

WOMEN AND POVERTY

The Big Picture

In Canada

- Despite overall improvements in women's earnings and incomes relative to men's in Canada, and recent policy initiatives to benefit those with low-income, the face of poverty is still more likely to be a woman's.
- Some groups are more vulnerable to poverty than others, including female lone-parents, elderly women living alone, Aboriginal women, immigrant and visible minority women and women with disabilities.
- The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' 2000 Report Card on Women and Poverty concluded that even though the poverty focus seems to be on children, it is still a woman's issue. The Report supports a more comprehensive approach to dealing with poverty as envisaged by the UN's Poverty Report in 1997 — one that looks at how women's financial security may be undermined because they must combine paid work with unpaid family responsibilities.
- The National Council of Welfare estimates that total welfare income in 1998 for a single parent with one child ranges from 50% to 69% of the poverty level.
- Housing and homelessness are issues gaining greater attention in Canada. In recent years, the homeless population has often been identified as younger than in the past, with an increasing proportion of single women and homeless families headed by women. Studies indicate that the homeless among women tend to be hidden and therefore have not been counted.

Around the World

- There is a strong relationship between gender inequality and poverty. There is also a strong relationship between

eradication of poverty and empowerment of women and gender equality. The four countries that ranked lowest on the UN's gender equality index also ranked lowest in addressing human poverty. All major UN conferences in the 1990s have stressed the direct link between women's empowerment and poverty reduction.

- Women still have less access than men to credit, finance, education, training, employment, and other productive resources, which contributes to their poverty.
- Poverty deepened worldwide during the 1990s as economies restructured to pay down debt and compete in the global marketplace. These trends have created more opportunities in the labour force for women, yet the increase in employment has not been matched by an increase in equality of employment available to women. For example, more women than men are found in the informal sector and precarious forms of employment which are often lower paid and offer less social protection than employment in the formal sector.
- Reductions in publicly funded services have increased the amount of time women devote to caring for children, the ill and the elderly, thus adding to their daily burden. As a result women are available less available for paid work or training and more constrained in a competitive labour market.

Facts and Figures

In Canada

Statistics and figures below are from Statistics Canada unless otherwise noted.

- In 1997, almost 5.2 million people in Canada lived in low-income circumstances; 54.5% of them were female. Of the total female population in Canada, 18.9% were



living in low-income situations, compared with 16.1% of the male population.

- In 1997, 56% of all families headed by lone-parent mothers had incomes which fell below the Low Income Cut-off (LICO), a slight improvement from 57% in 1980. The comparable figure for male lone-parent families in 1997 was 24%.
- Of all children in low-income families, 40% were living with a single female parent, accounting for 13% of all children under the age of 18 that year.
- Due to increases in income assistance programs, the incidence of low income among all senior women dropped from 28% in 1993 to 24.1% in 1997 (14% to 12% for men). However, in 1997 49% of unattached senior women were living in low-income circumstances, versus 33% of unattached senior men.
- In 1996, over 45% of Registered Indian women reported government transfer payments as their major source of income, more than twice the percentage of non-Aboriginal women (26.2%).
- In 1995, the rate of poverty for working-age women (aged 15-64) with a disability was twice that of working-age women without a disability: 36% compared to 18% [Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), 2000].
- In 1998, 60% of runaway youth were young women aged 12-17. One-third of homeless youth were female at an average age of 17, compared to the 2/3 who were male at an average age of 18 [CCSD, 1998].

N.B.: Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off (LICO) is not official poverty line. LICO is the point where the portion of income spent on food, clothing and shelter is 20 percentage points more than average. The cut-off in 1997 was 55% of income in a large urban centre, \$17,409 for a single person, \$21,760 for a couple and \$32,759 for a family of four.

Around the World

- The absolute number of people living in poverty — earning less than \$1US a day — has increased from 1.2 billion in 1987 to 1.5 billion today, and if present

trends persist, the figure will reach 1.9 billion by 2015 (*World Bank Report 1999/2000*).

- Growth of women in the labour force since 1980 has been substantially higher than for men in every region of the world except Africa. Moreover, in most parts of the world, a high share of total labour force growth is due to the growth of women's labour. (Report of the UN Secretary General, the Role of Employment and Work in Poverty Eradication: the Empowerment and Advancement of Women, E/1999/53)
- The number of poor people in South Asia rose by 10% during the 1987-2000 period, with the regional financial crisis playing a major role. In the first half of the 1990s, the number of poor people in Latin American and the Caribbean increased by about 3 million a year; in Sub-Saharan Africa, 51% of the people are living in poverty today. (World Bank, *op.cit.*)
- The proportion of women in poverty has not changed vis à vis men since the early 1990s; 70% of the world's poor are still women and children. (UNIFEM Web site, 2000)
- Economic gender equality is likely to enhance economic growth overall. In Africa, gender inequality in employment opportunities has been estimated to account for a reduced annual per capital growth of 0.7% between 1960 and 1992. Estimating gender discrimination in economic opportunities and pay would increase both women's income and GDP. (Report of the UN Secretary General, the Role of Employment and Work in Poverty Eradication: the Empowerment and Advancement of Women, E/1999/53)
- In many developing and transition economies, strategies for stimulating development of small and medium sized enterprises can encourage employment creation and lead to poverty reduction.

Towards Equality

In Canada

- An array of measures to reduce women's poverty and economic inequality is being pursued by the Government of Canada. Measures such as child support reforms,

employment and pay equity legislation, student loans, tax deductions for child care and other dependant care, maternity and parental benefits and programs to address sexual harassment and gender violence.

- The National Child Benefit (NCB) program was implemented in 1998, designed to support low income families and reduce child poverty. About half of the NCB beneficiaries are one-parent families headed by women, the other half being two-parent families.
- National spending on Employment Insurance maternity and parental benefits was \$1.2 billion in 1998-99. This amount will increase by \$900 million per year when the enhanced parental leave plan, providing up to a full year of benefits, come into effect in 2001.

Around the World

- The national action plans of 56 countries for implementing the Beijing Platform for Action, establish policies for the eradication of poverty among women, by promoting employment and income generation and improving basic social services and social security systems.
 - Helping developing countries reduce poverty is the cornerstone of Canada's development assistance program.
 - The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) supports microcredit programs in Cameroon to enable savings and loan cooperatives, owned and run by women, to provide loans to rural women. The program provides technical assistance in microcredit management to the cooperatives, which have granted more than 500 loans for a variety of local enterprises.
 - A technical assistance project that is helping the Russian Ministry of Labour develop policies to encourage employers to hire and retain women employees is also supported by CIDA; another project supports special women's assistance programs in local business development centres throughout the country.
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