



# Communities In which Women Count

The Women's Equality  
Report Card Project

Toronto Women's City Alliance  
June 2010

Communities Where Women Count: The Women's Equality Report Card Project

© 2010 Toronto Women's City Alliance

Cover design: The Public Studio

Photo by Benson Kua

This project is funded by the City of Toronto



# Table of Contents

1. Introduction	p. 1
2. Really Counting (in) the City	p. 4
3. Women in Communities & Women in the City	p. 5
4. Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count	p. 6
5. Issues in Our Communities – Women’s Voices	p. 8
I. Housed and Sheltered	
II. Moving Through the City	
III. Caring for Children	
IV. The Working World and Finances	
V. Support Services	
VI. Leisure and Culture	
VII. Advocating Voices & Civic Engagement	
6. Building a City Where Women's Lives Count	p. 21
7. A Call to Action	p. 26
 <b>Appendices</b>	
Preliminary Report Summary	p. 27
Glossary	p. 29
Reports on Gender Inequity	p. 30
Acknowledgements	p. 31
About the TWCA	p. 32

# Introduction

## How does the city touch women's lives?

This was the question our project addressed. We know that women who live in Toronto are affected daily by the decisions made by the City. This includes sorting and taking out the garbage, walking with their children in the park, riding the bus to work, accessing essential services like housing, and much more. The goal of this project was to find out from women how these interactions with city services shape their lives as women.

Understanding how city services impact women's lives is crucial to understanding the inequalities that persist for women in Toronto. For example, women in Toronto live in higher rates of poverty than their male counterparts, and on average earns 73 cents for every dollar that a man earns (City of Toronto, 2008). For First Nations/Aboriginal women or women with disabilities, these income disparities are even higher (Statistics Canada, 2006).

"The Women's Equality Report Card Project" is the sub-title of this Report because as we listened to women and read reports documenting inequities among women, we recognized the need for the City of Toronto to monitor and evaluate women's status within the City, systematically and on an ongoing basis.

Monitoring and evaluation of inequality is one step towards recognizing its root causes and moving towards solutions. The existence of gender inequalities within City services indicates that women's experiences are not being included in the planning, policies and programs delivered by the City of Toronto.

# Introduction

The Women's Equality Report Card Project is grounded in concerns about how women's lives are touched by the city.

In 2009-2010 we spoke with over 100 women through focus groups and in-depth interviews. Through the voices of these women from across the city, this project is intended to inform the development of a Women's Equality Report Card that can be implemented by the City of Toronto.

We see a Women's Equality Report Card as a tangible tool that the City can develop and use to evaluate how the City engages all women living in Toronto, and to gauge how City services are responding to women's needs.

The goals of the Women's Equality Report Card project are:

- To identify key issues as they relate to City services
- To identify key sources of data related to gender equality in the City—including data that exists as well as identifying gaps in data, such as the need for the City to collect and use data that is disaggregated by sex, race, ethnicity, age, income, location, etc.

- To research the realities of women's lives in Toronto, informed by a Community Based Research methodology

The following report begins with a description of the activities in the Women's Equality Project. The section "Really Counting (in) the City" presents a statistical picture of women in Toronto. "Women in Communities, Women in the City" situates this report in the context of other research about women and urban issues.

In the next section, a future of Toronto as a women-friendly city is imagined. "Issues in our Communities – Women's Voices" details the areas that women we spoke with chose to talk about and includes experiences they shared. A broad framework for establishing a Women's Equalities Report Card in Toronto is outlined. The final section describes concrete recommendations for the City to consider in order to better provide for its' women residents.

# Introduction

## Project Approach

We used multiple methods, including in-depth interviews and focus groups. This community-based research formed the basis of an initial framework for a Women's Equality Report Card. The entire project was informed by our organization's vision for addressing women's lives on the municipal agenda. Ensuring that gender mainstreaming in Toronto is the institutional mechanism needed to address poverty and other oppressions faced by women in this city.

### Environmental Scan and Literature Review

The environmental scan and literature review reviewed gender-based reports and gender-based analysis tools for municipal policy and planning. Further, statistical information about women in various communities across Toronto was gathered.

### In-depth one-on-one interviews and follow-up conversations

We conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews with eight women over a three month period in 2009. Follow-up phone conversations with the interviewees about

their communities and workplaces provided insight about their experiences living in Toronto. The results of the research were released in the preliminary report of this project, entitled "Making it Work: Women's Experiences with Services in Toronto" (see Appendix).

### Focus groups at community centres and organizations that serve women across the city

In the second phase of the project our methodology was informed by community-based research. The focus groups were hosted by organizations and community centres that women already use – in some cases, the women who participated in the focus groups already knew one another.

