCSW, and for the creation of SWC specifically. Many national women's rights organizations were founded and received funding from the federal government during this period in Canada, including CRIA-W-ICREF. As a national women's rights research and advocacy organization we received funding to conduct independent feminist research and analysis, and we have worked closely with SWC over many years, advocated for a strengthening of that institution, including a broader implementation of a gender-based analysis across government.

Women's rights organizations and the Government of Canada have had varied levels of collaboration since the 1970s. Not surprisingly, there have been shifting advancements and setbacks throughout the past 50 years. In more recent history, the relationship between feminist civil society organizations and the federal government was reinvigorated in 2015, from a very, very low point. In 2015, the Prime Minister openly declared himself feminist and gender equality was a stated priority. In 2016, federal funding to women's rights organizations increased.

In 2018, there seemed to be a lot of momentum for women's rights and gender equality. That year \$100 million was earmarked for women's rights and gender equality organizations through the Capacity Building Fund. The purpose of this fund was "to increase organizational and sector capacity". Also that year, the Government of Canada established Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) to replace Status of Women Canada (SWC). This was a welcomed change as Canada had created a department, with a full Minister dedicated to women's rights and gender equality rather than an agency. WAGE has a mandate "to advance equality, with respect to sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression through the inclusion of women and 2SLGBTQI+ people in every aspect of Canada's social, economic, and political life." It also has a leadership role in the government-wide implementation of Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus). WAGE is responsible for sharing GBA Plus knowledge, developing training and tools, and providing technical assistance to other government departments so that GBA Plus can be used

in the development of policy, programs and legislation.

As highlighted above, there have been positive advancements since the last review in 2015 but there are still significant changes needed to strengthen the national machinery for the advancement of women's rights in Canada. The creation of WAGE demonstrates that the Government of Canada has a meaningful commitment to women's rights and gender equality. However, the department is still not adequately empowered to do the work that it needs to do as the lead ministry in coordinating and mainstreaming gender equality in Canada. The focus of our submission will be on key interrelated areas that greatly hamper WAGE's ability to act as a successful national machinery.

No National Action Plan from the National Machinery

Section 21 (b) of the Concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of Canada calls on Canada to develop a comprehensive national gender equality strategy, policy and action plan that addresses the structural factors responsible for persistent inequalities experienced between women and girls, including intersecting forms of discrimination, paying particular attention to disadvantaged groups. Having a comprehensive national gender equality strategy, policy and action plan that addresses structural factors is imperative to guide the department and provide a framework to coordinate and evaluate as a national machinery.

It is notable that the Government of Canada passed the Canadian Gender Budgeting Act in 2018, enshrining gender budgeting in legislation and Canada has implemented additional plans, including the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, and the Federal 2SLGBTQI+ Action Plan. However, none of these measures are a national gender equality action plan. Without a comprehensive national action plan on gender equality, the priorities and action areas are unclear and consequently more difficult to implement nationally and assess progress and impact. We are also very concerned that the momentum is waning, and we are entering a period of austerity and women's rights and gender equality will fall off the priority list without commitment to, and resourcing of, a clear direction and action plan.

We reiterate what the Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA) said in their submission on the occasion of the eighth and ninth periodic review:

women's inequality cannot be ameliorated or ended by partial, disparate and siloed government interventions, with no consistency across jurisdictions.[...] it is time for Canadian governments to work with Canadian women's organizations and with the CEDAW Committee, in a new way, to devise strategies and interventions that will address the structural dimensions and components of women's inequality and build towards a national gender equality plan.

Limitations for the Department of Women and Gender Equality (WAGE)

In section 21 (a) of CEDAW's Concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of Canada, the Committee recommends that the Government of Canada ensures that the Minister of Status of Women has a clear mandate and the financial, human, and technical resources required to successfully oversee plans, policies, and programs pertaining to gender equality across all sectors and at all governmental levels, including by assigning specific funds to provincial and territorial administrations.

The funding allotted to WAGE in Canada's federal budget is not sufficient for it to take on the work it needs to do as a true national machinery for the advancement of women. Based on Canada's own reporting, the department's expenses for 2022-23 were \$327.8 million. While this is a significant increase from the last review period, it represents an exceedingly small percentage of Canada's \$2 trillion GDP in 2023. WAGE's current budget for the fiscal year 2024-2025 is \$371.46 million, or in other terms 0.08% of the \$461.8 billion federal budget. WAGE is primarily a grant-awarding institution, with 80.3% of its total spending allocated to transfer payments. This funding is critical for national women's rights organizations, as they are not eligible for funding other levels of government. However, in addition to providing support to the national women's rights movement, the national machinery should have more financial resources to adequately coordinate gender equality policies across the government and ensure their implementation, not just operate as a funding institution. In addition, many of these multi-year funding agreements are coming to an end and are not being renewed. Funding is expected to decrease to \$240 million by 2026-2027. This further indicates that Canada is no longer prioritizing women's rights and gender equality. This

budget reduction leaves the department facing an even greater financial predicament in the upcoming years and leaves women's rights organizations in a very precarious state.

WAGE just does not have the financial resources to meaningfully fulfill the breadth of its mandate and has not had the time and resources to adequately build up its internal capacity. For the purpose of this report, we would like to focus on two specific areas, implementation of Gender-based Analysis Plus and WAGE's collaboration and coordination with women's rights organizations.

The implementation of Gender-based Analysis Plus

GBA+, (now rebranded as GBA Plus), is a key tool used by the Government of Canada to analyze the differential impacts of projects, policies, and initiatives as they relate to gender plus other factors of identity. WAGE is the central champion for this analytical framework and provides an online Introduction to GBA Plus course on its use.

