

## BC Child Care Advocates at the United Nations to defend Children's Rights

Written by Susan Harney, April 2012

*"If we don't bear witness as citizens, as people, as individuals, the right that we had to life is sacrificed. There is a silence instead of a speaking presence."*

– Jane Rule

On February 6, 2012, two BC child care advocates representing the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC (CCCABC) and the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC) appeared in Geneva, Switzerland before the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. I was one of those advocates. Along with my colleague Lynell Anderson, we had been invited to speak to the Committee's Pre-Sessional Working Group about Canada's shameful lack of affordable, accessible, quality child care programs. Our task was to highlight Canada's failure to uphold the rights of the majority of Canada's young children (and their families) and to ask the international community to hold Canada accountable for its lack of progress towards building a system of early care and learning.

But let me start from the beginning. Two years ago during a strategic planning session of the CCCABC Board of Directors, a number of key issues emerged:

- It had been 40 years since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women first called for a national system of affordable child care services.
- It has been 20 years since Canada ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (December 13, 1991). More recently, the Committee adopted General Comment 7 (GC7, 2005), which provides additional guidance about implementing rights in early childhood. GC7 clearly addresses the importance of access to affordable child care, with well-trained, appropriately-paid and socially valued staff.
- Within the social justice community, more and more organizations were talking about issues through a "rights based lens."
- The United Nations review process of Canada's implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child was scheduled for 2011-2012. This process provided an opportunity for us, as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to intervene and bring attention to Canada's lack of progress in developing and funding an early care and learning system.
- Multiple international studies, including those published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UNICEF, ranked Canada last amongst the world's developed countries in its lack of public support for families with young children.

And so, with a commitment to reaffirm our roots as an organization based on the principles of women's and children's rights, our project "Child Care is a Right" was born.

Eager to combine our efforts through a partnership with CCAAC, the next 18 months were busy ones for the project. We established three primary goals:

1. To explore Canada's international treaty obligations to women, children and families as they pertain to child care.
2. To provide public information about the rights of Canadians in 3 specific treaties:
  - The Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),
  - The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and related General Comment 7 - Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood (GC7), and
  - The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
3. To participate in the United Nations review process of Canada's obligations to children under the CRC.

We developed fact sheets, delivered workshops and began integrating a "rights based lens" in our other organizational work. In the spring of 2011 we published *A Tale of Two Canadas: Implementing Rights in Early Childhood* which generated attention and built support for children's rights across the country.

*"There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected."*  
– Kofi Annan

In November 2011, we submitted *A Tale of Two Canadas* to the United Nations Committee, along with a Declaration for a Child Care System in Canada endorsed by more than 20 local, regional and national organizations. We were honoured to receive an invitation to present our findings to the Committee in February. It's important to note that the process for review does not end with the NGO presentations. In the fall of 2012 the Committee will meet with Canadian government representatives to discuss Canada's child rights policies and practices. After this, the UN Committee will issue a public report with recommendations as to how Canada can better fulfill its responsibility under the Convention to uphold the rights of children in Canada.

Some may question the importance of universal child care when too many children around the world face dire conditions of starvation, life in war torn villages and limited access to education or basic health care. Within this context, how can we expect Canada's failure to provide affordable, quality child care to be viewed as a breach of children's rights? But a right is a right – and if Canada, one of the wealthiest countries in the world, does not fulfill all of its obligations under the Convention then how can we expect or hope more from other countries? Year after year our own province, BC, has

*"If we don't stand up for children, then we don't stand for much."*  
– Marian Wright Edelman

the highest level of child poverty in Canada and the rights of our First Nations children are violated every day in our country. Do we stay silent? Do we decide as a nation that as long as some of our children have their rights upheld we're doing OK? No!

As we said to the UN Committee,

"...Canada's lack of progress on realizing rights in early childhood is not for lack of evidence, not for lack of identified need, and not for lack of detailed solutions and recommendations. Nor should economic uncertainty be a barrier. Multiple analyses consistently show that the social and economic benefits of child care substantially outweigh the estimated cost of 1% of GDP. And still governments do so little."

Just like at home, many in Geneva were shocked to learn of Canada's last place ranking in supporting young children's right to child care. While other countries continue to make progress and build quality systems and programs for young children, Canada does not. More than ever, CCCABC and CCAAC are committed to exposing how our governments – and by extension, we as Canadians – are not fulfilling our obligations to young children and to offering real solutions.

George Orwell said "Speaking the truth in times of universal deceit is a revolutionary act." Those who are dedicated to social justice know that no one act will turn events. But each opportunity to bear witness, to give voice, especially on behalf children is always the right thing to do. We will continue to engage in our "revolutionary acts" until the rights of all children in Canada are a reality.

In our closing statement to the committee we said,

"As Canadian we profess that nothing is more important than our children. We say we would do anything for their well-being. But, as we have detailed in a *A Tale of Two Canadas* (and in our briefing update), Canada is not living up to these ideals. Are the rights of young children in Canada being upheld and advanced? We think not."

To view *A Tale of Two Canadas*, our Briefing Update and our presentation to the committee go to our website at [www.cccabc.bc.ca](http://www.cccabc.bc.ca). For more information or to contact CCCABC, email [info@cccabc.bc.ca](mailto:info@cccabc.bc.ca).

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