

Recent Neo-liberal Policy at the Federal and Provincial Levels

Impacts on First Nations Women in British Columbia

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As former National Action Committee president Judy Rebick once said, “Native women are the most vulnerable group in Canadian society.”¹ Whether or not they deserve the superlative place as Canada’s most vulnerable group, First Nations women are disproportionately subjected to more violence, poverty, and human and civil rights abuses than most other groups in Canada.² Their condition is no doubt deserving of study and rectification. Using the lens of gender as a social position, I will explore First Nations women’s oppression to demonstrate that other factors, such as race and class, intersect to further define their position in relation to the structures of the state.³ By exploring the themes of poverty, social services, political influence, and violence, this paper will examine the negative impacts of neo-liberal policies on First Nations women, as well as how the Canadian provincial and federal governments are implicated in the further marginalization of a group already on the fringes of society.

As a political and economic policy, neo-liberalism has been a growing force in Canadian politics since the 1980s.⁴ Unfortunately, strategies such as market liberalization, deregulation, and other hallmarks of neo-liberal ideology at the federal and provincial levels have had an increasingly prejudicial and harmful effect on women as a class and First Nations women as a group. Although the link between the economically focused principles of neo-liberalism and the specific targeting of certain groups and classes may not be immediately apparent, this paper intends to clarify their

connection and to shed light on the damaging consequences that have already taken effect.

Neo-liberalism

Let us begin by reflecting on what it means to hold a neo-liberal point of view in Canada. Fuller et al. describe neo-liberalism as placing primary emphasis “on engagement in the market, self-sufficiency, and individual responsibility.”⁵ As Sylvia Bashevkin notes, along with this emphasis comes “a presumed lack of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency among social assistance recipients.”⁶ She further observes that the current government’s discourse on poverty “no longer frame it as an economic condition but as a cultural, and moral malady.”⁷ More to the crux of my argument, this neo-liberal conception of “the good citizen” has allowed neo-conservatives in the Harper government to discredit Native women based on their race, class, and gender identities and to frame them with a negative moral character that is undeserving of tax-payer dollars. In this way, by negatively framing a specific group, the Canadian population is becoming more acquiescent to the financial cuts and demands of neo-liberalism on the poor.⁸ Citizens wary of global economic problems allow stereotypes and essentialism to be perpetuated through the government’s economic policy. Gone are the Mulroney days that promised a “sacred trust” of universalism and social programs.⁹ The current Canadian government has used a neo-liberal economic ontology to implicitly support neo-conservative policies that further subjugate and moralize groups who do not fit in to traditional conservative roles.

Since 2006 the Conservative Party has formed the Canadian government. Although the Conservative Party espouses “A belief in the equality of all Canadians” on its website under the heading of *Founding Principles*, more prominently displayed in the enumeration of its values is the belief in “individual rights and responsibilities.”¹⁰ The Conservative Party has promoted an

increasingly neo-liberal approach to politics and the role of the state within Canada. It is the inherent individualism and transposition of economic principles onto the realm of politics that has weakened the importance of collective norms, social programs and social justice at the federal and provincial levels.¹¹

As understood by the Conservative government, the role of the state is restricted to being fiscally prudent and limiting its responsibilities to those which cannot reasonably be discharged by the individual.¹² At its core there exists the belief that the best guarantors of well being for Canadians are freedom of the individual to pursue their own self-interest within the economy, and the right to own property.¹³ Inherent in this belief is the patriarchal principle that paid work is the determining factor in citizenship and the prerequisite for worth. Furthermore, by only recognizing contributions to society made in the public moneymaking sphere, neo-liberal thought denigrates contributions made by women in other areas while simultaneously solidifying the government's own self-exclusion from domestic/private sphere matters such as family violence.

Finally it is also important to recognize the implicit patriarchal foundations of neo-liberalism.¹⁴ It is patriarchy that allows men and women to assume that there exists a one-size-fits-all form of family, government and economic order. As Margaret Thatcher once stated, to the enthusiastic reception of neo-liberals for decades to come, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families."¹⁵ Policies that are based on ideologies of free market economics, privatization, and individual responsibility regardless of the individual's position within society are implicitly placing power and importance on those who directly contribute the most to the country's Gross Domestic Profit.

