

CanWaCHCanadian Partnership for
Women and Children's Health**CanSFE**Partenariat canadien pour
la santé des femmes et des enfants

On Gender Equality and Youth Empowerment: An Interview with CanWaCH's 2018 Gender Equality Award Recipient, Diviya Leonard

*To celebrate Canada's inaugural Gender Equality Week, we sat down with **Diviya Leonard**, the 2018 recipient of CanWaCH's **gender equality award** to discuss feminism, Women Deliver 2019, and finding your passions. Diviya is a public speaker, leader, and social activist, and is currently involved with **Plan International Canada** as a youth advocate. Despite only being 17 years old, Diviya is insightful beyond her years, sharing with us some of her experiences in the field, and ideas for what gender equality could look like in Canada, and abroad.*



Can you tell me about how you first became interested in gender equality, and how you got your start in this field?

I first became interested in gender equality and social justice issues when my parents sponsored two girls through Plan International Canada's sponsorship program. This experience taught me a bit about what the program means and about where the girls were from, and so I started to get interested. When I was in the 6th grade, I decided to enter my elementary school's speech competition and I gave a speech about girls' rights. At that point I was learning a bit about "Because I Am A Girl" so I talked about that too. After I won that competition I started to learn more about what Plan International Canada does and I decided to join their Speakers Bureau. Through the Speakers Bureau I've been able to attend monthly meetings and have met a lot of like-minded people, and through that have learned a lot more about women's issues and what Plan International Canada is doing domestically and overseas. Through Plan International Canada I've been able to participate in events and even travel to other countries!



CANADA EN TÊTE LEAD ON CANADA

What are you currently focused on in your role as youth advocate for Plan International Canada, and other extra-curricular activities you're involved in?

I'm one of Plan International Canada's thirty youth advocates for their "[Change the Birth Story](#)" campaign. This campaign addresses the complications and barriers to seeking healthcare that a lot of women and girls face during pregnancy and childbirth. Our goal is to each collect 500 endorsements to show the government that this is an issue that matters to Canadians, and they want funding to continue to go towards it. This past summer, ten of us youth advocates had the opportunity to go to Ghana to see this project in action. The purpose of the trip was to facilitate an exchange of knowledge between Ghanaian and Canadian youth. So 10 youth from Ghana were selected from their communities for being leaders, and throughout the trip we were paired with them and really learned a lot from them.

Given the work you've been involved in, what are the opportunities that can accelerate the progress on gender equality and women's empowerment?

I think the first thing is to provide girls with access to education. Around the world there are still 130 million girls who are still not in school, and I think to achieve gender equality it is really important to close this gap. When girls are empowered they can make their own decisions, have a steady income, have children when they want to and feel ready, and then be able to support their families. Another thing is to really focus on the girls. It's important to have more of a rights based approach when we're talking about gender equality. Instead of first talking about how empowering girls can improve the economy, or things like that, it's better to focus on the fact that it's a human right and that's why it's important. It needs to first start with the girls. I also think that having proper representation of women and mentorship between more experienced women and younger girls allows girls to see other people in their dream roles and allows them to envision themselves in the future. I think it's really important to see themselves reflected in these roles.

Could you talk about the importance of Canada celebrating its first ever [Gender Equality Week](#)?

I think this week is definitely really important. It's really a time to celebrate our progress in gender equality, but it's also a time to acknowledge what still must be achieved in order to make gender equality a reality. I think it's also a time to celebrate some inspiring women and girls who are helping to move us closer to achieving it. I really like the theme that "Gender Equality Benefits Everyone" for this week because I think it's really important to promote the idea that feminism and gender equality is really for everyone, it's not just for women. I think it's really showing that our country is moving in the right direction because we're not just celebrating how far we've come, but we're also recognizing areas we need to improve on.

Do you have any ideas on how this week could be used to highlight and integrate youth voices into the conversation on gender-related issues?

I think this week is a great opportunity to give youth the chance to share their views and really make their voices heard on this issue. I think that during this week and in general, social media is a great way for youth to share what this week means to them, or what gender equality week means to them. In future, it would be great to have some type of summit or conference for youth to come together and talk about ideas for achieving gender equality and make a plan for how Canada can move forward.

As you know, because of our leadership in gender equality, Canada was selected to host, [Women Deliver 2019](#), the largest conference on gender equality and the health, rights and wellbeing of girls and women in the 21st century. What do you think are some of the main successes Canada should highlight and show the world as part of this conference?

Representation of women is increasing, and I think that is something to be proud of even though we're not perfect yet. Currently our government has a gender equal cabinet, and there's a lot more women in high profile positions in our country which is great to see. I also think it's important that we're having weeks and days like this. So with Gender Equality Week it shows that our country is moving in the right direction, and our country was also the first to start International Day of the Girl, which is also something to celebrate. Also, I really think that our government is investing in girls' education and other campaigns that focus on women's rights, like "Change the Birth Story", so I think that's also something to be proud of.



Do you have any advice for young women who are interested in getting involved in this type of advocacy work?

I think the first step is to figure out what issues you're passionate about and to then start educating yourself on them. I think getting involved with organizations like Plan International Canada are also a great way to develop your public speaking skills and to receive opportunities to raise your voice on issues you care about. For me, personally, joining the Speakers Bureau allowed me to meet like-minded people and learn more about issues I care about, while also helping me to refine my presentation skills and ability give interviews and things like that. I really think that young women shouldn't be afraid to speak out and have their voices heard, because I know for me it really helped me to find my identity and find my own passions.