

Femme Fiscale Brings Women's Voices to the Legislature

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Les auteures révisent le militantisme de la PCANU (La plate-forme pour le comité d'action des Nations Unies) qui devrait soumettre les budgets accordés selon le genre, à l'attention du public et du gouvernement d'une façon qui est accessible, en plus d'inclure la diversité des voix des femmes du Manitoba. Un regard particulier sur la performance art de « Femme fiscale » montre une autre manière d'engager un discours public féministe.



Feminist activism is alive and well in Manitoba, and some groups are willing to try new strategies to ensure that longstanding feminist messages are heard. One example of a group with some fresh ideas, working with women in all their diversity, is UNPAC Manitoba. The United Nations Platform for Action Committee Manitoba grew out of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Forty-five women from Manitoba attended the UN conference itself and the parallel conference for NGOs and were inspired to form the committee to help ensure the implementation of the Platform for Action in Manitoba and globally. Working with its own broad membership, as well as with other community-based organizations, UNPAC Manitoba has undertaken two major projects.¹

In 2000, shortly after the Beijing +5 meetings in New York, the “Women and Economy Project” was initiated.

A foundation for the second major project, the “Women and Economy Project,” brought together women from throughout the province to hear from them and to educate them about women’s place in the economy. A video was produced which features local women and is available to community groups to continue the education and empowerment process.

By the time of the Beijing +10 meetings in New York in 2005, the second major project was underway. The “Gender Budget Project” aims to empower women to take interest and participate in the provincial budget process, and to educate women and the general public about the disparate impact of budgetary measures on women and men. In particular, the project was designed to promote women’s equality through influencing the government to take women’s specific needs into account in the annual budget process. This work is taking place within a broader context of gender budget work across Canada and around the globe (see Bakker; Yalnizyan; CCPA), but is uniquely focused on the particular concerns of Manitoba women and on building their economic literacy and ability to participate in the political process.

Eighteen months into the two-year project, UNPAC has met with close to 400 women through a series



of day long workshops conducted around the province, including in the sparsely populated North. Most of the workshops were hosted by local community groups, such as women's resource centres; and some were designed to reach specific communities of women, such as women living with disabilities, immigrant women, or senior women. Aboriginal women were also well represented. The workshops attracted women of diverse age, ethnicity, class, and geographic backgrounds and provided the opportunity for UNPAC to hear what the women had to say and to educate the participants about the provincial budget process.

particular concerns. After each workshop an article was run in the local newspaper outlining the unequal impact of the provincial budget on women when their particular needs and concerns are not taken into account. Members of the gender budget advisory group also met regularly with representatives of Treasury Board and with the Ministers of Finance, Status of Women, and Housing to keep them informed of the results of the ongoing consultations; and to discuss the implementation of gender-based analysis in the budget process. UNPAC also participated as part of a coalition with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (Manitoba) that produced an Alternative Provincial Budget that was released to the public and the media a week before the Provincial Budget was handed down on March 6, 2006 (*Investing in Tomorrow, Today*). Buttons proclaiming "Proud to be a Taxpayer" were made and worn by many members and supporters during the weeks leading up to the budget. These buttons provoked many conversations about how tax cuts benefit men more than women and impair the ability of the government to provide the services on which many women rely.



Numerous activist methodologies flowed from the workshop meetings. Draft letters for participants to send to their Members of the Legislative Assembly as well as to the Minister of Finance and the Minister responsible for the Status of Women were provided and many participants sent such letters with strong personal statements stating their own

The most dramatic and unorthodox activism that has been part of the "Gender Budget Project" so far has been the creation of the "Femme Fiscale" who was brought to life by a local performance artist, Shawna Dempsey, and attended the media scrum following the March 6th budget. She went a long way to bringing the issue of women's economic equality to the attention of politicians and the broader public.

Femme Fiscale was created by UNPAC Communications Coordinator, Becky Thiessen. Her dialogue was generated by the advisory committee based upon the feedback from women around the province that was gathered during the workshops. A series of postcards has been

Photos and drawings by Becky Thiessen.

created where *Femme Fiscale* discusses a variety of issues including women's poverty, transportation, tax cuts, and housing with the Golden Boy—Manitoba's provincial symbol of economic prosperity, a 17-foot golden statue of a cherubic boy with a sheaf of wheat who stands atop the dome of the Legislature. New cards in the series will highlight the issues of affordable childcare, safety, and income support through increased minimum wage and assistance levels. It is hoped that the accessible format and information as well as the personal connection created by *Femme Fiscale* will generate ongoing interest and even a desire to "collect them all!"

