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Feminists might be granted own hearing on divorce law Boycotted consultations

Chris Cobb, with files from Ralph Bodirsky, National Post
Southam News, with files from National Post

OTTAWA - Women's groups who boycotted nationwide government consultations on changes to divorce law because they refused to sit at the same table as men could get the female-only hearing they have demanded.

Although the consultations ended last month, the Justice Department and its provincial partners are considering a special session for "women's equality-seeking organizations" that are fighting proposed changes to the federal Divorce Act. Those changes would give separated and divorced parents an equal say in raising their children under a new concept called shared parenting.

The women's groups are urging governments "not to cave into a father's rights groups agenda."

Justice Department lawyer Virginia McRae, co-chairwoman of the consultations, said the request from the women's groups for a separate hearing is being considered by the family law committee, a group of about a dozen federal, provincial and territorial bureaucrats.

The boycotting organizations included the National Association of Women and the Law, numerous women's shelters and the Ontario Women's Network on Custody and Access. The women's network was formed in March to fight shared parenting and other changes proposed by a joint Senate and House of Commons report tabled two years ago after cross-Canada hearings.

The 35 consultation sessions, held last month at a cost of about \$1.5-million, were seen by many "father-friendly" groups as an effort by the Justice Department to undermine the committee's recommendations. The sessions were effectively private and no verbatim public record was taken.

The president of a men's rights group said yesterday he finds it disgusting that the women's groups could get their own hearings.

Ross Virgin, president of In Search of Justice, said the fact the committee is considering giving women separate hearings shows the pro-feminist bias of Anne McLellan, the Justice Minister.

"Women's groups constantly yatter about equality, but they don't want equality. They want special treatment," said Mr. Virgin, who estimated his group has 12,000 to 14,000 members throughout the country.

The women's groups that boycotted the consultations said they did so because the process could lead "to the further subordination of women" and sitting at the same table as fathers' rights groups created an "adversarial" atmosphere.

The joint committee spent a year from January, 1998, holding hearings on custody and access. The cornerstone of its many recommendations is to replace the words custody and access with the term "shared parenting" under which both separated or divorced parents would have an automatic right to be involved in the raising of their children. That does not necessarily mean equal time with each parent but rather a continuation of the parenting pattern before the parents separated.

