

Women's rights require society's endorsement

By Dely Farrace

Last month saw the resurfacing of the case of the young woman who was raped and beaten on a bus in India and later died in hospital.

One of the accused, on death row, continues to believe he has no responsibility, that the woman, in fact, was to blame for his actions. Our western values and culture have apparently transcended these arcane and prohibitive attitudes towards women, thanks to the women's movement of the 1970s.

Although women had already gained the right to an education, the right to vote, the right to employment, an increase in property rights and sexual freedom, anticipation remained. These theoretical rights and freedoms had not been realized. To address this issue, the women's movement emerged from the general movement to right all wrongs, sprung by the 1970s freedom generation.

Unfortunately, women's rights seem to be taken for granted today. The vast majority of women still do not have the freedom of choice when it comes to raising children or garnering gainful employment. They must do both if they wish to have children. The intent of the women's movement was to give women the choice to either remain housewives or work outside the home.

Another unforeseen effect of the movement manifested itself in developing a wedge amongst women, those who wanted to stay home and raise children and those who wanted to work outside the home. Proponents of the movement were labelled women's libbers. All too quickly, that label gained a negative connotation which remains to this day.

Did the women's movement backfire? Not entirely. We do have reforms in the family law act, pensions, and pay equity, only parts of which have worked. There is plenty of room and opportunity to further these reforms in the approach to true equity.

Nevertheless, our society is at risk of having women's rights diminished. Gradually, they have been weakened over the years. With every effort to increase women's rights, there seems to be a counter-effort to reduce them. The pay equity legislation of the 1980s fell apart as women continue to be paid less than men in equal ? not simply equivalent ? jobs, especially in upper executive positions. And only eight per cent of these positions are held by women in Canada.

Compounding these discouraging statistics is the threat of cultural gender inequities seeping in through immigration. If the type of man in the Indian jail is any indication of that cultural norm, then it becomes a responsibility of Canada to educate and enlighten the newcomers. Unfortunately, it takes more than one generation to overcome entrenched views, views that contravene Canada's philosophy and laws.

When women must wear a hijab or a niqab to cover their faces and bodies for religious reasons, do we question the reasoning or do we remain ignorant? In the Islam religion, the primary reason a woman is required by her God to cover her body is the preservation of respectful male and female relationships, especially with males outside of the family. There are other compelling arguments to support this attire, and I encourage the reader to educate him/herself on them. Succinctly, a woman's dress sends one of two messages to others, either ?pay attention to my looks? or the opposite.

It is the interpretation of this message that becomes subject to question? How often have we heard, ?She asked for it? because of what she was wearing? This is an example of how the actions and decisions of women are more scrutinized and held to account than those of men. How does that mindset not affect our society's view of women as this practice moves into Canada, and old, denigrating attitudes subtly resurface?

Today, the Wynne government has made a notable effort to arm young people, especially young women, with the tools they need to make informed, positive decisions about their personal health, sexual and psychological, and to insist on respectful treatment from the opposite sex. After all, women are and will always be more vulnerable than men.

If this society is to accomplish legitimacy in women's rights, it is not an option for women to consider one another as competition, but to come together and believe in one another. There is an opportunity today to build on what began in the 1970s, to make it a more level playing field for women, to have women viewed and respected as men are viewed and respected. Society must endorse women's rights.

The women's movement may require resurgence, not only to preserve the gains of the last century, but to continue to confront inequities and pave the way to a more enlightened future for all women and men in our society.

