

Thank you again for supporting the event on November 28, 2020, for the Young Canadians' Parliament (YCP) hosted by Children First Canada (CFC)!

The November event was the final virtual forum for 2020. One forum has been held each month since June 2020. The objectives of the forums have been to:

- Educate children about their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- To educate them on their options to take action,
- Advise on the impacts of COVID-19
- To provide a platform to exercise their rights, including having direct access to parliamentarians and decision-makers to share their recommendations and perspective

Each month, this program was co-designed with CFC Youth Ambassadors to contribute to the vision and outcomes of the YCP:

- A coordinated response by federal government and civil society organizations that responds to the priorities of children and youth impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Public policies intended to improve the lives of children will be reflective of the interests and concerns of young Canadians.
- Improved outcomes for the health and wellbeing of all 8 million children in Canada.
- Increased political will to address the urgent threats to childhood.
- A coherent policy framework to improve children's wellbeing.

## INTRODUCTION

Kelsey Beson, Manager of Programs (Children First Canada) facilitated the November YCP event. Elaine Kicknosway, Elder and Traditional Teacher from Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, opened the event and encouraged participants, if they have not yet done so, to start their relationship with the people who traditionally, and presently inhabit the land that was acknowledged by Kelsey. She also encouraged participants to learn the language(s) of the original people of their area, to reflect on and engage in anti-oppression through empowered relationships with land and people, and unified true talk. She wished participants wellness in their journey together.

The hosts of the event Kaitlyn Fernandes and Simi Sahota welcomed two guest presenters: the Honourable Jag Sahota, Conservative Member of Parliament representing Calgary Skyview, and Estefan Cortes-Vargas, former Alberta New Democratic Party Member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta.

### Jag Sahota

Shadow Minister Sahota provided an overview of her experience as the MP for Calgary Skyview. Sahota was sworn in months before the COVID-19 pandemic began. As a result, Sahota feels like she does not know what it feels like to be a 'normal' MP.

Sahota explained that all politicians have personal goals about what they would like to achieve; however, it is her job to focus on COVID-19. Most of the work Sahota is currently involved in is in emergency response due to the pandemic. For example, Sahota worked to bring home some of the members of her riding who were stuck in India and could not fly back at the beginning of the pandemic. Sahota highlighted that her job has allowed her to make an impact, and she feels a responsibility given to her by the constituents of Calgary Skyview.

### Estefan Cortes-Vargas

Former Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Alberta, Cortes-Vargas provided an overview of their experience beginning by acknowledging that not a lot of politicians 'look like me'. They were the first Colombian-Canadian, third Latin American, first trans/non-binary and one of only three GLBTQ+<sup>1</sup> Members of the Alberta Legislature, when they took office. During their time in office, they were treated differently than other politicians when repeatedly asked about their age and identity. During their presentation, Cortes-Vargas acknowledged the impact lawmakers have on people's lives and how their role resulted in a deeper consideration of gender identity and gender expression in the legislature and health care, especially for trans-people.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning. People often use this acronym to describe all of the community including asexual, ally, pansexual, agender, gender queer, bigender, gender variant and pan gender.

Former MLA Cortes-Vargas explained how representation leads to change in the Legislative Assembly including the use of a gender-neutral honorific (Member) rather than past use of he/her. Their work on trans-health meant that policy makers were considering issues that may be overlooked or lead to further problems for not only trans-people, but the broader GLBTQ+ community. For example, during COVID, elective surgeries were not performed. Many gender confirming surgeries for trans-persons are considered elective by the medical community. Delays in surgeries leave people stuck in situations of uncertainty during an already stressful period of vulnerability. Cortes-Vargas also indicated that trans people are at the highest risk of suicide in the time between when they come out and when they are waiting to have gender confirming surgery. These are realities that are often missed by policy makers, and therefore not addressed, if members of the trans and gender non-binary community are not present. Despite the challenges faced during their time in office, Cortes-Vargas highlighted that Canada has created a space for trans-people, GLBTQ+ people and youth. They noted that when people say that youth are the leaders of tomorrow, they respond with "no, they are actually leading now".

# GENDER EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN PARLIAMENT: WHAT CHILDREN AND YOUTH SAID:

Participants considered the barriers to political life in Canada as a result of a person's gender identity and/or gender expression, sexual orientation, and ethnicity and/or race. The breakout session on gender considered the responsibilities of duty bearers (government and parents) to address barriers in a way that enables diversity, equity and inclusion within Canada's parliamentary system. In so doing, the breakout session made connections to the following Articles from the UNCRC:

## Article 18 - Responsibility of parents

Parents are the main people responsible for bringing up a child. When the child does not have any parents, another adult will have this responsibility and they are called a "guardian". Parents and guardians should always consider what is best for that child. Governments should help them. Where a child has both parents, both of them should be responsible for bringing up the child.

## Article 5 - Family guidance as children develop

Governments should let families and communities guide their children so that, as they grow up, they learn to use their rights in the best way. The more children grow, the less guidance they will need.

## Article 42 - Everyone must know children's rights

Governments should actively tell children and adults about this Convention so that everyone knows about children's rights.

## More than anything else we want you to know:

- More education should be provided on 2SLGBTQI+<sup>2</sup> people in schools and government funding should be provided so that schools can ensure resources exist like 2SLGBTQI+ library books.
- Teachers should receive training, and participate in workshops led by people from the 2SLGBTQ+ and BIPOC<sup>3</sup> communities, so they can help children learn about gender diversity and equity in politics.

