



Women's Legal
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pour les femmes

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National Youth Commission to Engage Canada's Future Leaders in a Dialogue About Equality

Dr. Ursula Franklin to Address Canada's Youth

Toronto, ON, April 15, 2010 – The Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) is launching a national Youth Commission to celebrate 25 years of the equality section of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. **A launch event will take place today at the Ursula Franklin Academy, ([146 Glendonwyne Road, Toronto, ON](#)) from 10:05 a.m. – 11:20 a.m.**

Dr. Ursula Franklin will speak at the launch. Dr. Franklin is University Professor Emerita in the University of Toronto's Department of Materials Science Engineering and a member of the Order of Ontario. She has campaigned for social justice, peace and women's rights and is the figurehead of the group that ushered in Section 15. The United Nations Association of Canada awarded Dr. Franklin with the Pearson Peace Medal in recognition of her humanitarian work.

Speakers also include **Saron Gebresellassie**, a Youth Commissioner and York University doctoral candidate. Saron received the YWCA Woman of Distinction Award and was named in Chatelaine Magazine's "Top 80 Women to Watch" feature.

The Youth Commission is taking the pulse of Canada's youth to discover how social justice and equality issues impact their lives. LEAF selected 12 Youth Commissioners from across Canada to survey their local communities through focus groups and events. At these gatherings, Commissioners will pose questions about social justice, and the responses will be recorded.

LEAF will publish a video of youth responses, use the feedback to improve their youth programming and develop a report to support further research on equality issues in Canada.

Youth from across Canada are also encouraged to submit creative works that depict their perspectives on human rights to the Youth Commission blog at www.leaf.ca/youth.html.

"Today's youth are the first generation to grow up protected under the equality section of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*," says Audrey Johnson, Executive Director of LEAF. "Through the Youth Commission, we hope to learn about the social justice challenges young Canadians currently face and how they see the future of equality in Canada."

To learn how you can interview a Youth Commissioner in your community, please contact Niki Popper, Education Program Coordinator at 416-595-7170 ext. 229 or n.popper@leaf.ca.

About LEAF: The Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) is a national charitable organization that works toward ensuring the law guarantees substantive equality for all women in Canada. This year marks LEAF's 25th anniversary.

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LEAF Youth Commission: Taking the Pulse of Canada's Youth

For 25 years, LEAF has stood behind women and girls by advocating for equality and social justice. 2010 also marks the 25th anniversary of the equality section of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. To celebrate both milestones, we're launching a Youth Commission to engage Canada's future leaders in a national dialogue on social justice and equality.

Through the Youth Commission, LEAF hopes to take note of the way young Canadians view social justice in their daily lives. We will use the feedback received to ensure our upcoming activities are meaningful to youth across the country.

During the campaign, we will:

- Train 12 Youth Commissioners from across Canada. The Commissioners will survey their local youth through focus groups, consultations and community events.
- Encourage youth organizations and young individuals to submit creative works, such as poems, short skits, photos and essays, which depict their perspectives on equality.
- Use social media to engage young individuals across the country. We will provide a blog for youth to interact with each other and share their stories and perspectives on equality issues.

At the end of the initiative, we will:

- Develop a report to use as an educational tool and to support further research on equality issues in Canada.
- Provide a digital recording of youth responses and creative works. The video will be made available to the public through our website, YouTube and an open screening.

How You Can Get Involved

Visit www.leaf.ca/youth.html to sign up for updates on Youth Commission activities and a copy of the Youth Perspectives on Social Justice Report once it is complete.

You can also visit the Youth Commission blog at <http://leafyouthcommission.wordpress.com/>

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About the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF)

LEAF is a national, non-profit organization founded in 1985 to advance the equality of women and girls in Canada through litigation, public education and law reform.

Using the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, LEAF helps women win landmark legal victories in crucial areas such as violence against women, pay inequity, sexual harassment, unfair pensions and reproductive freedoms.

LEAF is the only women's organization in Canada that focuses on court action to address the source of injustice against women and bring about social change. To date, our staff and volunteers have participated in more than 150 cases and the Appellate and Supreme Courts.

