



Breaking Free:
Toward Women's Economic Security

Prepared by Vancouver Rape Relief & Women's Shelter
For the Provincial Government of British Columbia
March 2018

Background

In response to the Provincial Government's creation of a Poverty Reduction Plan for British Columbia, Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter called together seven women's groups and organizations that work with and on behalf of women in the lower mainland to discuss the gendered effect of poverty and the present conditions of women's lives. The groups and organizations who participated represent racialized, lesbian, immigrant, prostituted, and battered women. Many of which are single mothers, on income assistance, disability, or working low-paying jobs. They are living in poverty with no ability to break free from it. The groups and organizations that participated in this initial phase are:

- The Vancouver Women's Health Collective
- EVE (formerly Exploited Voices now Educating)
- YWCA
- Vancouver Committee for Domestic Workers and Caregivers Rights
- Lesbian Collective
- Nova Transition House
- Asian Women's Coalition Ending Prostitution

We resoundingly heard from all involved that the conditions of women's lives are continuously deteriorating and of the absolute need for substantive change to the systems that keep women impoverished. Common themes were identified during the consultation; lack of basic necessities, lack of access to safe and affordable childcare, and how men's violence contributes to and holds women in poverty.

Highlighted Issues

Provisions for Basic Necessities

It is widely known we are in the midst of a housing crisis in the lower mainland, however, it is worth emphasizing the particular implications for women and children. Women who live in poverty have unstable housing and may be uprooted if there is an increase to rent, work hours are cut back, or violence forces them from the home. When women and their children are forced from their neighbourhoods, this impacts the relationships they have cultivated and removes them from their supports in the community who help them with child care, food, etc. Residents of historically working class neighbourhoods with sizeable populations of single mothers such as Commercial Drive, are being driven away from the community by the expanding reach of gentrification.

Most of the participants stated that the safety of women, and by extension their children, who they serve is compromised by poverty. For those on welfare or working low wage jobs, covering the costs of secure market housing and utilities is often out of reach. Women are sometimes unable to cover their hydro bill and go without it. For women fleeing abuse, second-stage transitional housing is one of the few affordable options but it is highly sought after with few openings. As well, social housing through the BC Housing registry has a multi-year wait list, even to those with priority placement. This pressure has prompted service providers like Nova Transition House to find creative solutions by negotiating with land owners who are selling properties for redevelopment to open their houses to families in need during the interim rezoning period. Though everyone was adamant on the desperate need for housing, it was agreed that proposed solutions like modular housing units are short term and reinforce existing societal divisions.

Due to the constant efforts and time required to procure basic necessities and services, impoverished women are exhausted. Women who work for minimum wage often work two or three jobs in order to make ends meet. Those who are employed as live-in caregivers are only paid for a typical eight-hour work day but in reality, work around the clock cooking, cleaning, gardening, and providing care for their employers without any overtime pay. For women here as temporary foreign workers, whose families are located outside of Canada, they are living in abject poverty, sending large portions of their incomes to their families back home.

Poverty compromises women's health. Mothers are prioritizing feeding their children and are themselves going without food and sufficient nutrition. As well, access to basic healthcare items such as painkillers, vitamins, and personal hygiene products such as soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and menstruation products is regularly accessed through service providers such as the Vancouver Women's Health Collective. Due to substandard access to nutritious food, preventative healthcare, and secure housing, this contributes to poor mental and physical health.

Lack of Childcare

Access to safe, affordable childcare was repeatedly raised as an urgent issue. Without it, women with young children are prevented from re/entering the workforce. When her kids are school-aged, holidays and summer break present a challenge in juggling the responsibilities of work and caring for her children. The expense of out-of-school care is prohibitive for low-income families. Additionally, the difficulty in securing appropriate placements is further compounded for children with disabilities.

Impoverished women are living in a state of constant worry that their children may be apprehended by the Ministry of Child and Family Development due to poverty and its' grinding impact. They live in fear of displaying the indicators of poverty that effectively put them under surveillance by neighbours, teachers, doctors, and service providers. The ever-real threat of removal has an isolating effect on women and their children from the community.

For women who are in prostitution, and do not have childcare, they resort to bringing johns into their homes, risking the wellbeing of her children.

