

## Status of Women Deputy Minister Visits the University of Calgary: A Wish List

**By: Jennifer Koshan**

Kim Armstrong, Deputy Minister of the [Status of Women](#), visited the University of Calgary campus yesterday. I participated in one of her meetings with a group of deans, faculty members and senior staff. One of the major themes from our meeting was the need for the university to attract and retain a diverse body of students, faculty and staff, and to prepare and support students with the challenges they may face in their fields once they graduate. The need for diversity and intercultural training was also a common theme. It was interesting to hear about initiatives at the university level and in other faculties: Valerie Pruegger, Director of the [Office of Diversity, Equity and Protected Disclosure](#), reported that her strategic plan will soon be released; Jennifer Quin, Senior Director of Student Services, has been working on a new policy on sexual assault and sexual harassment on campus; the Faculty of Science is appointing an Associate Dean responsible for Diversity; and the Werklund School of Education has engaged in cluster hiring of First Nations, Inuit and Métis faculty members. I was pleased to report that our Faculty has a new student group, [Calgary Women Studying Law](#), with whom the Deputy Minister would like to meet to discuss women and leadership, and that we are working towards implementing the recommendations regarding legal education from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recent report (see Calls to Action # 27 and 28, available [here](#)).

On my wish list of matters for the Status of Women Ministry to undertake, in conjunction with the Ministry of Justice, are a few amendments to the *Alberta Human Rights Act*, [RSA 2000, c A-25.5 \(AHRA\)](#). These amendments would benefit university women as well as women and other equality-seeking groups in Alberta more generally.

First, Alberta is one of the few jurisdictions in Canada that does not have a pay equity law. Section 6 of the *AHRA* requires women to be paid equally for “the same or substantially similar work”, whereas true pay equity provisions guarantee equal pay for work of equal value (see e.g. section 11 of the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, [RSC 1985, c H-6](#)). The government should amend the *AHRA* to include a similar guarantee.

Second, the *AHRA* should be amended to protect against discrimination on the basis of social condition or social disadvantage. Currently, our human rights law only prohibits discrimination based on “source of income”, which is much narrower (including, for example, receipt of social assistance but not poverty, education level, inadequate housing or homelessness). If we want to protect some of the most vulnerable people in our province from discrimination in employment, tenancies, and services customarily available to the public, we should extend the *AHRA* to include social condition or disadvantage as a protected ground. We would join provinces such as [Manitoba](#), [New Brunswick](#), and [Quebec](#) by doing so. And it is worth noting that the new government has already amended the *AHRA* to include gender identity and gender expression as protected grounds (see [Bill 7](#)), so it is on the right track.

Third – and I did not get a chance to mention this at the meeting – the government should amend the *AHRA* to allow the Human Rights Commission to initiate complaints. At present, the Commission is prevented from doing so (see section 20 of the *AHRA*). This exclusion limits the extent to which issues of systemic sex and other forms of discrimination can be scrutinized, and may shield egregious cases of discrimination when victims are afraid to come forward. Using the *Canadian Human Rights Act* as a comparator once again, section 40(3) provides that “Where the Commission has reasonable grounds for believing that a person is engaging or has engaged in a discriminatory practice, the Commission may initiate a complaint.” Similar provisions exist in other provinces as well (see e.g. Manitoba’s *Human Rights Code*, [CCSM c H175](#)).

Fourth, it is time to completely remove the requirement that school boards notify parents when the K-12 curriculum will cover issues concerning human sexuality or religion. This requirement was formerly found in section 11.1 of the *AHRA*, but the Conservative government migrated it to the *School Act*, [RSA 2000, c S-3](#) last fall when it passed [Bill 10](#). Bill 10 was somewhat of an improvement, as it removed materials on sexual orientation as one of the triggers for giving notice, and no longer branded non-compliant boards and teachers as violating human rights legislation. However, it may still create a chilling effect on classroom discussions covering important issues related to gender and sexual equality (see previous posts on this issue [here](#) and [here](#)). The repeal of this provision would also align with the government’s new [Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions](#), released Wednesday.

I am encouraged that we have a new Status of Women Ministry, and a Minister – Shannon Phillips – and Deputy Minister who are committed to improving the position of women and other equality-seeking groups in Alberta. The mandate for the Ministry is still being set and will be released in March 2016. I hope that it will include some actions in the realm of human rights law.

To subscribe to ABlawg by email or RSS feed, please go to <http://ablawg.ca>  
Follow us on Twitter [@ABlawg](#)