Community-based research was used so focus groups could consult, build skills and transfer knowledge to their respective, diverse communities. In fact, in almost every focus group women shared information and tips on how to access services, sharing their good (and bad) experiences.

## Really Counting (in) the City

Women account for 52 percent of the population of Toronto – and in their complex and intersecting identities as racialized women, women with disabilities, First Nations/Aboriginal women, women without status, queer and trans women, young or

older women, they experience the city in varied ways. The numbers below help to paint a picture of the present city.

---

Total Population of Toronto	2.5 million
Population of women	52 %
First Nations/Aboriginal population	0.5%
Female First Nations/Aboriginal population	56%
“Visible Minorities” population	47%
Population who identify as queer	10%
Population living with a disability	19%
Population over age 65 years	15%
Female population over age 65	58%
Population of immigrants	1,165,550
Percent of immigrant population who are women	53%
Poverty rate in Toronto (national average is 11.8%)	19.4%
Women who live in poverty	24%
Aboriginal women who live in poverty	37%
Racialized women who live in poverty	32%

---

Source: *Figures are taken from City of Toronto website, [www.toronto.ca](http://www.toronto.ca)*

# Women in Communities & Women in the City

Toronto is an incredibly diverse city, and this diversity is apparent in its many neighbourhoods. While neighbourhoods are one way of understanding communities, other meaningful communities are based on experience or identity. “Women” as a generic community may be too large – and so the Women’s Equality Report Card project recognizes that women maintain complex identities. Women may find their communities in their neighbourhoods, in places where other women share their immigration stories, their work experiences as sex workers, or in their queer identities.

Women who live in Toronto are impacted by the decisions made by the City at many points in their everyday lives. The experiences of women in their various communities are an important way in to evaluate how the City does (or does not) address women’s needs.

Numerous reports have been researched, compiled, released and then filed away on the topic of gender inequality in Toronto (see appendix C for examples). These reports

detail the challenges that women face, and clearly outline the ways policymakers at various levels of government can respond to these challenges to build communities that support the needs of women. As Punam Khosla stated in 2003,

*“The need for proactive approaches in the City has never been greater. Inequality based on race and gender is not new. But in the past fifteen years feminized and racialized poverty and segregation have created a ballooning underclass in Toronto - one that is falling out of the democratic processes of both decision-making and community resistance. Only a concerted effort for meaningful action by policy-makers, analysts, advocates and residents can reverse the trend.”*

*-If Low-Income Women of Colour Counted*

The reality is that these challenges have rarely been addressed, and many women continue to experience marginalization, especially in their complex identities as racialized women, women with disabilities, First Nations/Aboriginal or Indigenous women, women without status, queer and trans women, young or older women, among others.

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

What would it look like to live, play and work in a city where women count?

In the initial report for the Women's Equality Report Card project (see Appendix for summary), the findings of in-depth interviews indicated that women love living in a busy, vibrant city, and benefit from living in Toronto's social and cultural diversity. Many women reported that living in Toronto provided them with opportunities that they would not have otherwise been afforded, and that they valued the right to be independent, respected members of society. However, many also shared stories of discrimination, inequality and poverty.

Toronto already has in place some of the components needed to create a city where women count, yet many more things need to change in order to create this city.

Based on what we heard from women across the city in interviews and focus groups, here is the city we imagine:

A city is made up of many communities: these include the neighbourhoods, houses and apartments, workplaces, businesses and organizations, transit, parks and streets where women experience their lives. These communities are integrated through a thorough planning processes that consider the experiences of women. They consider the networks that women belong to in families, work, school, etc., through the inclusion of housing, employment, recreation and social services, and transit.

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

On any given day, a woman spends time in her home, which is comfortable, affordable, and reflective of her needs and the needs of those she lives with— including children, partners, family members and kin. Basic services and shelters are well-placed across the city and are responsive to women's needs.

On any given day, she navigates the streets easily, getting from place to place within a reasonable amount of time, whether or not she travels with children (and strollers), uses stairs, escalators or elevators, travels during the day or at night, and no matter what her race, sexuality, ability, age, or other markers of difference.

On any given day, she experiences pleasure through affordable leisure activities. She participates in cultural activities that are important to her well-being.

On any given day, she has ready access to childcare supports which are free or low cost, safe, and near her home and workplace.

On any given day, she has ready access to eldercare supports which are free or low cost, safe, and near her home and workplace. She can transport her elderly relative easily using public transit.

On any given day, she accesses the supports and services she requires without difficulty. These supports and services are culturally appropriate, and designed to be responsive to her needs, with mechanisms in place to adjust the services where it is needed.

