



March 8, 2007

Dear Prime Minister Harper,

I am writing to you on International Women's Day to call on the Canadian government to endorse the right to water at the United Nations and to develop a national water policy that ensures equitable access to clean, safe water for all Canadians.

The global water crisis is undeniable. According to the United Nations, 1.1 billion people lack access to safe water. A further 2.6 billion people don't have access to basic water services, such as water sanitation. Each year, 3 million people, mostly children, die from preventable diseases associated with unsafe water.

Access to safe, clean, affordable water is essential to gender equality, as it is women and girls in many countries that are tasked with fetching water. This restricts access to education and participation in their communities.

Around the world, women and girls collect water for washing, cooking, cleaning, drinking and sanitation. In rural areas, up to one-third of a woman's time can be spent fetching water and traversing physically rough terrain. On average, girls walk 6 kilometres (almost 4 miles) a day to fetch water and may carry up to 40 pounds of water during each excursion.

Safe water has long been an issue in many countries around the world, but Canada is increasingly home to a growing list of threats to the availability of clean, safe water.

The delivery of clean, safe drinking water is a continued issue for many municipalities. Years of chronic neglect have left towns and cities with crumbling water infrastructure, and Canada does not have binding clean drinking water standards. Canada needs a national water policy that includes investment in water infrastructure to ensure access to essential public services such as water and sanitation.

In 2002, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stated, "the human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use."

Canada was the lone country to vote against the adoption of the right to water, for which it earned a rebuke from the United Nations in May, 2006.

Endorsing the right to water would ensure access to clean, safe drinking water for all Canadians, regardless of the town, city, region, or First Nations community they live in. Treating water as a fundamental right will help address the issues of poverty alleviation, gender inequality and promote healthy communities all around the world.

By endorsing the right to water at the United Nations Human Rights Council, Canada can regain our position in the international community as a leader on human rights and gender equality.

The Council of Canadians is Canada's largest citizen advocacy organization and we know from our membership that Canadians believe that water is a fundamental right. On March 22, communities across Canada will celebrate World Water Day by calling on your government to endorse the right to water in the international community and to develop a national water policy that ensures clean, safe, affordable water is a reality for all Canadians.

Sincerely,

Susan Howatt
National Water Campaigner
The Council of Canadians