

*British Columbia Provincial
Election Voter Guide for 2011*

**Candidate Questions
On Women's Rights Issues**

D R A F T

**International
WOMEN'S
Rights Project**

Elections are a natural, integral part of a healthy democracy. We envision this brief voter guide to be used as a tool to inform voters about issues regarding women in British Columbia and to provide focusing questions for candidates. Our hope is that voters will use the questions in election forums, online through social media, or by emailing or phoning their candidate to engage with their candidates on issues that matter to them. In the long term, we hope that the guide provides a lens towards women's issues in politics that are often overlooked during elections. By realizing how integral and intersecting women's issues are to broader electoral topics like the environment or the economy, our aim is to help Canadians voting in B.C. to highlight some of these issues before they cast their vote and to hold attention on those issues after the election.

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Please send any comments, ideas or questions to info@iwrp.org.

Provincial Election Questions

1. Childcare: Federal and provincial supports

The Federal Government introduced a taxable \$100 per month child benefit payments to parents in 2006. The effect of this payment tends to favour wealthier parents and provides little if any incentive to expand the number of childcare spaces available. Within BC, childcare fees account for an average of 20% of families' monthly costs and 2010 estimates are around \$1,000 a month on childcare expenses in Metro Vancouver.¹

The BC Government promised an additional \$26 million in funding over three years to childcare programs for low-income families. The BC government also said full day kindergarten would be available for up to 50% of kindergarten students in 2010 and every 5 year old in 2011. The government has only pledged \$129 million to this while their own Early Childhood Learning Agency estimated annual costs at \$615 million.²

British Columbia Representative for Children and Youth, Mary-ellen Turpel-Lafond's report on child poverty quoted Statistics Canada, saying that "despite a drop in British Columbia's overall child poverty rate between 2007 and 2008, British Columbia continues to have the worst child poverty record in the country for the sixth year in a row based on after-tax measures."³

Furthermore, prospects do not improve for BC children as they grow older. There are currently only enough regulated childcare spaces for 15% of children under 12 in BC. Waiting times for care spaces are years long. In addition, the Ministry of Children and Family is being cut a further \$7 million for the coming fiscal year, concentrated in early years, youth services.⁴

Access to childcare should be universal and equitable and the system should provide comprehensive services for all childcare needs. The needs of childcare are arguably best addressed by a federal government. It has been 41 years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970 called for a national childcare legislation. Some provincial parties have committed to working with the federal government on this issue. There is currently no effective national system of childcare in Canada.

Questions for candidates:

Inaccessible childcare continues to disadvantage women in BC and Canada. What policies will you support to alleviate waitlists for childcare and what would you do to create affordable, accessible childcare in BC?

Would you, as a representative of the federal government, be willing to work with provincial governments to establish a national childcare system?

2. Health care

Despite Canada having a universal health care system, care is not equal for all individuals. Currently, we are witnessing an erosion of the public health care system and a failure to recognize the connection between good health and effective social policies.

Although the direct funding of health care across Canada is managed by the provinces, the system of payment transfers between the federal government and the provinces that supports health care funding will need to be renegotiated in 2014. This makes the federal government in 2014 a key player in what is otherwise seen as a provincial issue.

Equal access to abortions for women across Canada is key to economic equality. However, not all women in Canada or BC have equal and affordable access to medical abortion procedures. Many women must travel for hours to reach an abortion clinic. Women's health problems are often linked to systemic discrimination that impact poverty, sexual abuse, reproduction and economic inequality.

Aboriginal women are disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS. Aboriginal women are three times likelier to become infected than non-Aboriginal women. Senior women are not receiving adequate care for their age-specific health issues. The World Health Organization states that social determinants are linked with health – the lower the socioeconomic position (which is more often the case with women), the worse the health of that person.⁵

More than 600 nursing positions (in BC? Across Canada? Footnote recommended.) have been cut since March 2009. In overcrowded hospitals, treating people in hallways has become the new normal. For seniors needing complex care, the government's failure to provide the promised 5,000 intermediate and long-term-care beds continues to have dire consequences.⁶ Access to healthcare practitioners varies across the province.

