

Social change affecting women and their families

Women today have many roles. They work inside and outside the home. The community depends on their time as volunteers. They are still considered the primary caregivers for their children and dependent relatives. However, the social policy that affects family life in Canada and in Nova Scotia – maternity and parental leave, early childhood education and care, dependent care, and family-friendly policy in workplaces – hasn't kept pace with the influx of mothers into the workplace and the aging of the earliest baby boomers.

As a result, women and their families are cobbling together their lives, filling in the gaps where social policy provides no support. In Canada and Nova Scotia, we need policy to be flexible so that women can meet their present needs without jeopardizing their future opportunities.

In October 2005, the Roundtable on Women's Economic Security, hosted by the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, held a forum to test the effects of social policy on Nova Scotia women and families and to share the results with those who develop policy for government and for workplaces.

The question confronting the forum organizers and participants: What can be done to improve policy so its consequences are more positive and supportive of women and their families in Nova Scotia?



Keynote speaker Jane Jenson

This summary of Women, Work and Care provides a glimpse into the impact of social policy on the lives of women and their families and points the way for future action needed.

Future Action

Participants in the forum recommended the following future action:

- offering participants future opportunities to meet, share and learn together
- forming policy groups or networks including women who are most affected by this policy, and policy makers which would follow-up on the work of the forum
- sharing the outcomes of the forum with those who can influence policy change, including

Members of the Legislature and Members of Parliament

- taking ownership of the issues and mobilizing women to take action
- providing education on the issues women are faced with in everyday life
- monitoring government's action and policy development on issues such as maternity benefits, childcare, dependent care and family-friendly workplaces

Involving women in policy development

Women, Work and Care provides the basis for growing a policy community that includes the people affected by the issues, particularly diverse young women whose futures are shaped by the policies that affect their life choices.

contribute the voices of women of all ages and backgrounds to the development of policies that are responsive to the varied circumstances in which families find themselves today.

Special thanks to:

- Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health
- Canadian Labour Congress - Atlantic Region
- Canadian Union of Public Employees
- Nova Scotia Department of Community Services
- Nova Scotia Federation of Labour
- Nova Scotia Government Employees' Union
- Nova Scotia Public Service Commission
- Public Health Agency of Canada
- Public Service Alliance of Canada - Atlantic Region
- Saint Mary's University (Dept of Political Science, Women's Studies and the Women's Centre)
- The United Way of Halifax Region

Government has identified stronger communities and families as a priority. The Advisory Council on the Status of Women and its partners are proud to



Women Work & Care

Policy at
the Crossroads
An examination of issues
that affect women's life
choices and opportunities.



Highlights of the forum



Nova Scotia
Advisory Council on
the Status of Women

Conseil consultatif sur la
condition féminine de la
Nouvelle-Écosse



Panel members Jen Chisholm (L) and Flavia Lytle (R) share their personal stories of learning, earning and caring.

Considering social policy in a new way

Three events made up Women, Work and Care: Policy at the Crossroads – a panel discussion on early childhood education and care, a lecture by national social policy expert Jane Jenson and a day-long forum for policy developers and Nova Scotia women.

Labour organizations, government departments, university faculty members, community organizations and Nova Scotia women took part in the forum. The women were of culturally diverse backgrounds and represented many different family structures, including traditional husband-wife families, single-parent families, and families composing 'shifting mixes' (elders, foster children, extended family, and friends).

The Women, Work and Care forum examined whether the mix of policies now in place meets the needs of women and their families. As a result, people who make or influence the development of government and workplace policy saw first-hand the real-life impact of their policy-making.

The forum demonstrated that Nova Scotia women experience social conditions differently and as a result, face greater risk to their social and economic well-being. It also showed that women who face additional disadvantage because of race, disability, Aboriginal origin, marital status, income, or geographic location also experience greater disadvantage as parents and caregivers.

Maternity and parental leaves

Maternity and parental benefits provide financial support to give families with new babies a chance to bond, giving children the best start in life. To receive the benefit in Canada, mothers and fathers must be eligible for Employment Insurance. Many new mothers (40%) do not qualify for any maternity and parental benefits even though they hold paid jobs. This is because they are not eligible for Employment Insurance. This affects women who work part-time, seasonally, and in self-employment (with the exception of self-

employed fishers). The women who are least likely to be eligible for benefits include young mothers who have not been in paid work, women with low education levels, women with low incomes and precarious jobs, single mothers, immigrant women, racialized women, Aboriginal women, and women with disabilities.

Women in Atlantic Canada are less likely than women in other parts of Canada to be eligible for benefits under the Employment Insurance Act.

Early childhood learning and care

The majority of mothers of pre-schoolers and school-age children are in the paid work force. Nova Scotia urgently needs early childhood education and care that gives women and their children reasonable and affordable alternatives whether they live in rural or urban Nova Scotia. Children need culturally appropriate services that reflect their African, First Nations, Acadian or other heritage, as well as meeting their developmental needs.

In Nova Scotia, a lone-parent woman heads more than one-fifth of families with children living at

home. These 37,000 mothers need better supports to achieve their educational potential, to provide care for their children, and to participate effectively in the paid work force.

Participants talked about their desire for a publicly funded, not-for-profit child care system in Nova Scotia. One model they discussed was the hub model, which brings together early childhood education and care programs with parent education and support programs. It is community-board operated (non-profit) and primarily neighbourhood-based.



"We need a publicity campaign – one size does not fit all – so people see the importance of flexibility in social policy."

Linda Carvey, Panelist



Dependent care

Caregivers – those who provide dependent care to an elderly or infirm family member or to a child with a disability – provide a wide range of supports, including housekeeping, transportation, meal preparation, yard and maintenance repairs, care management (making appointments, arranging for services, etc.), financial management, personal care, and emotional support. While this care is often a labour of love, it can lead to high stress, depression, burnout, and social isolation without proper support and respite.

Baby boomers are beginning to be called the 'sandwich' generation, facing the burdens of caring for both children and elders. There are extra costs

as well as additional hours of work. Caregivers who interrupt their jobs to care for a family member may reduce their hours of work and as a result their income, which reduces their Canada Pension Plan (CPP) credits and therefore, their retirement income. And in rural Nova Scotia, the conditions for providing care are more difficult than in urban Nova Scotia.

Today's sandwich generation will grow substantially as baby boomers age and younger generations have children later in life. But very little policy surrounds or supports this relatively new experience for families.

Family-friendly workplaces

Participants discussing family-friendly workplaces commented on the need to address long work hours and workload that limit time for family commitments and increase risks to mental and physical health. In addition to effects on individual health, conflicts in work/family balance also have significant corporate health costs, including higher absenteeism and attrition rates, low morale, a greater number of work-related compensation claims and productivity losses.

A supportive work environment is key to the economic security and well-being of women who combine paid work with caregiving.

Workplace culture must recognize that families, but especially women, are trying to balance work

and family commitments, for different family needs and structures, including lone parent and blended families. A family-friendly environment would allow for more flexibility in work arrangements.

Family-friendly workplace policies have become essential, not only to meet the needs of children, but also to allow for assistance to elders and to younger adults with disabilities.

There is also an impact on communities when women are overextended with family and work commitments. This is one of the main reasons that women cite for not participating fully in government decision-making as elected officials and citizens or in volunteer work.