LEAF works on behalf of all women and girls, as:

- A leader in the development of equality using litigation.
- A catalyst for and resource to legislators, policy makers, women's groups and others on law reform, as it affects women's equality rights.
- An educator about women's equality rights, related to our litigation and law reform work.

LEAF Makes a Difference

LEAF selects cases that establish important principles of equality for women and girls in Canada, using the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

LEAF works to shape, expand and redefine the language of equality used in Canadian courts, to ensure that it reflects women's social realities.

LEAF is an internationally respected leader in developing theory and litigation strategies that recognize women's diversity, and that address the various ways in which inequality manifests itself in women's lives.

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A National and International Leader

LEAF has participated in over 150 cases and has helped women win landmark legal victories in crucial areas such as:

- Violence against women
- Bias in employment
- Unfair pensions
- Sexual harassment
- Pregnancy discrimination
- Spousal support
- Parental leave
- Reproductive choice
- Hate speech
- Social assistance

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* has strong equality provisions but they must be defended in the courts to make equality real for all women.

LEAF has undertaken more *Charter* litigation than any other equality-seeking group and has been involved in the most important women's equality cases at the *Supreme Court of Canada*.

LEAF is committed to the dream of a country where women are truly equal.

LEAF is using the legal system to make this a reality.

LEAF's work is unique in the world and has provided a model for other equality-seeking groups to use. These include the US, Britain, Eastern Europe, Indonesia, the Philippines and South Africa.

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LEAF Was There! LEAF's Interventions Make a Difference!

“Rape Shield” Law Upheld – The *Supreme Court of Canada* unanimously upheld provisions in the *Criminal Code*, which limit the use of a woman's sexual past history as evidence. This ended a long battle over the so-called “rape shield” laws, (they shield the person assaulted from being traumatized further on the witness stand). LEAF was involved in both law reform and litigation on this point of law. This decision reaffirmed the importance to maintain sensitivity to the equality rights of women when considering an accused's right to a ‘fair trial’. This section of the *Criminal Code* properly balances the interests of accused persons, complainants and society as a whole. (*Mills*, 2000)

Women's Personal Records in Court – In a unanimous decision, the *Supreme Court of Canada* ruled that Bill C-49, does not infringe the *Charter* rights of accused persons. This law protects the private records of women in sexual assault trials. LEAF intervened in this case because applications for complainants' records in sexual assault trials are usually based on myths and stereotypes about women and therefore make it more difficult to have fair trials. The court found that the legislation was constitutional because it balanced the rights of complainants and the accused. (*Darrach*, 1999)

Access to Legal Aid – The *Supreme Court of Canada* held that a poor, single mother had been unfairly denied legal assistance in a case where the mother sought custody of her children. Notwithstanding the narrow legal aid scheme in New Brunswick, the *Court* held that access to a lawyer was necessary in order for the complex proceedings to meet the requirement of “fundamental justice” set out in Section 7 of the *Charter*. Because Section 7 has generally been applied to criminal cases, the majority of women's encounters with the law are not in the criminal law context, the *Court's* analysis was extremely important for women. (*J.G. v. New Brunswick*, 1999)

Workplace Discrimination – In this unanimous decision, the *Supreme Court of Canada* ruled that if a workplace rule, in this case a test of running speed, systemically excludes women or other groups it must be scrutinized to ensure whether it is truly required in order to determine job performance. The government of BC was required to reinstate forest firefighter Tawney Meiorin to her job. Court decisions and legal opinions often refer to the “Meiorin Standards.” (*BCGSEU*, 1999)

No Means No – In a unanimous decision the *Supreme Court of Canada* declared that a person's “no” means “no.” The *Court*, having heard LEAF's equality argument, held that no one has the right to sexually touch another unless that person clearly communicates consent. Your consent must be positively established: silence, inaction, or ambiguous conduct is **not** ever consent. This is an absolute statement that there is **no** such thing as “implied consent” to sexual assault. The *Court* stated that this approach is necessary to safeguard everyone's personal autonomy and bodily integrity. (*Ewanchuk*, 1999)