Poverty

The ways in which the neo-liberal emphasis on individualism manifests itself in social policy are widespread. With regards to First Nation's women, one of the simplest ways to discern the implications of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility discourses is to study income, or the lack thereof. First Nations women are more likely to be impoverished in Canada due to their intersectional identities that encompass several marginalizing criteria including race, gender, class, and geographic location.¹⁶ The disparity between the social and economic conditions of First Nations women and the rest of Canada is striking and clearly demonstrates the primacy of the market economy over the priority of the welfare of all Canadians.¹⁷

The budget cuts to social welfare programs by the federal and B.C. provincial governments in the last decade have significantly decreased the number of eligible persons for welfare. Although B.C. recorded its lowest unemployment rate in years (3.2%) in 2008, critics maintained that employment at the current minimum wage, underemployment and the prevalence of part-time work for women and aboriginals have not led to a reduction in the need for access to welfare support.¹⁸ According to the report done by VIPIRG, data obtained through freedom of information acts have shown that after the new welfare criteria were introduced in 2002, the number of applicants who were successful in attaining income assistance dropped from 90% in 2001 to 51% in 2004.¹⁹ The British Columbia government places a high value on the recipient having been "independent" for at least two years prior to receiving welfare subsidies.²⁰ This expectation, plus the weight placed on paid work as a criterion for social assistance, discriminates against those most likely to have been dependents, i.e. women.

Because women are twice as likely to occupy lower wage earning positions in order to fulfill family obligations and other

gender specific roles in the private sphere, poverty is becoming more and more of a gendered issue.²¹ First Nations people on the whole are also more likely to be employed part time or for only part of the year.²² Not only are Native women subjected to the feminization of poverty, but on average they also earn 25% less than other women in Canada based on their race and other limiting factors.²³ This means that the average wage of an Indigenous woman is 47% that of a non-indigenous Canadian male.²⁴ Consequently, any decrease in social assistance to the B.C. population is intrinsically damaging to Native women due to their current economic and social positions defined by race and gender.

Social Services

The British Columbia Liberals have used the recent cuts in federal funding to justify several other social services cuts that have significantly impacted the lives of Aboriginal women. The abolition of the Human Rights Commission of B.C. as well as the almost complete elimination of legal aid services has reduced access to citizens seeking redress from discriminatory practices that are contradictory to the Charter of Human Rights of Canada.²⁵ Since Charter Rights deal almost exclusively with claims concerning sexual and racial discrimination, Aboriginal women are left with few options to seek restitution.²⁶

In addition to legal aid, the province has also closed many rural courthouses. In contrast to the rest of the Canadian population where 80% live in urban settings, only 45 % of First Nations live in cities.²⁷ Not only have Liberal policies favored economic projects in urban areas, but we have also witnessed outright discrimination towards the rural population in terms of services.²⁸ Aboriginal reserves often lack healthcare, education and legal services. None are aspects for which one could reasonably expect the “individual” to be responsible, and all of which are under the mandate of the provincial government.²⁹ Because free market principles expect that private services will go where there is

demand and money, the lack of a local economy on reserves should be a red flag for needed government intervention. However, the neo-liberal agenda of the B.C. government has been intent on shifting responsibility for health and welfare back onto the Indigenous people.³⁰ First Nations communities in B.C. are facing an extremely difficult situation in trying to alleviate the cycle of poverty, a situation that disproportionately affects women as noted above.

The Harper government is complicit in the subordination of First Nations women in British Columbia as it has the power to influence provincial policy by attaching stipulations to federal transfer payments to the provinces.³¹ Although this power can be used to the advantage of marginalized people, the Conservatives have chosen instead to extend their policy of defunding women's organizations at the federal level to the provinces. Instead of ensuring that money be directed to Indigenous women in need, federal grants have taken the form of block funding. Block funding employs a lump sum directed toward several policy areas at the same time, such as education, social welfare and healthcare.³² This type of grant has allowed the provincial government to choose policies deemed most important, and has removed responsibility at the federal level to impose national standards.³³

By leaving it solely to the province to allocate resources, the federal government is allowing B.C. to impart the costs of lost funding onto the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. The decentralization, individualism, and cost/benefit framework of neo-liberalism has transformed the way Canadians view the state's responsibility to its citizens.³⁴ As a result of the new challenges that neo-liberalism has brought to Canadian federalism, it has become even harder for those falling outside of the system to have their voices heard. It is important that policymakers become aware of these connections in order to sustain equality among all Canadian citizens.

