

PRIORITIES

Vol. 1, No. 8

August 1973

"She wears a simple print dress and an Afro hairstyle...She looks more like a housewife from Kingston, Jamaica, than an MLA from Vancouver, which means everything is as it should be."

(from an article on Rosemary Brown in the July, 1973 issue of Leisure Magazine)

A Publication of the N.D.P. Women's Committee

PRIORITIES

IN THIS ISSUE 000

Priorities is published monthly by the Standing Committee on Women's Rights of the B.C. New Democratic Party. Its intent is to provide a means of communication and discussion for NDP women in order to further the interests of the women's movement and of democratic socialism.

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" The issues and demands raised by the Women's Liberation movement are integral to the development of a democratic socialist society. The N.D.P. actively encourages and provides support for women organizing around the demands of women's liberation and commits an N.D.P. government to creating the legislation necessary to realize these demands."

(From the B.C. NDP policy on Women's Rights)

Priorities is produced by volunteer labour.

WOMEN'S COMMITTEE

POLICY PAPER

(Following is the NDP Women's Committee Policy Paper, presented to constituency associations and regional conferences as a pre-convention discussion paper. It will also appear in the September issue of the Democrat).

Over the past several years, the NDP has accepted as Party policy many resolutions specifically aimed at altering the status of women in B.C. Taken together, these policies suggest a vision of the role of women in society which is significantly different from that of today.

This vision is one in which women will not be confined to their present social inequality but will live and work on an equal basis with men. Responsibility for raising and caring for children, which now falls almost solely upon individual women, will be shared equally with men and will also be seen as a social responsibility assumed by the community at large. Free to choose when and how often to give birth, women will also be freed from the confines of the home. Unlike the present situation, they will not see their life's work as unpaid household chores or menial jobs at the lowest pay, but will have access to every kind of work now available to men, and at the same remuneration. As preparation for this work, women will be educated in all fields without being channelled into pre-conceived areas of "proper women's work". Their sexuality will not be exploited by the media nor will the fact of their sex inhibit their participation in any field of endeavour. In every way, women will see themselves and be seen as equal partners in the building of a new society.

NDP policies that envision this new status of women are very specific:

- to establish community free clinics throughout the province which will provide pre- and post-natal care, abortion, family planning information and contraceptive devices to all who require them;
- to establish 24-hour child care centres for children of all ages, to be free, community-controlled and available to all persons;
- to alter the early sex-role differentiation in our schools;
- to ban all advertising which transforms human beings into objects by exploiting sexuality;
- to legislate to ensure that equal pay is received for equal work;
- to extend maternity leave with full maintenance of seniority provisions;

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POLICY PAPER _____ (CONT.)

- to include domestic and part-time workers within the confines of legislation designed to protect members of the labour force;
- to support the ending of the use of formal education levels in selecting job applicants and, instead, encourage selection on the basis of abilities needed for the job.

While implementation of these specific resolutions would go far towards creating the new status of women envisioned by the NDP, it has become clear, over time, that there is a major block to making these policies a reality. Put simply, this block is that of sexism -- the systematic discrimination against women in all walks of life -- that is extensively woven into the fabric of this society.

The problem of sexism is most obvious in society at large; indeed, there are no positions of power or decision-making within society where women are represented in any way proportionate to their numbers. Women are equally (or over) represented only among the poor, the unemployed, the unskilled, the unorganized, the unpaid and the underpaid, the ill and the uneducated. Prejudice against women is deep-rooted, fuelled by the systematic socialization of both sexes, experienced and transmitted by most men and, despite the women's liberation movement, even felt by many women. So rampant is sexism that women are not hired, promoted, appointed or elected on consideration of their merit but of their sex.

Given this pattern, it is not surprising to find that our extensive body of policies on Women's Rights is, by and large, not being implemented by the NDP government. The same attitudes that govern present society's lack of regard for the social problems of women -- the belief that these questions are of low priority -- are, unfortunately, reflected both in the government and in the senior civil service. While the concerns of women have been well understood by the women's movement, government departments (with one or two exceptions) have yet to indicate they share this understanding. What few reforms have been proposed tend to touch upon the central issues without really dealing with them. Thus the problem of formulating new policy at this time is secondary to the problem of how to ensure that existing policy will be implemented.

Despite the existence of policy sympathetic to Women's Rights and the current organization efforts of the NDP Women's Committee, the pattern of sexism extant in society and reflected in the government is also evident in the NDP itself. With few exceptions, members still do not accept women as candidates for public office or as members of the Party executives. As long as we fail to encourage women to seek full participation in the Party, the status quo will continue. In the face of the socialization of women, the prejudice against them and the physical difficulties many encounter in their roles as wives and mothers, it is not enough simply to allow women to seek office in the Party. The history of the NDP shows clearly that the Party by and large does not support the election of women to decision-making positions.

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POLICY PAPER _____ (CONT.)

If we are truly concerned to change the status of women, the NDP must also change its own structures and its own way of doing things.