On any given day, she is meaningfully employed in an educational program that values her experiences and needs and helps her reach her potential. If needed, she is provided adequate financial support in a dignified manner.

On any given day, she knows that there are advocates in her community who are committed to supporting her. Advocacy in the city is intertwined with leadership and civic engagement – so women's voices are not only heard, but they are represented by women in positions as elected officials, board members, civil service employees and more.

She lives a healthy life in a healthy community where gender equity plays a primary role in how the city is viewed and managed.

**After all, this is a city where 52% of the population is reflected in governance.**

# Issues in Our Communities: Women's Voices

The voices of almost one hundred women, many from marginalized communities across the city, are represented in the key issues outlined below.

In focus groups, women identified which city services they wanted to discuss, and then spoke at length about their experiences with them. Additional activities, including an arts-based activity, allowed women to express their experiences and the city they would like to see.

The municipal issues discussed by women in the focus groups included:

- Housing and Shelter
- Moving through the City
- Caring for Children
- The Working World and Finances
- Support Services
- Leisure and Culture
- Advocating Voices
- Civic Engagement

## Demographic Information about the Focus Group Participants

### **Age:**

11% were under the age of 24  
80% were between 25-64 yrs  
10% were older than 65 yrs

### **Parenting:**

76% of the women were parents  
45% had children under 18 yrs

### **Immigration & Racialization:**

54% were not born in Canada  
38% have lived in Canada less than 10 yrs  
63% identified as being a visible minority  
13% identified as being Aboriginal

### **Education & Income:**

30% had completed graduate studies  
24% were employed  
53% had an income under \$20,000  
1% had an income above \$80,000

### **Housing:**

45% lived in subsidized or social housing  
41% identified as experiencing homelessness or under-housing at least once

### **Sexual Orientation/Identity:**

5% identified as LGBTQ

### **Disability:**

25% identified as having a disability

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Housed and Sheltered

There is insufficient affordable and accessible rental housing in the city for single women of all ages, and women with children. For women in low-income housing there are on-going problems of insufficient maintenance and long delays in repairs to their homes.

### The City We Would Like to See:

On any given day, a woman spends time in her home that is comfortable, affordable, maintained and reflective of her needs and the needs of those she cohabits with including children, partners, family members and kin, and others. Shelters are well-placed across the city and are responsive to women's needs.

### The City We Heard About:

In the city, women's housing needs are not being met. The length of waiting lists means that some women are precariously under-housed. The conditions of supportive housing are often poor, and women express frustration at how difficult it is to have repair requests met.

"They have no problem taking our rent no matter what language we speak! But when the notice comes out it's only in one language."

"I'm in Native housing. It's a 3 bedroom. Apartment is really, really great."

"The thing is, I was told that we have to notify them as soon as our income changes. So, if we get a job, our income changes, our rent increases. Why can't we get a time period of a six month base so we can save our money?"

"If you notice lately, all the big shelters are closing in downtown Toronto. These are all downtown shelters. They're closing them down and they're putting condos in these places."

"When I go to places [with] with a rental room downstairs, like I go there, and they ask me where I work and ... they'll ask me well where do you stay now? And I say I'm in a shelter, and then just kind of ... well that first impression just went out the window."

"[At shelter] When we get up for breakfast, there's donuts and pastries. There's no vegetables. And when we come at snack time, it's still more pastries."

"Bed bugs is a torture to us, which area we are living in you know, it has become an epidemic and our lives totally almost ruined."

"Housing Connections was great. They said we're still paying your rent. We're still going to keep paying your rent. We're still going to keep in contact with you. They just told me what to do to get it fixed." [Woman was in jail for 7 days]

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Housed and Sheltered: Desperate need for action on affordable housing

National, provincial and regional figures show women and girls are more likely to live in core housing need – lacking affordable, adequate and/or suitable housing – compared to the male population. In the Toronto region, 18.3% of women and girls are in core housing need compared to 15.9% of men and boys.

Low incomes, inadequate social assistance, unemployment, underemployment, violence against women and discrimination in rental housing, all contribute to the housing problems facing women, and particularly women from marginalized groups.

On the international stage through United Nations' covenants and conventions, Canada commits to the right to housing, while failing to deliver on the home front. To make real headway on housing for Toronto residents, including the many women-led households struggling to keep house and home, the federal and provincial governments need to make permanent, sustainable investments. The City of Toronto has an important role to play too.

In 2009, Toronto City Council adopted Housing Opportunities Toronto, a 10-year affordable housing plan for Toronto. This ambitious plan includes 67 recommended actions with roles for the City, Province and federal government, and aims to assist about one-quarter of Toronto residents with housing issues. Sounds good. But where's the money?