Questions for candidates:

What will you do to ensure more equitable access to the array of different healthcare practitioners in rural and urban areas?

Access to abortion is essential to women's reproductive equality, yet access in BC is limited to urban areas. There is only one clinic on Vancouver Island that

provides abortion services. This increases the cost for many women who have to travel, make arrangements for children and take time off work.

What will you do to increase access to abortion services in BC?

As a federal representative, would you work with provincial governments to better support access to reproductive services and maternal care within Canada? Do you see reproductive services as an important part of Canada's role in international aid work?

3. Violence Against Women

Trauma caused by sexual assault can affect a survivor's long-term ability to have relationships or gain and maintain employment due to an accompanying loss of self-esteem, sense of safety and trust. According to the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS), only one in ten sexual assaults are reported to police. With only a small proportion of sexual offences formally documented through law enforcement, the prevalence of sexual assault in Canada has been difficult to quantify. According to the 2004 GSS, there were about 512,000 incidents of sexual assault, representing a rate of 1,977 incidents per 100,000 population aged 15 and older. Given that most sexual assaults go unreported, police-reported sexual assault counts are notably lower, with about 24,200 sexual offences recorded by police in 2007.⁷

In March 2003, government funding was cut to all of BC's Sexual Assault/Women Assault Centers providing crisis support and counseling to women who were victimized by sexual violence. These services were replaced with a 1-800 number located in Vancouver. Each of these programs lost an average of \$100,000 in annual core funding and impacted the counseling services. Support and counseling are imperative for a women's recovery from sexualized violence. Many of the victims of domestic or sexual violence in recent years have been members of marginalized groups, facing particular barriers that make it more difficult for them to access critical support systems.⁸ In 2010, the Vancouver General Hospital announced it would close its outpatient domestic violence program, leaving approximately 25 people a week without services and relying on already overstretched community resources.⁹

Questions for candidates:

Violence against women remains an important issue, as one in four women will experience sexualized or domestic violence in her lifetime.¹⁰ What will you do to support and fund more transition housing for women and children who are fleeing abusive relationships?

Sexual Assault Centres' funding have been slashed during the last decade, yet the number of women who experience sexual assault remain the same.

The 2009 General Social Survey found that self-reported spousal violence remained stable from 2004 with 6% of women reported being physically or sexually victimized by their spouse in the 5 years preceding the survey.¹¹

How will you support and fund sexual assault centres?

4. Aboriginal Women

Canada's history of colonialism and assimilation of Aboriginal people has resulted in lasting discrimination, racism, inequality and violence still felt today in Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal women are plagued with high levels of violence both within their community and in broader society. Aboriginal women face significant barriers to specialized, accessible domestic and sexual violence services as there is a shortage of support services for them. Most of the women who have been murdered or gone missing on Highway 16 (the Highway of Tears) and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside are Aboriginal women. It has been estimated that there are over 500 missing and/or murdered Aboriginal women in Canada, while the Native Women's Association of Canada says this figure may be actually low and it is probably nearer 1,000 missing or murdered Aboriginal women.¹²

Carrie Humchitt, president of the Aboriginal Women's Action Network stated that, "aboriginal women in BC remain grossly disadvantaged and experience very high levels of violence because of provincial and federal government inaction on Aboriginal women's equality and absolute non-response to violence against Aboriginal women".¹³ Between 2007 and 2009 in B.C, there have been 21 children who have died before the age of two. Fifteen of those children were aboriginal. This raises questions about the BC Liberal government's current apprehension and placement policies regarding aboriginal children. The policy made it harder for the apprehension of aboriginal children from their families, and of those apprehended, they try to place the children with relatives or someone else in the same community. The intent behind these policies is positive and is what aboriginal leaders pressured the government for. However, without adequate support given to the parents, the children are left in the care of relatives who do not have the resources and therefore ability to care for the children.¹⁴

Questions for candidates:

The Sister Watch Program in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside was set up to help vulnerable women in BC. Would you be willing to expand this program across BC? If so, how?