Medical Interpreters For People With Hearing Disabilities – LEAF intervened in the case at the *Supreme Court of Canada* to argue that sign language interpretation should be funded as a medical service under B.C.'s health care legislation. LEAF demonstrated that sign language interpretation is

crucial for ensuring proper communication between people who are deaf and their doctors. The *Supreme Court* agreed with LEAF and DAWN Canada and ruled that sign language should be funded as a medical service. (*Eldridge*, 1997)

A Woman's Right to Choose – Chantal Daigle's ex-boyfriend got an injunction to prevent her from obtaining an abortion. The *Quebec Court of Appeal*, in a stunning decision, upheld the injunction. The Quebec woman appealed this to the *Supreme Court of Canada*, where LEAF made arguments to the *Court* that reproductive rights are fundamental to women's equality. The *Court* was unanimous in overturning the injunction and ruling that the fetus is not a legal "person." This was a critical decision for women's rights to control their own bodies. (*Daigle v Tremblay*, 1992)

Obscene Materials – In the case of *Butler*, LEAF intervened at the *Supreme Court of Canada* to argue that violent pornography harms women and girls. The *Court* upheld the *Criminal Code* obscenity provisions as constitutional saying that the provisions address the grave harms posed by this material. (*Butler*, 1992)

Parental Leave – Additional *childcare benefits* must be extended to all biological parents – available to either mothers or fathers. This was an important ruling for women as it recognized that both parents have a role to play in the care of a new baby. (*Schachter*, 1992)

Fair Pensions – After a 35-year marriage ended in divorce, Mrs. Albrecht lost her rights to a division of Canada Pension Plan credits. LEAF intervened at the *Ontario Divisional Court* and helped win a ruling that a woman is entitled to share a couple's Canada Pension Plan credits when there is a separation or divorce. This case was an important step in addressing the circumstances of older women and to reduce their vulnerability to poverty. (*Albrecht*, 1990)

No to Sexual Harassment – When two servers were sexually harassed at the Winnipeg restaurant where they worked, they took their case all the way to the *Supreme Court of Canada*. With LEAF's help, they won an important ruling that recognized sexual harassment as sex discrimination and therefore, illegal. This decision has helped many women fight sexual harassment in the workplace. (*Janzen and Govereau*, 1989)

Pregnancy Without Penalty – For years, women were fired, passed over for promotions and denied training because they were pregnant or might become pregnant. LEAF intervened in the case of three Winnipeg women who worked at Canada Safeway, Ltd. and who were denied benefits while they were pregnant. LEAF helped win a groundbreaking decision that pregnancy discrimination is sex discrimination and illegal. This ruling has changed the lives of thousands of women in Canada. (*Brooks*, 1989)

Publication Ban – LEAF helped win this ruling that women and children who have been raped have the right to prevent the media from revealing their names. (*Canada Newspapers*, 1989)

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Youth Commissioner Bios



Parminder Nizher is a 28-year-old community organizer. As a second-generation South Asian woman born and raised in the suburbs of Greater Vancouver, personal experiences have shown Parminder that social justice for marginalized immigrant youth is unique. She graduated as a social worker from the University of British Columbia three years ago. Since then, she has split her time as an outreach worker in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and coordinating a participatory action research project at Battered Women's Support Services. Her dream is to do grassroots work with young woman in the South Asian community, and she's still figuring out her niche.

Parminder's secret dream is to be an organic farmer and have her own homestead. Her passions are living in harmony with Mother Earth, growing and eating food, exploring old stories and mythology, decolonization, spirituality and her loved ones. She tries to truly be the changes she fights for in the world – an arduous, interesting and fruitful journey!

Participating in the Youth Commission is an honour for Parminder. She's curious to hear what youth from her generation and younger think about social justice and the barriers to social justice. She thinks creating anti-oppressive, just and inclusive communities starts from the grassroots. Going to youth, listening to them and then shaping our community initiatives based on what they tell us is why she's excited to participate in the LEAF Youth Commission. For Parminder, social justice is inseparable from living in harmony with our environment and planet.