The Ontario government is set to introduce a long-term affordable housing strategy in the weeks to come. Will it deliver real change or tinker at the edges of the problem? Time will tell. The federal government remains absent from the housing table, making no commitment to such a strategy. In the HOT plan, the City of Toronto commits to several actions with a promise of periodic reports on its progress to date beginning in 2011.

To make the HOT plan a reality, the City must work with local communities, including women's groups, to hold senior levels of government to account. As well, the City's progress reports need to be clear and transparent, incorporating the perspectives of community stakeholders including women's groups.

Read the HOT plan: [www.toronto.ca/affordablehousing/pdf/hot\\_actionplan.pdf](http://www.toronto.ca/affordablehousing/pdf/hot_actionplan.pdf)

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Moving Through the City

The public transit system is a critical service for many women. However, for women of all ages and backgrounds it is too expensive, and inhibits mobility. For some women the geographical coverage and frequency of buses is insufficient. Access to public transit and safety on transit is a problem for many women, including those with young children and strollers, and those with mobility devices. The 'Request Stop' program designed for women's safety is not working for the majority of women who participated in the project.

### The City We Would Like to See:

On any given day, she navigates the streets easily, getting from place to place within a reasonable amount of time whether she travels with children (and strollers), whether she uses stairs, escalators or elevators, whether she travels during the day or at night, and no matter what her race, sexuality, ability, age, etc.

### The City We Heard About:

Public transportation is incredibly important for women. Women are struggling to afford the costs of public transportation, and sometimes must choose not to use the TTC when they cannot afford the fare for themselves and their children. Women find the transit system inaccessible, especially if they are travelling with children or have mobility needs. Pedestrian safety is an additional area of concern.

"It's very expensive in [so] we walk all the winter. Because it's very cold, I used to pay only for my two girls, so they used to take the bus and me and my son we used to walk. Because it's very expensive. I cannot pay \$10 daily just to go to the school. So this is affecting us a lot."

"That whole stop at nighttime stuff, half the drivers don't even do that. They're supposed to stop when the sun goes down for women, and some drivers are like 'oh I can't' ..."

"Getting around the city is different for an older person, older women. They often may not have a car, not have access to a car. They're almost totally dependent on either walking or public transit."

"For the newcomers, TTC is a great support. Right after we come here, it's not possible for every one of us to afford our own transportation. With the support of the TTC we can go to our workplaces. We can do all of our activities."

"If I did a survey in my neighbourhood about can we get a community bus because where I'm living again is a place that was one of these last places built, one of the co-ops that were built on wasteland and so there is no service nearby. Nothing walkable. Without a car, you got nothing. So I'd love to see us get a community bus to the shopping centre because we go one shopping centre to the other."

"Safety is very important in the subway. I was on the scooter, the train stopped in a tunnel. It started out, jerked and stopped. It jerked and I fell off the scooter."

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Moving Through the City

"Older persons coming out the door can get killed. So the ... pedestrian issues are much more important. There should be more ways of getting across the street. I was aware of that yesterday, I was on Bay Street. I saw a woman, she looked about 95, she had her shopping and I saw her walking and I was like "oh no, she's going to do it," and she did. She jaywalked across Bay Street, she almost got run over by this van but I could see why because otherwise she would've had to walk all the way up a long distance for her to the corner. "Sometimes, with kids ... not all the drivers are ready to help them. Sometimes they don't care, just thinking about other things, like whether she's paying or not. First of all, she needs to get in first, with kids, with the stroller."

"It's over a big area, so I can go from here to North York using my metropass, changing twice or three times the bus or streetcar, so that's good."

"I think how they have on a school bus, the stop sign comes out, I think on the TTC ... they should have a stop sign come out."

"I wear fitted caps and hoodies and so my appearance would be that I am a male even though I am a female, so sometimes I go and request a stop when you know what I mean, you're not a lady kind of thing. So I'm like 'excuse me sir can I please get off here kind of thing' I take off my stuff and show them my face, sometimes I undo my jacket to show that I have cleavage in order to get a requested stop and that's a safety issue.... And I shouldn't have to dress a certain way just to request a stop."

"I can't understand why the TTC hasn't put some kind of signage saying 'please allow people with disabilities or mobility scooters, or walkers, what have you, to use between the doorways [on the subway] as a safety cubicle, and please use the other door. I don't understand! I've been hit with umbrellas, briefcases, you know."