While GBA Plus has been mandated within Canada, as it is part of Canada's commitments from the Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing Platform for Action Declaration 1995, it is difficult to determine whether it is being properly implemented, the impacts and its effectiveness because it is not centrally coordinated, monitored or evaluated. The Auditor General's 2022 report "Follow-up on Gender-Based Analysis Plus" found that "gaps persist in departments and agencies' capacity to perform GBA Plus, including the availability and use of disaggregated data to analyze gender and diversity issues, inform the design and implementation of programs, and achieve outcomes that benefit all Canadians." The Auditor-General report "also found weaknesses in monitoring and reporting on the implementation and impacts of GBA Plus across government. This makes it difficult to assess whether actions taken are achieving better gender equality, diversity, and inclusion outcomes." As noted earlier, WAGE's mandate is largely centred around sharing knowledge on GBA Plus; however, there is not a monitoring or evaluative function for WAGE for GBA Plus implementation across government agencies and departments.

Better coordination and engagement with feminist civil society organizations

CEDAW's Concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of Canada, recommends that the Government of Canada work with civil society organizations to increase the effectiveness and implementation of various activities.

WAGE was created with little consultation with the very feminist organizations that had advocated, over the many decades, for a robust national machinery. WAGE was created as a surprise, within an omnibus Budget Implementation Act 2018 and the only avenue for women's rights organizations and experts to provide input was after the legislation had been tabled in Parliament. Women's rights activists were in a difficult position and did not want to stop the legislation from passing, but it was a missed opportunity for Canada to use the expertise of the women's rights movement to create a strong mandate for a robust national machinery. Unfortunately, limited on-going relationships and consultation with the women's rights movement continues to have an impact on the effectiveness and responsiveness of the department.

While the Capacity Building Fund, was the closest funding stream to operational funding that the national women's rights organizations have received since the 1990s, it was still a project-based funding stream with the expectation that women's rights organizations would be self-sustainable at the end of their projects. Reinstating operational funding to national women's rights organizations, in addition to project-based funding streams, would support national feminist organizations conducting research, analysis, law reform and advocacy to fulfill their mandates and collaborate more effectively with each other and with government partners on pressing gender equality issues. Relying exclusively on project-based funding to support feminist work is restrictive and insufficient to realizing women's rights and gender equality. Operational funding to national women's rights organizations supports more responsive and timely policy analysis and action on emerging issues. It also better positions the government as a partner with feminist civil society organizations.

WAGE's 2022-2023 Departmental Results Report highlights an increase in the number of partnerships over the past three years with both governmental and non-governmental actors to 2,221 in 2023. It is unclear how they are defining 'partnerships', however, there is no regular on-going engagement and consultation with national women's rights organizations as WAGE's key civil society counterparts. Additionally, there is no advisory council,

roundtable, secretariat, or body within WAGE to ensure transparent and ongoing communication and collaboration with national women's rights organizations.

Civil society organizations appreciate WAGE's support through project funding, and reaffirm our support in this document, but we also call on Canada to support and value our expertise to create new projects and build effective policies through WAGE. It has long been documented that "[t]he success of a national machinery depends largely on the support of civil society. The main sources of support are the women's movement in all its various forms." A reciprocal relationship is crucial because not only do women's rights organizations support the work of WAGE, but WAGE supports the work of women's rights organizations. Additionally, leveraging feminist civil society expertise will assist Canada in achieving its gender equality goals and in meeting its international obligations under CEDAW. National women's rights organizations are an essential part of the democratic process and contribute to a more inclusive and just society.

WAGE's current approach points to a wider issue within the Government of Canada of not leveraging community expertise and knowledge. This adds to the precarity of feminist policy advancements in Canada. For example, findings from research conducted with public servants working on GBA Plus implementation, found that "due to budget cuts, the use of university or community-based research in GBA Plus had diminished" and government agencies now rely on in-house data to fill this gap. However, in-house data does not provide the same neutrality, scope, or detail that outside research can provide.

The research also identified that "building and sustaining relationships and networks with women's organizations did not figure prominently among the relational strategies of GBA analysts." Gender-based analysis and other equality frameworks originate within the feminist movement, Canada should more effectively engage and collaborate with feminists to analyze and implement their GBA Plus strategy. It is a significant missed opportunity to improve and further develop this framework for analysis and strengthen the organizations and entities that have advocated for its use within government.

Having little communication or collaboration with national women's rights organizations impacts and severely limits the potential of a national machinery for the advancement of women's rights.

Key Recommendations for Strengthening Canada's National Machinery

Canada should increase WAGE's budget so it can fulfill its mandate as a national machinery. WAGE's mandate needs to include women's rights policy-making initiatives, and it needs to take on a monitoring and evaluation function rather than just the promotion of GBA Plus.

WAGE should create an advisory committee, comprised of national women's rights organizations to improve engagement, consultation and collaboration with feminists from the women's rights movement. This will improve knowledge sharing and coordination to develop more effective policies for intersectional women's rights in Canada. Creating an advisory committee and improving on-going communication would create better conditions to co-develop a comprehensive national gender equality action plan with feminist civil society.

WAGE should reinstitute an operational funding stream to support the work of national feminist organizations so that national women's rights organization can be supported to do their women's rights and gender equality work within their mandates and areas of expertise. Supporting and valuing the work of feminist civil society will also support the aims and goals of the national machinery.