Mandavni Dhama is 21 years old and a self-described, "hairy and hungry feminist." She was born in Richmond, BC, and grew up under the guidance of her grandmothers, mother, father and sister. Mandavni learned about animism from her maternal grandmother, justice from her mother and feminism from her sister. She spent her childhood and adolescence playing in the garden, riding her bicycle, eating gummy candies, jumping on trampolines and playing with Barbies.

After high school, Mandavni studied sociology for two years at the University of Toronto. She transferred to Simon Fraser University and is currently pursuing a double major in women's studies and sociology. When Mandavni grows up, she wants to become a lawyer and work in criminal defence law and prisoners' justice.

Mandavni's favourite things to do on rainy days include curling up under a blanket with a cup of chai and watching Hindi soap operas. She spends her spare time eating chocolate, hanging out at the SFU Women's Centre and volunteering with social justice organizations, including Elizabeth Fry and West Coast LEAF. She's an avid reader, artist and creative writer, as well as a social justice activist. She is passionate about prisoners' justice and social justice issues pertaining to disability. As a Youth Commissioner, Mandavni would like to explore these social justice issues through poetry and paint.



Derek Warwick, 22, is in his final year at the University of Alberta with a major in women's studies and a minor in creative writing. Currently the Program Coordinator for LEAF's *No Means No* in Edmonton, Derek's work is centred around gendered violence and sexual health.

A self-described troublemaker, Derek headed the Samarasekera Response Team last fall. With the help of his friends, he put a clear focus on the real issues behind the fear of a lack of male enrolment in universities. In addition to stirring up controversy, Derek is an amateur spoken word performer and can often be seen at the monthly story slam at Edmonton's Blue Chair Café.



Diane Leclerc, age 28, was born and raised in Montreal and is of French-Canadian and Polish descent. From 2001-2005, she attended Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where she earned her B.A. in International Development Studies and Political Science. She wrote her honours thesis on tourism development and terrorism. Diane also holds a certificate in Public Relations Management from McGill and a graduate diploma (DESS) in Community Economic Development from Concordia's School of Public and Community Affairs.

Diane has done extensive research on topics in international and local development, including community mapping of resources for young single mothers in Montreal. She has written communications plans for public relations campaigns and has studied the development of the social economy in Quebec and Canada. Living in different regions of Canada has deepened her appreciation for Canadian cultural diversity.

Diane has worked in the public and private sectors. She spent the last year on a fundraising team for a rehabilitation centre that serves people with physical impairments. Diane wants to apply her knowledge and skills to advocate for human rights and security. She volunteered her communications skills at the Girls Action Foundation in 2006 and has been working to build her toolkit of skills in community and political organizing. She is currently teaching herself how to play the piano.

Diane is available to speak with the media. You may arrange an interview with Diane by contacting Niki Popper at 416-595-7170 ext. 229 or n.popper@leaf.ca.



Meghan Menzies is currently enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Manitoba and has an undergraduate degree in International Development Studies from the University of Winnipeg.

Meghan is 23 years old and from a small town in Southern Manitoba. She has always enjoyed expressing herself through creative mediums such as music and sewing.

Community involvement and action have always been Meghan's passions. She's worked and volunteered with groups focused on education, gardening, body image issues and landmine awareness.

Over the past year, Meghan has become increasingly involved in organizations that incorporate a legal focus in their work. These groups include the Feminist Legal Forum, Pro Bono Students Canada and LEAF. Her work with LEAF has been primarily with their *No Means No* campaign, which involved giving interactive presentations to high school students on the issue of consent. Not only has this experience been both personally educative and eye-opening, but it has also been extremely inspiring for Meghan to hear ideas on rights and responsibilities from the perspectives of youth in her city.