### **Paying for the Better Way:**

The accessibility, affordability and adequacy of Toronto's public transit system are particularly important to the lives of women. In the Toronto region, women outnumber men in their regular use of public transit getting to and from work. According to the 2006 Census, public transit is the regular mode of transportation for 28% of women with paid employment to get to and from work, compared to 17% of men.

Part of the problem is that 70% of TTC costs are covered by riders through fares, the highest percentage in North America. This means that increased costs of the system fall disproportionately on the shoulders of riders. The City of Toronto contributes 95 cents per ride, with no regular, predictable contribution from the provincial government. It's time for the provincial government to make a permanent, sustainable contribution to the operation of the TTC, like state governments do in the United States.

Read more about the campaign for public transit: [www.publictransitcoalition.ca](http://www.publictransitcoalition.ca)

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Caring For Children

Women face numerous limitations as a result of the lack of sufficient childcare and the expense of childcare in relation to women's family incomes. Lack of affordable and quality childcare means women cannot work outside the home, cannot go to ESL classes, and cannot study or go to any upgrading courses or university. Lack of childcare is taking a toll on family life, affects relations between parents, and sometimes locks women inside their homes, undermining their community engagement and well-being.

### The City We Would Like to See:

On any given day, she has ready access to childcare supports – these supports are free or at a low cost, are safe and located within a close distance to her home and workplace.

### The City We Heard About:

Access to affordable childcare is a serious issue. Where childcare is available, it may be beyond women's means. Without childcare, women's ability to pursue education and meaningful employment are limited.

"They come here in Canada, with big, great hope. Ok, developed country, we are going there to settle down and we will be able to do something. Again from education, they have to start from zero. They have to upgrade themselves. They cannot go outside to upgrade themselves because of lack of subsidies; lack of childcare. So, access to the childcare is really a big issue and they need these facilities."

"I am going to have a predicament this fall when my daughter. My daughter is in JK, but she's going to be going to senior kindergarten and it's still going to be half a day. And the lady that takes care of my daughter, she's elderly and she's not going to be taking care of children anymore. And I've already looked at childcare at her school and there's several years waiting list and then there's one that's close by and it's not affordable. It's twice what I'm paying the lady that currently looks after her ... I really don't know what I'm going to do this fall. And staying home is not an option. I was really hoping for the full-day at her school, but it's not going to be there."

"Regarding the qualification for the subsidy, I have to be in school every day full time. But I want to find a job. So how can I look for a job when I am in the ESL course full time? So what I can do, I stay in the ESL forever and my kids stay in the daycare."

"You know I feel like ... if they see the mother and father come picking up their kids, they have more respect. But when they see you as a single mother they don't respect you. They're ready to call Children's Aid and they're ready to think your child is being neglected."

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Caring For Children

"I cannot go outside because I have kids... I cannot go anywhere, I cannot see anything. Just like for work, just like for tourist, nothing because I have kids. [If] government give us lots of subsidy, we take subsidy, then we can go outside for our educations and job... So, first we need lots of subsidy and then we can do things properly and in full concentration. I realize this is my problem. Not only my problem, lots of women suffer this problem."

"You know when we are both working, leaving home at 7:30 even for a 7 or 8 year old, no way to live. 7:30 you cannot leave your child anywhere. It's very difficult... I could take care of some of the friends who could take my child from morning, 7:30 til evening 7:30 when I get home. And it's a very long time. I don't know sometimes, even if I'm getting late after that, I used to call her and she used to literally feed and do everything... It's very difficult because now my husband has given up his job because we cannot both afford to go out from morning til evening. And he's going only weekends when I am home. Like Friday evening, Saturdays, and Sundays. Other days, I said no. We don't need. This much long we cannot keep our child out... So, one has to give up either their total career, everything, or otherwise..."

"There are LINC classes here... Lot of women in our community like to come and they like to learn English language, but they stay and they get citizenship, but they have long list, waiting list for English classes with childcare because the rooms is not enough..."

### It's a long wait for Toronto families without high-quality, affordable child care

Access to affordable, high quality child care is critical to Toronto families, and disproportionately affects women who have lower incomes and bear the major responsibility for child rearing. While just over 114,000 children, age 12 and under, live in low income families in Toronto, available funding provides for only 24,000 child care fee subsidies, and more than 17,800 children are on the waiting list for subsidies.

We need to expand the system to serve more families. Instead we've been working to save the centres and spaces that we have now. It has been a difficult year for child care. The federal government's funding for child care expired and was not renewed – Canada continues to have no national child care strategy. After strong advocacy from parents and child care providers, the provincial government stepped in to provide temporary funding to bridge the gap.