Because those in power have traditionally failed to comprehend the social problems facing women, the 1972 NDP Convention called for the creation of a Ministry of Women's Rights. This resolution was intended to overcome the problem of sexism by transferring some measure of political power into the hands of those who best understand the concerns of women and who are prepared to act on them. That the government has not yet implemented this policy (and has, in fact, ignored it) only underscores the vicious circle women are caught up in. While a Ministry of Women's Rights could go a long way toward implementing our policies, the male-dominated government is not sensitive to the problems women face or committed to finding solutions. The small representation of women in the government in turn reflects the prejudice women face in trying to win NDP nominations or in becoming a strong force within the Party. And this prejudice is only a microcosm of the discrimination in society at large -- a discrimination which only a structure such as a Ministry can begin to combat.

From this it can be seen that three central questions relating to Women's Rights face the 1973 NDP Convention:

- (1) Devising a workable method toward implementing the Women's Rights policies already adopted by the Party;
- (2) Developing workable methods to break down the under-representation of women in decision-making bodies in society;
- (3) Creating new mechanisms to ensure that women achieve full participation in the decision-making bodies of the NDP itself.

First, the Convention can begin the process of policy implementation by calling for the establishment of definite liaison procedures between the NDP Women's Committee and appropriate government departments. Women's Committee attempts to open channels of communication with the government in the past have met with no response. A convention decision may alter this situation and provide the beginnings of proper liaison procedures.

Secondly, the NDP must go beyond its present policies calling for equality between men and women and recognize that in the face of a pervasive sexism, special measures are necessary to realize this equality. In particular, we should consider the question of preferential hiring, training and promotion for women in all fields and levels of employment that are presently dominated by men. This should include all institutions supported by public funds: the civil service, hospitals, schools, universities and so on.

Thirdly, we should be prepared to consider ways and means through which the NDP itself can alter the status of women within its own

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POLICY PAPER _____ (CONT.)

ranks. NDP women throughout the province would profit from the hiring of a women's organizer whose work would be to encourage women to run for elected office and to seek executive posts within the Party, and to expand policy discussion and awareness among NDP women. To ensure that the pattern of electing a large majority of men to the Provincial Executive does not continue, a new method of election based on parity between men and women should be adopted.

The B.C. NDP has gained a reputation for being progressive and concerned about the question of Women's Rights primarily on the strength of the work of the Women's Committee, some concerned individuals, and the support by the Convention of such important resolutions as the Ministry of Women's Rights. In fact, much is on paper and little has been done to demonstrate our real commitment to bring about sexual equality. It is time to translate our ideals into action.

- The B.C. New Democratic Party
Standing Committee on Women's Rights
August, 1973.

DON'T FORGET:

NDP WOMEN'S RIGHTS B.C. POLICY CONFERENCE

for consideration of:

- * resolutions
- * policy implementation
- * general strategy

Saturday, Sept. 8, 9:30 - 5:30 : All women welcome

Evening : Social; All welcome

Sunday, Sept. 9, 9:30 - 4:00 : NDP women only

VANCOUVER EAST CULTURAL CENTRE

1895 Venables Street, Vancouver

REGISTER NOW:

Write to 321 East 24th Street
North Vancouver

Phone 988-9980

BC FED WOMEN MEET SEPT. 29/30

The B.C. Federation of Labour will hold its third annual conference on Women's Rights at the Georgia Hotel on Sept. 29 and 30. This conference, open only to delegates of unions affiliated with the Federation, will welcome visitors during its plenary session.

Sylvia Gelber, Director of the Women's Bureau of the Canadian Department of Labour will be the guest speaker Saturday at 10:30. Sunday from 10 a.m. to noon Gene Errington, Ombudswoman for the Status of Women of B.C. and Kathleen Ruff, Director of the B.C. Human Rights Act, will be guest panelists.

For more information, contact Marilyn Cairnduff, secretary, Committee on Women's Rights, B.C. Federation of Labour, 879-3568.

EQUAL PAY FOR HOSPITAL WORKERS

Minister of Health Dennis Cocke announced on August 17th that by January, 1976, all women workers in the hospital industry will receive equal pay for equal work.

Kathleen Ruff, Director of the Human Rights Act, helped to instigate this action by bringing to light the extent of the discrimination which female hospital workers face. In a prepared statement, she said,

"This is no small matter. It is not simply a question of a few individual women who happened to have had a raw deal. We are talking about a situation where discrimination against women is widespread and deeply rooted; in fact, the whole system is structured on discrimination. Job classifications and pay scales have little basis in logic or justice; they do not reflect objective criteria such as job content but are based on the sex of the worker.

It is a matter of facing the whole issue fairly and squarely and undertaking a thorough reform so that discrimination on the basis of sex is eliminated in every form and at every level. The question we are facing is whether equal treatment for women workers is just a principle to pay lip service to or whether it is something we are finally going to see put into practice."

Although 1976 is still a long way off, Cocke's initiative is one of the very few positive actions relating to women that the NDP government has enacted. It will help considerably in working women's struggle for equality in the labour force.

BOYCOTT SHOPPERS'

THE STRIKE AT SHOPPERS' DRUG
MART IS STILL IN EFFECT AFTER
SIX MONTHS. TO SUPPORT THESE
WOMEN, DON'T SHOP AT ANY OF THE
SHOPPERS STORES IN B.C.