

Gendered Dissent, Democracy and the Law: A workshop on the gendered face of Canada's crackdown on dissent

May 12-13, 2014

Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, Toronto, Ontario

The Gender & Dissent Working Group of the Dissent, Democracy & the Law Research Network and the Institute for Feminist Legal Studies invite proposals for papers and other interventions to be presented at a workshop that aims to bring scholars and advocates together to consider the gendered dimensions of dissent in Canada and Quebec.

The Workshop

This two-day workshop will bring a small and diverse group of legal scholars and advocates together in Toronto to theorize, and respond to, the challenges faced by advocates and civil society organizations and individuals working on issues of gender equality in Canada and Quebec. In many cases, these challenges stem from governmental use of legal and extralegal measures that undermine the capacity of individuals, civil society organizations and institutions to participate in public debate on key policy issues at the local, provincial or federal level.

Gendered Dissent, Democracy & the Law

Concerns about the increasing constriction of legal and political space for civil society organizations in Canada resonate with global discussions about the restriction of dissent and other efforts to control public dialogue about government policy and action. While the nature of the state-civil society relationship is a site for ongoing debate, the freedom to critique and oppose government decisions and positions is an essential element of ensuring healthy democratic institutions and practices, including the protection of fundamental human rights.

In Canada, a combination of legal and policy measures have functioned to reduce the legal, financial and political space available to civil society organizations, particularly those whose work and public positions differ from those of the government. A number of specific methods employed by the federal government to restrict dissent have been identified through preliminary research by the Voices-Voix Documentation Project: the threat or revocation of charitable status, defunding, harassment/privacy violation, withholding information, interference with independent institutions, surveillance, and vilification/smearing. In some cases, rhetorical vilification has carried implicit or even explicit overtones of criminalization.¹ Media reports have pointed to the Voices-Voix research in highlighting the federal government's attack on dissent.² Further theoretical inquiry into the impact of such tactics on democratic institutions and practices, at all levels of government, is an essential component of understanding the relationship between dissent and democracy.

Research undertaken to date indicates that women and gendered-focused civil society organizations attempting to critically discuss government policy decisions are the target of legal and extralegal measures that undermine their capacity to participate in public debate and dissent on important policy issues. In

¹ The Voices-Voix civil society coalition was formed in 2010 in response to concerns about the restriction of political space for civil society organizations. The Documentation Project aims to research and record specific cases: <http://voices-voix.ca/en/facts>. Since September 2013, the Dissent, Democracy & the Law Editorial Board has undertaken to conduct peer-reviewed research that advances the digital publication of the Documentation Project. A description of the Board and its members can be found here: <http://voices-voix.ca/en/editorial-board-2013-2014>.

² For example, see Linda Diebel's November 2013, "Meanness is a way of life in Ottawa" in the Toronto Star: http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/11/20/meanness_is_a_way_of_life_in_ottawa.html.

particular, it appears that these practices have impacted those working on gender and socio-economic equality. While the application of these measures to women and groups working on gender issues appears to be part of a broader shift in the relationship between the state and civil society, a close examination of the gender-based features of this shift has the potential to bring specific nuance and insight into the political nature of this shift. The *Gendered Dissent, Democracy and the Law* workshop will be a focused examination aimed at documenting and theorizing gender and dissent in Canada. We also acknowledge that this focus has limitations, particularly with respect to how one draws the boundaries between 'gender' issues and other civil society issues. As such, we encourage debate on both the substantive issues articulated here, as well as the very terms of their articulation.

Call for Submissions:

We welcome interventions from scholars, civil society organizations and advocates that aim to:

- a) Document and describe specific instances and impacts of particular state measures, at any level of government, on public advocacy efforts and/or civil society organizations working on gender issues in order to develop an empirical picture of the problem;
- b) Document and describe state support for organizations whose work and public positions support current policy goals, and other promotional tactics, towards the construction of representations of public "agreement" or "support" for specific policy decisions and/or constructions of gender, nationhood and race;
- c) Examine the historical context of the relationship between the state and public advocacy efforts and/or civil society organizations working on gender issues to explore whether the current restriction of dissent is qualitatively different than in the past, and if so, how;
- d) Critically consider whether and how state practices targeting dissent are distinctive when they are aimed at women or gendered groups; and,
- e) Draw links between particular instances to identify broader themes with regards to the constriction of legal and political space for advocates and civil society organizations working on gender equality issues and the relationship between dissent and democracy.

Please submit proposals along with a CV for each author to genderanddissent@gmail.com by **February 21, 2014**. Proposals should be approximately 250 words in length and should identify whether the intervention will be offered as a scholarly paper or in another format, such as a case study or report or multimedia presentation. Papers (approximately 10 pages in length) will be circulated by the organizers 10-days in advance of the workshop; other interventions will be shared in advance as appropriate.

We regret that participation in the workshop will be limited to a small group. We anticipate that we will be unable to accept all of the proposals we receive. However, it is our hope that the workshop will launch ongoing inquiries into this topic and related issues. We will communicate both the results of the workshop and plans for follow-up events with all applicants and we look forward to future collaborations.

The organizers aim to have scholarly paper submissions published in a special issue of a selected law journal. Contributions which take other forms will be published or otherwise shared in collaboration with our civil society partners as appropriate.

Travel Funds

Although we have limited funds, we may be able to provide modest support and assistance with travel and accommodation expenses. If you require assistance to attend the workshop, please provide the details of the cost for return travel to Toronto and accommodation and indicate other funding sources you have identified/applied to as well as the portion of your expenses you are able to cover. We will notify accepted participants of any funding we can offer as soon as possible.