Violence Against Women

The connection between poverty and violence against women is strong and well established. Lack of economic security is a barrier to leaving an abusive partner and the inadequacy of the welfare system plays a role in this. Front line workers report cases of abusive men waging an economic war on their former partners by maliciously running up her court expenses and refusing to pay child support. In general, poor women are more vulnerable to male violence; unsecured housing puts her at greater risk, as does reliance on low cost means of transportation like the bus and walking with long commutes alone at night.

When law enforcement become involved in response to male violence against women, it is often the woman and her children who are removed from the home. This is due to the police's refusal to prevent abusive men from returning to the family home.

It was a refrain heard over and over again that poverty undermines women's bodily integrity, dignity, and autonomy. Overwhelmingly, women in the sex trade are pushed into prostitution by poverty. Predatory men are aware of women's economic vulnerability and exploit it. Pimps are known to target group homes to recruit young women into prostitution who are aging out of the foster care system and without economic support.

Recommendations

As a group, we discussed what concrete aid is required to lift women from the depths of poverty. Participants were firm that solutions must contribute to and promote women's autonomy, dignity and equality in a meaningful way.

1. Guaranteed Livable Income

All representatives highlighted the vital need for women to have a sufficient amount of money that is under their control. Receipt of a guaranteed income payment would vastly change the quality of life for women and their children. The criteria discussed for such a payment is that it should be set high enough to meet an adequate standard of living, providing for all basic necessities such as nutritious food, safe housing and to allow for discretionary spending to enhance full participation in community life.

To promote women's ability to be selective in choosing relationships and leaving exploitative ones, it is imperative that she has access to her own money, therefore any government payments must be individually administered rather than as a household.

Income payments should be universally delivered to all classes of immigrants and refugee claimants in Canada, to avoid exacerbating the current precarious and exploitative labour market.

The conditionality of the current welfare system keeps people impoverished and under state control. Therefore, it is imperative that any new state welfare program offers a departure from this premise. It should be given without a means test, without a job search requirement, without limitations on expenditures, without claw backs, without wait times or any other imposed conditions.

A Guaranteed Livable Income constructed in this way will dramatically increase women's autonomy and equality in society. It recognizes women's ability to make decisions that are to the benefit of her family and community.

2. Universal Public Services

It was clear from our consultation that guaranteed income payments need to be coupled with robust public services that are universally delivered. This includes pharmacare, dental care, optometry, education and training courses, transportation, childcare and access to legal representation.

As previously noted, women who do not have sufficient childcare are forced out of the workforce and in turn are invisible within the economic sphere. In order to fully participate within society, women need adequate and reliable childcare.

The current legal aid system has proven inadequate and substandard. Women often turn to non-profit organizations during critical parts of their trial when their legal aid hours have run out and they have no legal representation. This results in women representing themselves, being unprepared and ill-equipped within the legal system, and horrifyingly, being cross-examined by their abusive partner and/or the person who sexually assaulted them. It is imperative that Legal Aid is accessible to those who need it throughout their legal proceedings.

3. Safe and Affordable Housing

Safe and affordable housing was cited time and time again during our consultation by all groups as the absolute minimum that needs to be ensured to women in order to combat poverty. Without safe, secure, and adequate housing, it's virtually impossible for women to get ahead in any other aspect of their lives due to a severe lack of stability.

In order to ensure access to housing for women and their children who are living in poverty, implementation of stronger rent control is essential. The city's housing stock is not the prohibitive factor, rather it is one of un-affordability. Those who are homeless, or housing insecure, cannot wait for swaths of new social housing to be built.

4. Immigration Policy

It is necessary to address the immigration policies that keep women and families in poverty. Allowing women to come over as landed immigrants with their entire family will provide more bargaining power in accepting suitable work and to limit the exploitation they face from their employers as live in caregivers. This change in policy will reduce the support remittances sent back to family in their home countries, which is a contributing factor to being impoverished in Canada.

Conclusion

The material conditions for many women and by extension, their children, is dire and increasingly so. The formal equality granted to women in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is rendered null when the forces of neoliberal policy, capitalism, and male violence are imposed. Immediate intervention from the state to reestablish a social safety net is desperately required. We urge the government of British Columbia to work in concert with the Federal government to implement the above recommendations.