Much uncertainty remains for Toronto's child care system. We need the City of Toronto to maintain its commitment to child care and work with communities to get federal and provincial governments to make permanent commitments on child care.

Source: City of Toronto website, [http://www.toronto.ca/children/pdf/factsheet\\_jun2010.pdf](http://www.toronto.ca/children/pdf/factsheet_jun2010.pdf)

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## The Working World and Finances

For many of the women we spoke to, finding employment has been impossible due to language barriers or childcare responsibilities. Some women struggle to have their post-secondary degrees from their countries of origin recognized. For women with disabilities and mobility barriers, it is difficult to secure and retain employment due to a lack of employment supports.

### The City We Would Like to See:

On any given day, she is meaningfully employed, in an educational program that values her experiences and needs and helps her reach her potential, or is financially supported in a respectful manner.

### The City We Heard About:

In the city, women are too often unemployed or underemployed. Women on Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program are struggling to make ends meet through the support and have difficulty breaking out of the cycle of poverty.

"These unemployment agencies for Aboriginal people now, they have all these priorities, they gonna hire Native people first. Their number one priority. But they make the qualifications and credentials impossible for Native people to even attain these jobs."

"If there was a place, like you go to the job employment centre, and ... you could ... go into a union, to have that opportunity available. Even if it's on a part time level so you can build your self esteem and build your self worth. Because I mean at the end of the day, you have a mental illness and you crash. You know you don't have that benefit of going back to work after mental illness like you do after having a baby. So if being in a union if that aspect, you wouldn't be able to lose what you build so hard to have."

"It's challenging. So, having equal qualifications with my husband, but I have to remain at home and doing all the responsibilities. I can say I have more responsibilities than back home, you have so many other family members ... but here you are the only one and you have to look after the husband and the kids."

"Because if we have good jobs, we would not mind ... if we have to pay for the TTC, if we have to provide for the daycare."

"I've been all over the city being involved with a lot of trade shows, but that volunteer program [through the City's Environment Office] and the training that I got with the city has been excellent with the trade shows. And I've been able to carry that training over... I do enjoy the opportunity to volunteer, to learn. I'm respected, they do not see my disability."

"I get calls all the time for women who aren't old enough for a pension or who are old enough that their pension is inadequate. They need work."

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Support Services

The community organizations serving women are valued and appreciated by the women who use them. Due to their poverty, many women need more services and assistance than they are able to afford on their own, including food banks, ESL classes and support in crisis. There is a need for more seniors' centres to meet the needs of Toronto's growing aging population.

### The City We Would Like to See:

On any given day, she accesses the supports and services she requires without difficulty. These supports and services are culturally appropriate and are designed to be responsive to her needs, with mechanisms in place to adjust the services where appropriate.

### The City We Heard About:

In the city, women's access to support services (including health services) is often uneven. Women receive support from various places, including schools and community programs.

"I would like to see an improvement in the services regarding health for women ... there is a big division when it comes to physical health and mental health."

"I had a good one, 519 Church the community centre, it was intermediate. It was a very good program, and very cheap. I paid 25 dollars for 3 or 4 months." [regarding ESL]

"You can't just go to any food bank. It's by your postal code. You can only get a one-time emergency and after that, they literally say no."

"And at Christmas time they really take care of their clients. To make sure they have a comfortable Christmas, because not everybody has family. So they really take care, women [at] Sistering."

"There are almost no senior centres in the city of Toronto."

"They even call hair salon students to go to the women's Adelaide Centre to cut women's hair and do the small stuff, for international women's day..."

"I'm a single mother and I was in a very bad abusive relationship when I left my husband just after 6 months of my arriving to Canada. I didn't have a single thing in my hand, I was unemployed. My daughter's school gave me \$300 to start up and six month supply of food and stuff, the staff was really great. And I have come so far because of my daughter's school, and I'm employed because of them."

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Leisure and Culture

Culturally sensitive programming for seniors at community centres is needed. For some women, the cost of attending cultural activities is prohibitive, and others cannot access recreational activities due to lack of transport or lack of childcare.

### The City We Would Like to See:

On any given day, she experiences pleasure through leisure activities that are free or affordable. Her participation in cultural activities that are important part of her well-being is supported.

### The City We Heard About:

In the city, women's access to leisure and cultural activities can sometimes be limited due to low income and childcare responsibilities. Recreational programs may sometimes rely on assumptions about program participants which limit their interest and participation.

"Most of us can't even go to our centres to our ceremonies because there's no transportation. We go all over, and there's pow wows being taken out of the cities now ... those are our ceremonies, a lot of us can't even get to that."

"I would like parks and rec to have a little more sensitivity to the fact that not every senior wants to play bingo and sing songs from WW1, the program is just so patronizing."

