The astounding lack of women in government;  
Our dismal record on gender parity may help explain Canada’s increasing social ills such as child poverty

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A society where the majority of the population is scarcely heard or seen in government can hardly be considered democratic or civil.

Yet, that's pretty much the situation of Canadian women even though the Constitution guarantees equality and we tend to fancy ourselves on the side of angels when it comes to human rights.

Across every level of Canadian government -- federal, provincial and municipal -- the percentage of elected women is stuck at 20 per cent. There are many cabinet positions women have never filled in provincial and federal governments.

Of course, there are some exceptions. Surrey’s first female mayor, Dianne Watts, leads a council that is two-thirds women. In Vancouver, four of 11 members of council are women, and a woman has never been elected mayor.

Under Watts, considerable progress has been made on crime, homelessness and addictions. Having a majority of women has made a difference. They weren’t content to deal with crime as a policing issue. They wanted to deal with its root causes, including literacy and early childhood education.

"We certainly view the world in a very different way," she says. "It does make a difference [having more women] because of the way that women approach a situation in terms of resolving it. It's not good or bad or right or wrong, it's just a different way. It's very much a collaborative effort where everyone has the opportunity to bring an initiative forward . . . . It’s about fostering an environment of valuing people's input and by adding a contribution, they are feeling more empowered."

Watts was elected as an independent after Surrey’s party system imploded after a series of dysfunctional councils. Since then, she’s pulled together what she calls a non-party of six others who aren’t interested in politics as much as they are interested in making progress on issues. (The only reason they’ve registered as a society, she says, is that B.C. law requires that for a group to have a website or put out brochures.)

Watts doesn’t like the confrontational, Westminster-style of government at the higher levels, but retired Conservative senator Pat Carney, NDP MP Jean Crowder and former B.C. Liberal deputy premier Christy Clark have no interest in changing the system of government proposing, others opposing.

But Clark says, "Dare I say that mixed company is a civilizing experience -- both for women and for men."

The United Nations has concluded that a critical mass of at least 30 per cent of women is needed before government policies begin to reflect women’s priorities and before there is a shift in the governmental management style and organizational culture.

Academic studies indicate that when that critical mass is achieved and more women hold more of the key decision-making roles, governments tend to focus more on "root-cause" issues such as education, child care, housing and social services. And, since the Cold War ended, economists have come to realize that wealth is much more than per-capita gross domestic product.

The World Economic Forum’s annual gender gap ranking looks at health and survival rates, economic opportunity, educational attainment and “gender empowerment,” which is the ratio of women to men in national government.
The top four overall in 2007 -- Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland -- are also the top four in terms of the ratio of women to men in their national parliaments. Canada is 18th overall and 36th when it comes to gender empowerment.

It's not that women can't win election in Canada. They do. Their success rate is comparable or even slightly better than men's. What women don't do is run.

Clark, Carney and Crowder say politics isn't attractive to most well-qualified women, especially ones with young children.

Based on her experience as a single-mother, Carney says Parliament is so family unfriendly that women with young children shouldn't even run.

Crowder and Clark strongly disagree. But it's a measure of how bad things are that Carney would even suggest it.

The parliamentary schedule is punishing, particularly for MPs living at the far corners of the country, and the abusive, confrontational nature of question period is not attractive.

"Women are more reticent to get into a confrontational world where you have to be right all the time," Clark says. "And I just don't think that's the same kind of issue for men."

There's the boys' club culture that continues to exclude women from the most powerful and prestigious cabinet posts.

Then there's the media double standard -- journalists and commentators spending as much time analyzing women's clothing and private lives as their policies.

Without set targets for women's participation, both Clark and Crowder believe nothing is going to change.

"If [Premier] Gordon Campbell had actually set a target of 33 per cent women [in 2001], 33 per cent of the women in the legislature would have been women," says Clark. "But he didn't set a target. He said -- and I supported this at the time -- we're going to be more encouraging to women. We're going to talk to women, we're going to give them support, more money and networking. But the fact is, the political parties can't offer the support they say they are going to. They're never able to come through."

Carney opposes targets, but supports measures to make politics a more attractive career option for women.

"Any national caucus of any party is supposed to represent the nation and they set the priorities. If you don't have women in those caucuses, you get skewed priorities," Carney says.

Canada's dismal record on gender parity may help explain Canada's rising homelessness, increasing child poverty rates and infection rates for some diseases that rival the Third World's.

All of which more directly affect women, who because of a continuing wage gap are more likely to be poor. They're also more likely to be the primary caregivers for the young, the old and the sick.

While there was a gender voting gap in the United States as far back as the 1970s, one didn't emerge in Canada until 1993, along with the Reform party, according to Gender and Vote Choice in the 2006 Canadian Election, a paper done by McGill's Elisabeth Gidengil and five other academics in a paper. (www.ces-eec.umontreal.ca/documents/GidengiletalAPSA2006.pdf).

That gap continued in 2006. If Stephen Harper's policies of forging closer ties to the United States, smaller government and fewer social programs had appealed to the same proportion of women as men, Gidengil and the others said Canada would have had a majority government instead of a minority one with the fewest seats in history.
But women didn't. And the Conservatives have done nothing to bridge it.

When Environment Minister John Baird was asked about the gender gap at The Vancouver Sun's editorial board meeting, he glibly replied: "I can't explain why [Liberal leader] Stephane Dion does so poorly among men."

He acknowledged that the gap is "a huge challenge for the country, not just the Conservative party," but offered no solutions.

Without targets or quotas and without a proportional representation system that has boosted female representation in European parliaments, it's hard to imagine any substantial improvement in the proportion of elected women in Canada any time soon.

There's a chance that it -- and the voting gender gap -- may even get worse in the next federal election if Canada's role in Afghanistan becomes a major issue.

While women tend to vote against military actions, they usually support humanitarian efforts aimed at establishing a more civil society.

Ironic, eh?