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CANADA

A TURNING POINT
FOR WOMEN

UN POINT TOURNANT
POUR LES FEMMES

REDUCING POVERTY FOR WOMEN, GIRLS & GENDER NON-CONFORMING PEOPLE
YWCA Canada Brief to the Standing Committee on
Human Resources, Skills and Social Development
and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

YWCA Canada submits this brief to improve the lives of the tens of thousands of women and girls who use our programs and services every year. Through policy and advocacy, we work to achieve economic equality for women, to end the inter-connected issues of women's homelessness and violence against women, and to ensure access to affordable, quality childcare.

An effective Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy will incorporate an intersectional gender-based analysis (GBA+) to ensure that it responds equitably to the needs of women and girls and gender non-conforming people, and addresses structural factors contributing to their poverty. To work for women and girls it must link to strategies that:

- increase access to safe affordable housing and reduce homelessness for women, girls and gender non-conforming people
- close gender-based income gaps
- reduce gender-based violence
- and implement a national childcare plan.

The Experience of Poverty Differs across Lived Realities

The Federal Poverty Reduction Plan needs to take into account that the experience of poverty differs on the basis of gender identity, as well as intersecting factors such as race, Indigeneity, impacts of colonization, immigration status, sexual orientation, disability, income, occupation, age, health, experiences of criminalization, and histories of violence, abuse and trauma. To address poverty effectively in Canada, the development of policies and programs must respond to the different lived realities that women, girls and gender non-conforming people experience based on their social location.

Recommendations:

- I.** Incorporate an intersectional gender-based analysis with an anti-racist and anti-oppression approach to policy development and implementation including:
 - a.** Prioritize Indigenous peoples and implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action particularly, full implementation of the United Nations

Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Calls addressing child welfare, health, education justice and youth programs.

- b. Ensure that policies and programs respond to systemic barriers facing newcomers to Canada, Indigenous peoples and racialized women.
- c. Address the unique factors contributing to poverty of queer and trans women, Two-Spirit and gender-nonconforming people.
- d. Respond to the unique vulnerabilities to poverty experienced by disabled women, girls, and gender non-conforming people, exacerbated by disability benefits systems and an inaccessible labour market.

Lived Experience is Policy Expertise

Active involvement of those directly impacted by poverty is fundamental to poverty reduction policies and programs. Lived experience is policy expertise. YWCA Canada is pleased to see the targeted call for “nominations of people who have experienced poverty” to the Advisory Council and considers women’s participation essential. Women’s lived experiences of poverty provide invaluable information about the actual effects of policies and programs, including detrimental gaps. Policies and programs developed and implemented without input from those directly affected often prove ineffective or inadvertently harmful.

Recommendation:

- 2. Women and gender non-conforming people facing poverty should play a central role in the framing, development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy. Engagement of women with lived experience in policy and program development, implementation and monitoring requires material support and compensation, meaningful engagement in an accessible environment, and positions of real influence.

Major Policy Strategies Intersect in the Lives of Women, Girls and Gender Non-Conforming People

To be effective and impactful, the Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy must take into account the entire experience of poverty for Canadians. This requires policy coordination between intersecting federal strategies, and across ministerial and parliamentary stakeholders. The Poverty Reduction Strategy must be coordinated with developing strategies that impact women’s economic security, such as the National Housing Strategy and the Federal Strategy on Gender-Based Violence.

Recommendations:

- 3. Connect the Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy to the National Housing Strategy and the Federal Strategy on Gender-Based Violence.



Reduce Income Inequality for Women, Girls and Gender Non-Conforming People and Address Poverty Levels

Most low-wage workers in Canada are women. Women working full time, year-round earn 28% than men in comparable jobs.

This wage gap is intensified for Black, Indigenous and women of colour, immigrant women, disabled women, and trans* people. Racialized women earn 32% less than non-racialized men.¹ The median income of Indigenous women is 84% of that of Indigenous men and only 77% of that of non-Indigenous women.² Twenty percent of newcomer women live below the before tax low-income cut off, compared to 10% of Canadian-born women.³ Although Canada-wide data on income for gender non-conforming people is lacking, an Ontario-based study found that on average, trans* people live on an average of \$15,000 per year.⁴ Income levels for women with disabilities and older women are disproportionately low, and vary depending on other intersecting factors.

Legislated pay equity can “close the unacceptable gap in pay between men and women which contributes to income inequality and discriminate against women.”⁵ The complaint-based model of pay equity should be replaced with legislation framing pay equity as a human right.

Recommendations:

4. Implement proactive federal pay equity legislation for both the public and private sectors, in line with the recommendations of the 2004 Pay Equity Task Force.
5. Ensure the Canada Child Benefit is maintained as a permanent transfer program, indexed to inflation.
6. Comply with the rulings of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal by providing adequate and fair funding for child welfare services on reserves, and ensure the broad application of Jordan’s Principle.
7. Engage in research to capture the experience of poverty for gender non-conforming Canadians.

Precarious Work

Canadian women are more likely to be engaged in precarious, non-standard employment relations than men. While women’s participation in the labour force has continued to increase dramatically since the 1950s, women are disproportionately represented amongst minimum wage and part-time workers. This is especially true for young women. The feminization of occupations and industries, like the service sector, which are characterized by job tenure insecurity, low wages, and lacking benefits, contribute to higher rates of labour force insecurity of women as compared to men⁶. The general trend away from full-time permanent employment relations since 1990 has impacted men and women differently⁷. The federal Poverty Reduction Strategy must take into account the gendered dimensions of insecure employment relations and how they contribute to cycles of poverty for women.