Political Influence

Not only is equality of opportunity being eroded for Native women in B.C., but their ability to influence the government at all levels and address the systemic roots of their problems is also under attack. For example, in 2006 the operating budget of Status of Women Canada suffered a reduction of almost 40%, and although much of this funding has since been reinstated, funding to many advocacy, lobbying and research groups was permanently lost.³⁵ The restriction of advocacy funding further closes the means by which Indigenous women can have their interests represented and heard in government.

Neo-liberal policies revolve around a framework that denies the diverse social positions of distinctive identities. Some Conservatives have claimed that categorizing individuals on the basis of race, gender, religion, etc. is offensive or oppressive, yet they have continued to espouse a narrative that discounts true oppression based on these factors.³⁶ As Alexandra Dobrowsky explains, “interest shapes identity, and vice versa” meaning that by denying interest group advocacy on the part of First Nations women, we are fundamentally denying that their identities are based on gendered and racialized experiences.³⁷ Iris Marion Young also astutely pointed out that “Liberal individualism denies the reality of groups.”³⁸ Without the recognition of women or First Nations as groups, their collective interests are lost in the individually focused discourses that deny systematic oppressions or shared circumstances based on group belonging.³⁹

Currently, only five out of the 305 members of the federal House of Commons are of Indigenous origins, and only two of these are women.⁴⁰ Additionally, in the 2006 elections the Conservative government only fielded 38 women out of 308 candidates (12.3%), and only 11% were given cabinet positions in the new government.⁴¹ Because neo-liberalism sidesteps group/collective identities and claims to represent everyone’s

interests equally, the Harper government runs the risk of alienating and marginalizing a great deal of Canadians who see their identities as being more than disconnected individuals.⁴² In light of current economic difficulties, voters are likely to appreciate the turn toward liberal fiscal policy by the Conservatives, however this shift may fail to take into consideration the cost to social programs that contribute Canadian identity.⁴³

Advocacy for women's and First Nations interests goes beyond representation in political parties or "interest groups", and penetrates both public and private spheres, education and economics, and activism and politics.⁴⁴ Advocacy groups are so wide ranging in their pursuits of equality, recognition of collective identities and social justice, that removing their funding fundamentally endangers the roots of feminism. In denying advocacy, lobbying and research groups funding, the Conservative government managed to successfully 'other' the women's and First Nations rights movements from mainstream politics by deeming their causes no more than 'special interests' and attempting to undermine their right to exist in formal politics.⁴⁵

In 2006, the Harper government's former Minister of Heritage and the Status of Women, Bev Oda, was quoted as saying, "we have to understand that if women are continuously told that they are not equal, they will continue to believe that. We say that everyone in Canada is equal."⁴⁶ The statement made by Minister Oda exemplifies a neo-liberal approach which fails to recognize not only the steps yet to be taken in terms of women's equality, but also the plight of all those who do not fit neatly into distinct categories of oppression, notably women of colour, Native women, non-heterosexual women and the disabled. Oda's statement is also significant in that it shows that having women in power does not always equal the representation of women's interests.⁴⁷ Thus the need for extra-parliamentary sources of representation such as interest, lobby and activist groups becomes even more apparent.

Violence

Finally, in addition to suffering greater rates of unemployment, lower incomes, less representation, and greater health problems, Indigenous women in Canada also face a much higher proportion of domestic violence.⁴⁸ British Columbia has the highest reported incidence of violence against women of any province in Canada.⁴⁹ Domestic violence in First Nations communities has an added layer of complexity because of the racism and abuse suffered by the community as a whole, a fact that cannot be discounted when attempting to uncover the roots of violence against Indigenous women. As Brownridge explains,

It is possible that Aboriginal men have not only internalized the devaluation of women but that this operates in a context where they themselves feel devalued by society. To feel some value in the society in which they find themselves, they may have adopted White devaluation of women and seek to attain a sense of self-worth through having power over their partner.⁵⁰

In this way it is possible to see how, by refusing to acknowledge First Nations people as having a distinct group identity, neo-liberalism has encouraged policies that fail to reflect their historically disadvantaged positions in society.