The public inquiry that followed the Pickton trial was not sufficient in bringing justice to all missing and murdered women in BC. What types of resources, including funding, would you dedicate to achieving justice for the missing and murdered women across BC?

5. Housing

The BC government promised over 1,000 new units of supportive housing for the homeless in Vancouver following the Olympic games but produced only 125. The lack of safe and affordable housing across BC is having a severe impact on women. Many women stay in abusive relationships rather than risk being homeless. When women do decide to leave their home they will move often to find safe housing.¹⁵

The economic, social, cultural and demographic needs of women who access Transition House Program services are becoming more diverse. The wide range of needs to be accommodated in one shelter might be in conflict with some of the other women needing assistance. An elderly woman who struggles with a mental illness and substance abuse requires different services than a woman with young children escaping intimate partner abuse. To ultimately improve access for diverse groups of women fleeing violence, there needs to be targeted staff training, small changes to facilities and amendments to agency policies.

The disparity in resources is due to funding decisions made by the individual regions and contract managers over the years. The implications of funding variability is that women in need do are not always able to access the help they need. This can be remedied by a transparent funding model that reduces disparity in services, within regards to the individual needs of the diverse communities.

There are also barriers that prevent referrals from one agency to another due to differences in framework and approach and lack of knowledge of other community programs and services. There needs to be increased communication and referral between Violence Against Women services, as well as with other related social, health and justice services. In 2008/2009 alone, there were 6,000 women who were turned away do to insufficient space at shelters. There needs to be a sufficient increase in funding made available in order to provide enough spaces for women and children escaping violence. Women on social assistance who have their children removed from their care temporarily by the government will often lose their funding for child-friendly housing which can prevent the return of the child in the future.¹⁶

Questions for candidates:

Vacancy rates in BC are the lowest in Canada, with Victoria vacancy rates at 2.5 percent and Vancouver at 2.2 percent.¹⁷ This makes finding affordable housing in BC quite difficult. While there have been some advancements in BC addressing the affordable housing shortage, there continues to be a shortage of housing specific to women and their children that represent largest demographic below the poverty line. How will you address the specific need for affordable, long-term housing?

6. Economic Equality

The Canadian Human Rights Act recognizes pay equity. The Act states that women are usually paid less for traditional women's work which is undervalued in society but the federal Treasury Board has fought against acting on this clause. On average, women earn approximately 71% of what men earn for the same work.¹⁸ Women face a glass ceiling in professional and managerial jobs: the more senior the position, the fewer the women. The wage gap is greater for racialized women, immigrant women, aboriginal women, and women with disabilities.

When asked about pay equity between genders, Lynn Stephens, the first minister under the Gordon Campbell's Liberal government responsible for Women's Services, stated that if women wanted to get paid more, they should "get a better job", and that women in British Columbia "are free to work where you wish, for whatever you wish."¹⁹ The Director of the UBC Centre for Women's and Gender Studies, Gillian Creese, says she objects to casual references to "shovel-ready projects" in discussions about the economy.

The pay equity act is the policy, but the reality and practice illustrates that women still do not get paid at similar rates to men. The differences in income become more pronounced when race, disability, and age are taken into account.

Questions for candidates:

On average, women earn approximately 71%²⁰ of what men earn for the same work. Young women are particularly vulnerable to low paying jobs.

What policies would enact to create economic equality for women across Canada?

What would you do to support and compensate domestic work in Canada?

7. Political Participation

Women are under-represented at all levels in formal politics. Some would argue that one consequence of this is that decisions are made regardless of the impact it will have on women and their children. Nomination fights can be expensive which will put many women at a disadvantage given their economic inequality. The discrimination that women politicians often experience tends to dissuade women thinking about entering politics. As well, the systemic discrimination that women experience daily in society in terms of healthcare, childcare, and lower wages makes it difficult for women to find the time and energy to run for political office.

Electoral reform centered on spending limits and public assistance in financing could open up more options for women thinking about entering politics. Change from first-past-the-post to a more proportional representation would likely see more women elected into political office. Affirmative action programs that allow women candidates to be nominated ahead of men in winnable ridings is one way to ensure that more women make it into Parliament or the BC Legislature. Many women's organizations also push for mixed member proportional representation that is more easily understood and used in more countries.