"Usually in the summer, groups of family members, relatives, friends, they enjoy going to the park together, they stay in the park the whole day, they prepare the food like they used to do bbq there. They have a splendid time during the summer in the parks, so they really do appreciate the facility of the parks which the City of Toronto is providing."

"Some of the centres I go to are ridiculously amazing and everything looks brand new ... other places look so run down. There's such a drastic difference."

"It comes down to also, well, why aren't women being active, right? Like there's a girl in our group who can't come sometimes because she has to take care of her kid and can't find someone."

"Any programs that are designed for seniors are during the day making the assumption that only during the day that we want to be out and about ... I'm sure a lot of seniors are capable of being somewhere at 5 in the evening or 4. But everything seems to be mornings so there goes your opportunities to do other things. Whether it's working part time or volunteering or anything."

"How can we afford to go to the museums and galleries and things like that. ... You know when you're worried about your next meal."

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Leisure and Culture

"I can't go to recreational facilities without a car because they are all too far away to get to by bus ... there is a recreation centre that is about 3 kilometres from my house ... I actually did a little plotting and I have to around, like take 2 buses to get there. "

"We have a park in our community, it's a very big park, huge park, Dentonia Park ... facility for the children needs to be increased there, and people need washrooms ..."

"Some parks, they don't have sheds. If suddenly rain comes, so people like they can't stand anywhere, they get wet."

"The problem is culturally-appropriate services are not available, like Oakridge is giving seniors services, every senior does need them, but our seniors are more conservative so we need services that fit our culture."

### Women's and Girls' Voices critical to developing recreational plans

The City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation division is developing a multi-year recreation service plan to be released in 2011. The plan aims to ensure that residents have equitable access to high quality recreation programs reflecting community needs. The development process is to include opportunities for community engagement to ensure residents have a say in the plan. The experiences and perspectives of women and girls across diverse communities must be central in the development of the plan.

In addition to the recreation plan, City staff are also developing a policy on user fees. City of Toronto user fees take many forms including TTC fares, recreation program fees, development charges for new construction and many others. User fees make up 15% of the City's operating budget for a total of \$1.4 billion. Despite policies to mitigate the impact on low income residents, user fees can still pose a barrier to program access. Community engagement, including the perspectives of women and girls, should inform the development of the City's user fee policy as well.

Source: City of Toronto website, <http://www.toronto.ca/parks/rsp.htm>

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Advocating Voices and Civic Engagement

Women have a hard time finding advocates within city and community services or in their local leaders. As a result, many women work tirelessly to advocate for themselves and their communities. Community workers have limited capacity to advocate for women, and without this advocacy many women lack access to essential services and support.

### The City We Would Like to See:

On any given day, she knows that there are advocates in her community and beyond, who are committed to supporting her and other women. Women's voices are not only heard, but they are represented by women elected official, women board members, women civil service employees and more.

### The City We Heard About:

In the city, women are constantly advocating for themselves. Women articulated an uneven and unreliable advocacy system. Women look forward to a more representative political system.

"If you go to your councillor and the councillor won't intervene for you, and they tell you to go to a board and the board is a bureaucratic process that you can't access; if things aren't written in a language that you can read; if you have to jump through hoops to get contact anyone, they impact every way of you aspect and life."

"It all depends on your worker. If you can get a nice worker that will do anything for you."

"We are advocating 24/7. We eat, sleep and go to bed thinking about this."

"You find out about things afterwards ... of if you're close to certain people within Toronto community housing then you get the first frontline information."

"I'm just speaking on my behalf for being trans. [Staff] need more education."

"There's people in this community, there's people sitting in this room that have advocates for the community ... and have spoken in different provinces that are on [the] street."

# Imagining a City of Communities Where Women Count

## Advocating Voices and Civic Engagement

“They don’t have a Toronto disabilities’ office. We’re one of the few cities that do not acknowledge that through an official sanction anywhere.”

“As social workers: It hurts me, but we cannot do so much because it’s the system. We feel like we cannot do so much because the way the system is, so we try hard to advocate for women.”

“Most of the time, I believe they [clients] are waiting for a call from us because women leaving messages for the worker and never get a call back.”

### Women underrepresented on City Council and in the management ranks at the City of Toronto

Women make up over half of the City’s population, but are represented at City Council at 22%. Of the 45 seats on Council, only 10 of the seats are occupied by women.

While women of colour make up 23% of Toronto’s population, less than 6% of senior management jobs and just over 5% of management positions are held by racialized women, and very few Aboriginal women or women with disabilities hold management positions at the City of Toronto.