The status of First Nations women in their own communities has been jeopardized by a history of devaluation since first contact. In the past, only male First Nations leaders were recognized and consulted with. This trend, along with the narrative of ownership of women that existed in the Indian Act until the late 1980s, has allowed a discourse in many First Nations communities that has allowed band leaders and elders to deny the prevalence or seriousness of violence against them.⁵¹ Moreover, neo-liberal discourses of personal responsibility place the blame on First

Nations women for their failure to maintain healthy relationships or provide for their own security. Examples of abuse are then used as illustrations of the inability of First Nations governments to uphold provincial policies, thus undermining the potential for greater autonomy for First Nations people.⁵²

The hesitation and skepticism surrounding First Nation's self-government serves to discourage women from coming forward about abuse. As is often the case, Native women must choose between their culture and their personal safety in order to retain acceptance in their communities.⁵³ As Gotell explains,

Any adequate response to family violence must encompass a broad range of interventions including: expanded social welfare and child care programmes to provide women with economic independence; increased funding for social housing, second stage housing, and job training; increased and stable funding for shelters and crisis centres, and ...culturally appropriate services for aboriginal and immigrant women, etc.⁵⁴

Hence, cuts to social welfare programs and personal responsibility discourses in government have not only made help more difficult to attain, but they have also discouraged women from coming forward.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation of neo-liberal policies, while arguably successful economically, has been detrimental to the First Nations women of B.C. and Canada. Because physical barriers such as violence and health problems caused by poverty facilitate exclusion from the public realm, the denial of social rights to First Nations women has contributed to their disenfranchisement in the political arena. Moreover, because neo-

liberalism refuses to acknowledge the worth of private contributions, their lack of economic contributions coupled with the decrease in advocacy groups has directly lessened their ability to access and advocate change. Although the topic of discriminatory policies toward First Nations women could constitute a much larger and more in-depth study, in this paper I have outlined just four important aspects of the ways in which First Nations women are unfairly targeted. I feel that the issues of poverty, elimination of social services, lack of political representation, and the prevalence of family violence are all inextricable consequences of the ways in which the forces of patriarchy and neo-liberalism are being expressed in Canada today. It is time to give First Nations women a voice, both within their communities, their provinces, and the Country.

We as Canadians cannot allow injustice and exclusion to continue by refusing to acknowledge our own part. By challenging our own biases and seeking to uncover the true consequences of the dominant economic paradigm, the realities of neo-liberalism on the Canadian political landscape become glaringly clear. Canada, as a whole, must recognize that we are not made up of individuals, but of groups and nations and communities, and that sometimes, individual rights lead to systemic wrongs.

Notes

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- ² Joanne Barker, "Gender, Sovereignty, and the Discourse of Rights in Native Women's Activism." *Meridians* 7, no.1 (Nov. 2006): 127, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338720>.
- ³ Mala Htun, "What it Means to Study Gender and the State," *Politics & Gender* 1, no.1 (Mar. 2005): 157, doi: 10.1017/S1743923X05241016.
- ⁴ Alexandra Dobrowolsky, *Women & Public Policy in Canada: Neo-liberalism and After* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

- ⁵ Sylvia Fuller, Paul Kershaw and Jane Pulkingham, "Lone motherhood, welfare reform and active citizen subjectivity," *Critical Social Policy* 30, no. 2, (May 2010): 268, <http://csp.sagepub.com/content/30/2/267>.
- ⁶ Sylvia Bashevkin, *Welfare Hot Buttons: Women, Work, and Social Policy Reform* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2002), 5.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁸ Sylvia Bashevkin, *Women, Power, Politics: The Hidden Story of Canada's Unfinished Democracy* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129.
- ⁹ Canada, House of Commons Debates, *Hansard*, December 9, 1983, 44.
- ¹⁰ Conservative Party of Canada, "Founding Principles", http://www.conservative.ca/party/founding_principles/ (accessed March 14 2011).
- ¹¹ Sylvia Bashevkin, *Women, Power, Politics*, 118.
- ¹² Conservative Party of Canada, "Founding Principles".
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Margaret Walton-Roberts, "Weak Ties, Immigrant Women and Neoliberal States: Moving Beyond the Public/Private Binary." *Geoforum* 39, no. 1, (Jan. 2008): 503, doi: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2007.10.006.
- ¹⁵ Margaret Hilda Thatcher, interview by Douglas Keay, September 23 1987.
- ¹⁶ Fred Wein, *The State of the First Nation Economy and the Struggle to Make Poverty History* (Toronto: Assembly of First Nations 2009), 19.
- ¹⁷ Alexandra Dobrowolsky, *Women & Public Policy in Canada*, 7.
- ¹⁸ Seth Klein, Marge Reitsma-Street and Bruce Wallace, *Denied Assistance: Closing the Door on Welfare in BC*. (Victoria: Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group, 2006), 3.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ²¹ Jacquetta Newman and Linda A. White, *Women, Politics, and Public Policy: The Political Struggles of Canadian Women*. (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2006), 212.
- ²² Fred Wein, *The State of the First Nation Economy*, 36.
- ²³ David Macdonald and Daniel Wilson, *The Income Gap Between Aboriginal Peoples and the Rest of Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, 2010), 21, <http://ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/login?url=http://site.ebrary.com/lib/uvic/Doc?id=10385411>
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Canada, British Columbia CEDAW Group, *Inaction and Non-compliance: British Columbia's Approach to Women's Inequality*, The Poverty and Human Rights Centre, September 2008, 18.
- ²⁶ Louise Chappell, "Comparing Political Institutions: Revealing the Gendered 'Logic of Appropriateness'", *Politics & Gender* 2, no.2 (Aug. 2006): 231, doi: 10.1017/S1743923X06221044.
- ²⁷ Fred Wein, *The State of the First Nation Economy*, 36.