---

<sup>2</sup> Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning, Intersex and community. People often use this acronym to describe all of the community including asexual, ally, pansexual, agender, gender queer, bigender, gender variant and pan gender.

<sup>3</sup> Black, Indigenous, People of Colour

- Norms need to change in parliament so that non-gender pronouns are normalized and micro-aggressions addressed.
- Journalists and media have an impact on public opinion and therefore a responsibility to respect people's identity and use gender-neutral language.

We would like decision makers to address our protection concerns:

- Government should offer more financial aid to enable gender-diverse people to get the education they want and pursue the pathway to politics.
- Money should be available and more accessible for gender-diverse candidates.
- Government websites can include opportunities for women and encourage women to take on careers that are typically male dominated.

# EXPECT RESPECT: WHAT CHILDREN AND YOUTH SAID:

Participants considered how policymakers could address gender-based violence and promote healthy relationships during and after COVID-19. The breakout session considered how children of all ages could be included in discussions surrounding healthy relationships. The breakout session made connections to the following Articles from the UNCRC:

## Article 17 – Access to information

Children have the right to get information that is important to their wellbeing. Adults should make sure the information children are consuming is not harmful and should help children find and understand the information they need.

## Article 19-Protection from harm

Children have the right to be protected from mistreatment, in mind and body.

## Article 34- Protection from sexual abuse

Children have the right to be free from sexual abuse.

## Article 36- Protection from exploitation

Children have the right to protection from any kind of exploitation.

## More than anything else, we want you to know:

- We need more sex education incorporated into our curriculum before we reach junior high.
- Similarly, we would like to see respect taught in schools starting in kindergarten.
- We need to be educated about healthy relationships from early on to have definitions around healthy relationships and teen dating violence.
- We need qualified sex education teachers and resources to teach Canadian youth about healthy relationships.
- We need to ensure non-binary youth have a place to participate in sex education; when splitting up boys and girls for education, we need to consider those who identify as neither.

We would like decision-makers to address our protection concerns:

- The Government should offer more funding to organizations such as Kids Help Phone to collaborate in developing a strategy for reaching out to youth experiencing teen dating violence.
- The Government should offer funding for the creation of online courses for youth about healthy relationships.

## Q&A

The responses below have been paraphrased.

Q: What is the Government currently doing to address gender-based violence in Canada?

**A (Shadow Minister Jag Sahota):** The current Government has developed a national strategy to end gender-based violence. However, their response to gender-based violence so far is not satisfactory.

We are currently seeing victims of abuse being turned away from shelters due to a lack of funding. Additionally, people in rural communities lack access to online services, impacting the level of care they can receive.

Q: I wonder about any increase in domestic violence during the pandemic and what can be done to help.

**A (Senator Wanda Thomas Bernard):** It is essential to recognize that we do not have all the stats yet, so we don't know exactly how much violence has increased. However, it is also essential to recognize that things that regularly put women at risk, such as isolation and stress, are rising. Women in rural communities are particularly at risk due to increased isolation and limited access to direct services. At times, virtual supports are also out of reach due to limited telecommunications services.

We need to find creative solutions to this problem. We can help by raising awareness about the issue by participating in events such as the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence.

We also need to ask the Government to commit money to end violence. More importantly, though, we need the Government to address the root causes of violence, not merely the symptom of violence.

Q: How can we take action against gender inequity?

**A (MP Jenica Atwin):** The answer starts with a conversation but should be backed up by our Government's resources. Discussing respect in homes and at schools is critically important. We also need to spread the messages of organizations doing great work about gender equity. Moreover, we need to make sure there are resources available for those who are experiencing any kind of violence.

Q: What are steps that the federal Government can take to increase gender representation within their leadership?

**A (Former MLA Estefan Cortes-Vargas):** For the most part, parties are responsible to create structures from within that support their diverse candidates. For example, parties may provide childcare and wardrobe funding for women or networking opportunities for very young candidates. We should definitely push parties to continue and improve their practices from within.

We can ask the Federal Government to put funding towards initiatives like candidate training so people in marginalized communities that want to run can access political know-how.

## CONCLUSION

When linking gender equity in parliament and healthy relationships with the UNCRC, it is demonstrated that children's rights cannot be fully met without addressing the discrimination against women and gender diverse people. Furthermore, our conversations highlighted that discrimination is an issue that is linked with violence.

Most people view Canada as a progressive beacon to the world. However, our discussions reveal Canada needs to do better to ensure individuals are not subject to any forms of discrimination on the basis of their gender identity, expression or sexual orientation.

The ideas and concerns expressed throughout the November event are a challenge to government at all levels. We challenge the government to address the barriers faced by women, gender diverse people and members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community and to promote respect and dignity for all Canadians.

# THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS



Canadian  
Red Cross

Canada

**Gail O'Brien**



**#RISINGYOUTH**  
*community service grants*



**#JEUNESACTION**  
*subvention de service communautaire*

This event would not have been possible without the partnership of:



[www.childrenfirstcanada.com](http://www.childrenfirstcanada.com)

1-877-837-2258

[facebook.com/childrenfirstcanada](https://facebook.com/childrenfirstcanada)

[twitter.com/children1stca](https://twitter.com/children1stca)

[Instagram.com/children1stca](https://Instagram.com/children1stca)



[www.youngcanadiansparliament.com](http://www.youngcanadiansparliament.com)