Recommendations:

8. Raise federal minimum wage and support provincial and territorial increases to a living wage.
9. Increase access to Employment Insurance benefits for temporary, short-term and part-time workers.

Include a Northern Strategy

A northern strategy is needed address the acute poverty, food insecurity and housing shortages across the northern territories that impact women, generating health outcomes far below national averages and leaving many women living in violent situations without options to leave their abusers⁸. The northern strategy should take into account the ongoing legacy of colonization in Canada's northern and Inuit communities, and work with Indigenous governments.

In some northern communities, food prices have been calculated to be almost twice the cost of the same items in Ottawa. Quality nutritious food can be hard to come by in the north, due to shelf life, and the cost and distance of transportation. Many northern residents are considered food insecure, with 69% of Inuit adults in Nunavut lacking the resources to access healthy foods⁹. Average income levels do not reflect the high cost of living.

Remoteness and lack of services outside of urban centres, combined with distance and cost of travel, mean that when women from rural communities come to cities to escape abuse or search for employment, education and other opportunities, many become homeless on arrival. Lack of affordable housing options mean that many women live for years in underfunded emergency shelters.

Recommendations:

10. Develop an independent northern strategy for poverty reduction working with First Nation, Inuit and territorial governments and women's organizations and services in the territories that addresses:

- a. Cost of housing and access to affordable housing in the North.
- b. Cost of food and food insecurity.

11. Coordinate sufficient investment to bring access to affordable housing and emergency shelter to a national standard.

Include Implementation of a National Child Care Strategy

Given women's education and employment status, the absence of a national childcare program is a major social policy gap. Childcare is an anti-poverty tool that increases mothers' access to the workforce. Quebec's low-cost, broad-based childcare program confirms childcare reduces poverty for women, particularly for those raising families on their own, by dramatically increasing access to employment. In Quebec, between the introduction of childcare as a social policy in 1996 and 2008:

- employment rates for mothers with children under the age of six increased 22%
- the number of single mothers on social assistance was reduced by more than half (55%), from 99,000 to 45,000
- single mothers after-tax median income rose 81%.¹⁰

Recommendations:

12. Establish broad national access to low-cost childcare, by connecting the Poverty Reduction Strategy to moving forward on a national Child Care Framework with an equity lens.

13. Develop an early child development strategy with and for First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities working with their organizations including Indigenous women's organizations.

Address Violence & Homelessness as Lived by Women, Girls and Gender Non-Conforming People

The connection between poverty, violence and homelessness is undeniable. Women, girls and gender non-conforming people struggle due to lack of recognition regarding the realities of their experience and inadequate supports to meet their needs. Women's homelessness is often tied to gender-based violence, and, due to abuse, women's housing status is more precarious than men's. To prevent violence or a return to violence, women need an adequate standard of living. Women often lose both their source of income and their housing when escaping abusive partners.

For women, girls, and gender non-conforming people, homophobia, transphobia, racism, criminalization, sexualization and a lack of gender inappropriate services often lead to increased isolation and vulnerability. Many trans women have been denied entry into women's shelters¹¹ and one in three trans* youth will be rejected from a shelter due to their gender identity or expression¹². Given the harsh realities of living on the street and in emergency shelters, many women, girls and gender non-conforming people engage in hidden homelessness, a term that describes the strategies people use in order to be less visible and avoid physical and sexual dangers. A lack of awareness of hidden homelessness seriously underestimates the population of homeless women, girls and gender non-conforming youth, buries the measures they take for survival, and results in a lack of essential services.

Recommendations:

14. Ensure development and implementation of an effective Federal Strategy on Gender-based Violence leading to a National Action Plan.

15. Ensure the National Housing Strategy expands gender-specific programs, services, and shelters with trauma-informed services and invests in supportive and affordable housing options for women, girls, and gender non-conforming people.

Submitted on behalf of YWCA Canada by Ann Decter – adecter@ywcacanada.ca

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³ Tina Chui, *Immigrant Women*, Statistics Canada, 2016

⁴ Greta R. Bauer & Vanier Scholar, *Transgender People in Ontario, Canada: Statistics from the Trans PULSE Project to Inform Human Rights Policy*, Trans PULSE

⁵ Opposition Day Motion on Pay Equity, February 3, 2016. Retrieved from:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=42&Ses=1&DocId=8082478>

⁶ Cynthia Cranford, Leah F. Vosko with contributions from Katherine Laxer, *Conceptual Guide to the Precarious Employment Module*, gender and work database

⁷ Linda Gionet, *Inuit in Canada: Selected findings of the 2006 Census*, Statistics Canada

⁸ *National Aboriginal Women's Summit - Strong Women, Strong Communities*, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2007

⁹ *Dignity for all: A National Anti-Poverty Plan for Canada*, Dignity for All, 2015

¹⁰ Fortin et al, *The Impact of Low Cost Child Care on Women's Employment and Overall Economy*, University of Sherbrooke, 2012

¹¹ *Trans Inclusion Pocket Guide: Centering Trans Women in Our Work*, Women & HIV/AIDS Initiative, 2016

¹² Alex Abramovich, *1 in 3 transgender youth will be rejected by a shelter on account of their gender identity/expression*, The Homeless Hub, 2014