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- ²⁸ Margaret Walton-Roberts, "Weak ties, Immigrant Women and Neoliberal States", 508.
- ²⁹ Annette J. Browne and Jo-Anne Fiske, "Aboriginal Citizen, Discredited Medical Subject: Paradoxical Constructions of Aboriginal Women's Subjectivity in Canadian Health Care Policies." *Policy Sciences* 39, no.1 (Mar. 2006), 97, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25474293>.
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- ³¹ Sylvia Bashevkin, *Welfare Hot Buttons*, 28.
- ³² Marina Morrow, Olena Hankivsky and Colleen Varcoe, "Women and Violence: The Effects of Dismantling the Welfare State." *Critical Social Policy* 24, no.3 (Aug. 2004): 361, <http://csp.sagepub.com/content/24/3/3>, 58.
- ³³ Sylvia Bashevkin, *Welfare Hot Buttons*, 21.
- ³⁴ Marina Morrow, Olena Hankivsky and Colleen Varcoe, "Women and Violence", 361.
- ³⁵ Margaret Walton-Roberts, "Weak Ties, Immigrant Women and Neoliberal States", 508.
- ³⁶ Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 17.
- ³⁷ Alexandra Dobrowolsky, "Of 'Special Interest'", 717.
- ³⁸ Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting voices*, 17.
- ³⁹ Alexandra Dobrowolsky, "Of 'Special Interest'", 712.
- ⁴⁰ Canada, Parliament of Canada, "House of Commons Biographical Information: Inuit, Métis or First Nation Origin", <http://www.parl.gc.ca/parlinfo/Compilations/Parliament/Aboriginal.aspx?Menu=HOCBio&Language=E&Role=MP&Current=True&NativeOrigin=> (accessed March 16 2011).
- ⁴¹ Sylvia Bashevkin, *Women, Power, Politics*, 131.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 129.
- ⁴³ Marina Morrow, Olena Hankivsky and Colleen Varcoe, "Women and Violence", 161.
- ⁴⁴ Alexandra Dobrowolsky, "Of 'Special Interest'", 719.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 711.
- ⁴⁶ Bev Oda quoted by Andrée Côté in "The Broken Promises of Prime Minister Harper." *Jurifemme* 25, no.1 (Spring 2007).
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- ⁴⁸ Jacquetta Newman and Linda A. White, *Women, Politics, and Public Policy*, 222.

- ⁴⁹ Canada, Aboriginal Affairs Working Group. "A Framework for Action in Education, Economic Development and Violence Against Aboriginal Women & Girls". *Report to Provincial and Territorial Ministers of Aboriginal Affairs and National Aboriginal Organization Leaders*, 67.
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- ⁵¹ Joanne Barker, "Gender, Sovereignty, and the Discourse of Rights in Native Women's Activism." *Meridians* 7, no.1 (Nov. 2006): 261, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338720>.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Joanne Barker, "Gender, Sovereignty, and the Discourse of Rights in Native Women's Activism", 260.
- ⁵⁴ Lise Gotell, "A Critical Look at State Discourse on "Violence Against Women": Some Implications doe Feminist Politics and Women's Citizenship." In *Women and Political Representation in Canada*, ed. Manon Tremblay and Caroline Andrew (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2008), 45.