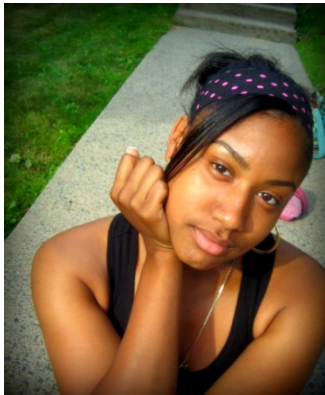
As a Youth Commissioner for LEAF, Meghan is excited to spend the summer facilitating platforms for the opinions, thoughts and ideas of youth in her community. There are many social injustices that exist within society today, and it has been her experience that some of the most innovative and bright ideas on these topics often come from the ingenious minds of youth. Meghan looks forward to spending the summer exploring the concerns of the people in her community, while collectively creating channels for expression so all voices and opinions can be heard.



Danna Joy is a 21-year-old from Stephenville, Newfoundland and Labrador. She is of M'kmaq descent has been actively involved in non-political cultural activities and events. She enjoys music and participates in native singing, drumming and dancing. Danna loves to network and share knowledge. She is open-minded, creative and loves working with youth. Danna enjoys learning about different cultures and hearing different points of view.

Danna has just accepted a job as Violence Prevention Coordinator with one of the local M'kmaq Bands. Her job involves gathering resources and networks to promote violence prevention, while incorporating the traditional teachings and knowledge of the M'kmaq people. She's putting this information onto a website so everyone can have access to violence prevention methods from a M'kmaq perspective. Before Danna started this job, she worked with Communities In Schools, an organization that places volunteer coordinators into local schools to help students get involved in the community. She worked with middle school kids and really enjoyed the experience.

Danna was drawn to the Youth Commission because she believes youth have a voice that needs to be heard. What better way to get heard than to take action and show the community what needs to be done? Danna feels connected to this initiative because she is a youth and believes youth are stereotyped and misunderstood by the general population. There is a huge gap between youth and the rest of the population. Danna feels that for anything positive to be achieved, there needs to be a means of effective communication between youth and adults. Danna's goal as a Youth Commissioner is to bridge the gap and open those lines of communication.



LaMeia Reddick is a 19-year-old from Nova Scotia. Although she lived in Dartmouth for the majority of her life, her heart lives in the community of North Preston, one of the largest black communities in the province.

LaMeia is currently a second year student at Dalhousie University, where she studies sociology and English. She works for the Community Justice Society as a Community Enhancement Coordinator and volunteers for organizations regularly. LaMeia's passion for doing grassroots community development inspires her to take advantage of every opportunity that comes her way. When she heard about LEAF's Youth Commissioner position through her mentors, she knew she couldn't pass up the opportunity to represent the voice of Nova Scotian youth.

LaMeia is a visionary leader with a passion for change and building relationships. She always asks, "How can we, as individuals, work better together to improve some of the crises we face on a day-to-day basis?" She has dedicated her life to trying to ensure every youth has an opportunity to reach their maximum potential. She continually works towards breaking down barriers that hold youth down. When LaMeia is not working or volunteering, she enjoys spending time with family and friends. She has a passion for art, including visual art, multimedia, film, poetry and spoken word. She also loves to travel and takes three-to-four trips a year.

LaMeia is motivated to give back to her community. She works to bring about change in this world because she knows change is possible. All it takes is a little hard work from everyone and a willingness to try new things and trust one another.

LaMeia is honoured to be a part of this initiative and values the hard work and dedication that has kept LEAF functioning for 25 years. She is very thankful for this opportunity.



Saron Gebresellasi is a 23-year-old doctoral candidate at York University, where she teaches in the Department of Humanities. Saron completed a Masters in Education at the University of Toronto and holds a Bachelors in Radio and Television Arts. She will start law school this September.

Saron is a linguist, translator, published author, musician, artist and academic. She speaks five languages and is studying two more. Saron is active in the labour movement as a proud member of CUPE3903. She has advocated for accessible post-secondary education, immigrant and refugee justice, international solidarity and social equality. Saron was a founding member of the Reparations Committee at the University of Toronto, the CUPE3903 Democratic Membership Committee at York University, the Anti-Racism Coalition at Ryerson University and Students in Support of CUPE3902 at the University of Toronto. She has played an active role in the student, labour, feminist and anti-racist movements in Toronto since 2003.