Femme Fiscale has contributed significantly to getting the concerns of Manitoba women heard by political actors in the province. The government has committed to using gender-based analyses across numerous ministries and UNPAC is hopeful that next year's budget will incorporate at least some gender

budgeting principles. The concerns of rural, Aboriginal, immigrant, and many other women have been given voice in Manitoba as part of a broader global context through education, grassroots action, academic engagement, and visual arts. This is Canadian feminism in action.

Jennifer deGroot is the Project Coordinator for UNPAC and co-facilitated workshops throughout the province. In her other life she grows food and is actively involved in a variety of grassroots organizations.

Lorna A. Turnbull is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Manitoba and a member of the Gender Budget advisory committee of UNPAC. Her work concerns how women's economic inequality is created by the caregiving work of women. She is the author of Double Jeopardy: Motherwork and the Law. She wore her "Proud to be a Taxpayer" button when teaching Income Tax Law and Policy and

shook up the thinking of some of her students.

¹For more detailed information about the two projects or about UNPAC more generally, please visit our website at www.unpac.ca.

References

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- Yalnizyan, Armine. *Canada's Commitment to Equality: A Gender Analysis of the Last Ten Federal Budgets (1995-2004)*. Ottawa: FAFIA, 2005.



UN Platform for Action Committee (UNPAC) Manitoba

Women & Economy Project Gender Budget Project

An abundance of resources on
women's economic literacy
<videos, resource books, website>
for students, researchers, and
community activists.

Visit www.unpac.ca to learn more

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Femme Fiscale sizes up Manitoba Budget 2006

Winnipeg, MB—Dressed in spandex and a purple cape Femme Fiscale, Manitoba's newest superheroine, flew into the Manitoba Legislature for her first public appearance on Budget Day March 6. The following day, the red-haired women's rights advocate took time to analyze the impact of the budget on some of the province's most vulnerable citizens. "We were disappointed that tax cuts were once again the big winner of the day," said the feisty Femme. The Femme is particularly concerned about the lost government revenue that tax cuts bring. "Tax cuts aren't free. This year's budget takes another nearly 100 million dollars out of the government purse. I am concerned about how this will impact people who rely on government services, especially women and their children."

Indeed, Budget 2006 offered no

new social housing units. "We have consulted with women across the province and in every community we hear women speak of the need for more housing that is affordable for low-income families. A hundred million dollars could go a long way to addressing this need," said the Femme Fiscale. Although the budget did promise \$7.8 million for an integrated shelter benefit for low-income people, it appears that money promised for this program last year has not even been spent. Manitobans living with disabilities will benefit from a small increase to their housing allowance.

Using her POV (point-of-view) goggles, the Femme Fiscale also examined the budget to see how the government would deliver on its childcare promises. "Women from across our fair province say that accessible and affordable childcare is an urgent need. In Winnipeg alone there are more children on waiting lists—nearly 15,000 of them!—than there are in childcare centres." Although Budget 2006 promised small increases for existing childcare spaces, a promise that will provide greater stability and higher wages for child care providers, there was no word on creating new spaces. Femme Fiscale hopes the Manitoba government will fight to keep the childcare deal signed by the federal government last April.

Femme Fiscale was pleased to see the budget promise new funding to the province's universities and colleges which allows post-secondary institutions to maintain quality programs without a rise in tuition. "Education is

very important for women," said Femme Fiscale. "Women still earn less than men so getting a good education helps them compete in the unequal workforce. The tuition freeze is crucial as time taken to raise children, compounded with lower wages, tends to limit women's ability to pay back student loans."

The Femme Fiscale believes that only in working together can we achieve economic equality for Manitoba women. Her presence on Budget Day was a reminder to all that the Manitoba Budget is not just for the proverbial "men in suits" but also for ordinary Manitobans, including those who wear spandex and capes. "Femme Fiscale livened up an otherwise dull budget," said reporter Jon Hendricks of CTV News.

Femme Fiscale anticipates further adventures with Manitoba's Golden Boy who has promised to remove his head from the clouds atop the Legislature and fight for women's rights alongside her. She also looks forward to continued dialogue with government representatives who have committed to using gender analysis in the development of the budget. With her toolbelt of women's rights implements Femme Fiscale will continue her mission to hold government accountable for their commitments to women's human rights. The stolid Golden Boy may be the economic vision of the province, but Femme Fiscale is the spirited conscience with her feet firmly planted on the ground.

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UNPAC is an association of Manitoba women committed to improving women's economic equality as articulated in the Platform for Action of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. For more information and photos visit their website at <www.unpac.ca>.