In Canada's Parliament, women constitute just 22% of the parliamentarians. British Columbians, in particular, have elected just over 100 women to the BC legislature or Parliament since winning the right to vote.²¹ In 2009, women made up 27% of BC MLAs. The percentage of women elected is slowly trending upwards. Overall, although there is a slight increase in the number of women elected in BC provincial politics, clearly boosting the number of women requires a concerted long-term effort.²²

Federally the parties need to continue to recruit and retain women candidates. With the 2011 federal election, the New Democratic Party lead the way with almost 41% women candidates. The Bloc Quebecois and Green Party were tied with 32% women candidates. The Liberal Party's slate included 30% women candidates and the Conservative Party had 22% women candidates running for office.

Questions for candidates:

Women are continually underrepresented in the Canadian political system. Would you be willing to support some type of affirmative action to increase women's representation in politics?

Electoral reform has been proven to increase women's representation in politics. Though the recent provincial referendum on Single Transferable Vote failed, would you support federal electoral reform that would increase women's representation in politics?

8. Refugee Women

Migrant women who are often refugees or foreign domestic workers are also particularly at risk of poverty and exploitation, as they are often forced to work in unregulated or hidden employment. Women make up the majority of migrant workers from Asia and many work in Canada and BC to sustain their families back home. They are paid low wages, and despite the fact that they contribute significantly to the Canadian economy, they are not entitled to many benefits such as employment insurance.²³

BC residents recently took in almost 500 refugees from Sri Lanka, who sought asylum in Canada. While some British Columbians welcomed the refugees, others demanded that the refugees be arbitrarily refused the right to land, that they be given food and sent back to their war torn country. Many were upset that these refugees would be using the Canadian healthcare system, and some went as far to accuse the refugee women of cheating the immigrant system by “deliberately” giving birth once in Canada.²⁴

In the case of the Sri Lankan refugees, racism and sexism was evident. While British Columbians were concerned about their own health care system, they neglected to look at the struggles of immigrant and refugee women. Many immigrant and refugee women endure significant stress and anxiety that may have a negative impact on their mental health. Older immigrant and refugee women are particularly vulnerable to social isolation, poverty and to carrying the burden of informal care-giving. Family and job responsibilities make it difficult for many immigrant and refugee women to use existing health care resources. Many immigrant and refugee women end up in traditional gender specific roles while entering the workforce in BC, such as house keeping, hospitality and home support. These are positions where the women usually earn minimum wage, lack job security and have little room for advancement.²⁵ The federal government must invest in community-based training systems as well as culturally appropriate health care in order for immigrant and refugee women to succeed.

Questions for candidates:

What is your stance on protecting refugee women's rights?

Historically, refugees who have communities in Canada are better able to integrate into society, find work and housing as become educated. What sort of policies do you support for refugee women's integration into Canadian society?

9. Women With Disabilities

More women with disabilities live in Canada and BC than men with disabilities. Aboriginal women have twice the national disability rate. The more severe a woman's disability, the lower her income.²⁶ The unemployment rate among women with disabilities is up to 75%. Eight percent of women with disabilities live on less than \$10,000 per year. Of those, 23% live on less than \$5,000 per year.²⁷ Services for mothers with disabilities are limited while accessible cribs, accessible and affordable childcare and other services for mothers with disabilities are virtually non-existent.

Oppression does not discriminate, and can impact anyone. Women with disabilities are often linked to many other issues that women without disabilities face. Women and children with disabilities are twice as likely to be victims of violence than non-disabled women, women and children with multiple disabilities experience even higher rates of violence. Across Canada, few rape crisis centres and transition houses are accessible to women with disabilities, leaving few options for these women.

Questions for candidates:

Given that the unemployment rate among women with disabilities is up to 75%, what economic policies or programs would you suggest to support women with disabilities?

Due to their economic marginalization, access to healthcare is more difficult for disabled women. What healthcare policies would you support for increase access for disabled women? .

What is your vision for supporting disabled women's access to affordable housing?

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