Saron is the recipient of several public accolades including the 2010 BBPA Harry Jerome Award, YWCA Woman of Distinction Award, African-Canadian Women's Achievement Award, OMNI Television Multilingual Award and was named in Chatelaine Magazine's "Top 80 Women to Watch" feature.

Saron is available to speak with the media. You may arrange an interview with Saron by contacting Niki Popper at 416-595-7170 ext. 229 or n.popper@leaf.ca.



Rabia Sheikh is an Edmontonian and 24-year-old Muslim woman. She completed her Bachelors in Business Management at the University of Lethbridge. Rabia currently attends the University of Alberta and is pursuing her Masters in Educational Policy Studies specializing in theoretical, cultural and international studies.

Rabia has volunteered for the John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights, the Racism Free Edmonton youth working group, UNESCO's youth advisory group, the Edmonton Muslim Leadership Forum and the Aboriginal Youth Proposal Review Committee. Her aspiration is to work in policy development for the NGO sector with a focus on human rights, social justice and diversity issues.

In her free time, Rabia enjoys travelling, reading and exploring different things. She is currently developing a Jewish and Muslim documentary with a colleague and hopes to launch this initiative in May as the first step in building understanding between the communities. Rabia is also collaborating with Pakistani filmmakers to start a grassroots media movement in Pakistan that promotes a multidimensional perspective of the country's art, cultural and media development. She looks forward to engaging youth in dialogue about social justice and human rights because she feels youth are often underestimated in the valuable insight they bring to the forefront.



Priscilla Akyea is in her mid-twenties and is excited about the opportunity to work within her community as a Youth Commissioner. She has a great passion for empowering youth with the tools they need to succeed.

Priscilla started her post-secondary education at Ryerson University, where she received a degree in Nursing. After spending several years as a nurse with the Public Health Department, Priscilla enrolled in the University of Ottawa's Law School. She is currently a full-time student with an interest in health law, social justice and technology law.

Priscilla became involved with LEAF's Ottawa chapter as a volunteer. She also spent four years as a volunteer Big Sister with Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Toronto. This experience allowed Priscilla to maintain a special relationship with a mentee.

In her free time, Priscilla enjoys playing volleyball, softball and Ultimate Frisbee. She also enjoys various forms of Latin dance.

Perhaps the best way to describe Lauren Warbeck's investment in social justice work would be to say she was born into it. Lauren is the daughter of a working-class British immigrant mother and a Ukrainian-Canadian father descendant from socialist immigrants and labour movement activists. Values of equity, justice and compassion were instilled in her from a young age and have always been the most prominent cultural tradition upheld by her family. At 24, Lauren has yet to be given a logical reason to stray from these values.

Lauren comes from the isolated northern town of Red Lake, Ontario, but has made Victoria, British Columbia, her home for the past decade. As an undergraduate at the University of Victoria, Lauren specialized in community-based research projects. For example, she made a documentary about a local all-female bicycle performance troupe that uses theatre, dance and storytelling to promote cycling. She also researched renewable energy alternatives for a local low-income housing co-op. Lauren holds a Bachelor of Arts in Women's Studies and Environmental Studies.

Lauren has worked as a tree planter (in her opinion, the best job ever), a feminist event coordinator and a wedding bartender. She currently serves at Rebar, a bustling vegetarian and whole foods restaurant. Lauren loves her tight-knit and diverse team of coworkers, working in an environment that celebrates food, supporting local farmers and analyzing how food service workers are gendered and sexualized.

Lauren enjoys riding her bike, playing the accordion, listening to her favorite radio shows and podcasts, and rocking out to her female music icons during long runs. She is mildly infatuated with Dolly Parton and is on a life-long quest to find the perfect dill pickle.

Lauren is available to speak with the media. You may arrange an interview with Lauren by contacting Niki Popper at 416-595-7170 ext. 229 or n.popper@leaf.ca.