To increase women’s participation in local government, the City of Toronto launched the Toronto Regional Champion Campaign, giving young women opportunities to get hands-on experience working with women on City Council. The City of Toronto also hosted a seminar to discuss the public appointment process to increase women’s and diverse groups’ participation on City agencies, boards and commissions.

More action is needed to address current inequities.

Sources: Better Ballots website, [www.betterballots.to](http://www.betterballots.to), City of Toronto websites: <http://www.toronto.ca/regional-champions/index.htm>, [http://www.toronto.ca/divisions/pdf/people\\_plan.pdf](http://www.toronto.ca/divisions/pdf/people_plan.pdf)

# Building a City Where Women's Lives Count

The broader goal of this project and report is to inform a framework for a Women's Equality Report Card. A Women's Equality Report Card is a tool that we believe the City of Toronto should develop and implement to evaluate how the City engages diverse women across the city; how city services are responsive to women's needs; and it could also provide a benchmark for a more widespread task of achieving gender equality.

Based on the voices of women from diverse communities in Toronto, we have outlined the following framework. The components of this Framework include: Access and Equity; Supporting Political Engagement; Addressing the Services Needs of Women.

**1. The Women's Equality Report Card must be informed by the lenses of access and equity.**

Access: equal opportunities for all community members.

A Women's Equality Report Card should be based on the realization that access to services for women in diverse communities across the city is uneven. Women from marginalized communities e.g. queer women, racialized women, women sex workers, women with disabilities, etc. often do not have their needs met by existing City services and structures.

By monitoring and evaluating diverse women's access and equity within Toronto, a Women's Equality Report Card can demonstrate the case for the inclusion and representation of women's diverse voices in decision-making and planning processes at the City.

Equity: some communities disproportionately experience marginalization due to institutional and systemic barriers. Equity does not mean equal treatment; but rather, treatment that is reflective of their particular realities and needs so that we are moving towards equality for all women.

# Building a City Where Women's Lives Count

The Women's Equality Report Card should be based on the understanding that in order to ensure equitable access to services for women in diverse communities across the City, the policies and programmes of the City must reflect women's specific needs and enhance their capacities to become active citizens in the City.

Some measures that could be reflected in the Women's Equality Report Card are:

- The collection of and presentation of data on the use of City services and programmes and decision making in the city's agencies, boards and committees that is disaggregated by variables such as sex, race, ethnicity, age, ability, location and language.
- Properly resources for implementation plans, programmes and actions that will build sustainable equality for all women.
- The integration of a gender perspective in local government policies and programmes to enable equality for women in all of Toronto's communities. This includes First Nations/Aboriginal or Indigenous women, women without status, queer and trans women, young or older women, among others.

# Building a City Where Women's Lives Count

2. The Women's Equality Report Card must examine and enhance the political engagement of women in various communities across the city.

Women of all the communities of the City should be engaged in decision making in the City and especially the women who are the most marginalized. Enabling the involvement of women to participate in decision making in the City will deepen democracy and inclusive governance. The engagement of this untapped creativity and knowledge will enhance the liveability and sustainability of Toronto.

Some measures that could be reflected in the Women's Equality Report Card are:

- A documentation of the diversity of representation in decision making at Council and on the City's numerous agencies, boards and committees.
- An outreach programme that informs and mobilizes all women to engage in civil initiatives and decision making and especially women who have been marginalized for the reasons identified in this Report.
- An explicit mechanism and process for engaging women's and girls' groups in the City's policy development and planning processes as Toronto builds a city of equality for all women and men.

## Building a City Where Women's Lives Count

**3. The Women's Equality Report Card must look at key services utilized by women in various communities across the city.**

As reported in the preliminary report of the Women's Equality Report Card Project in 2009, many women said they do not know where to find information about services offered by the City and feel that the City does not have the information it needs to create services with the needs of women in mind. The bulk of the conversations in the focus groups also focused on access to services. Thus, a Women's Equality Report Card must look at women's experiences of services. Key services include those highlighted by the Key Issues section of this report, such as TTC, childcare, and social housing. Considering key services means not just looking at usage rates, but also at how women get information about the services.

The Report Card must have multiple levels to account for the increased precariousness of First Nations/Aboriginal women, newcomers, women living with disabilities, and other communities of women who have experienced marginalization.

This requires real conversations with women in various communities to understand their needs. Specific measures that could be reflected in the Women's Equality Report Card are:

- Transportation – measures to enhance access and affordability to public transit by marginalized women as well as to ensure women's safety and security in the use of public transit.
- Childcare – how the city is expanding quality childcare facilities and increasing their affordability and accessibility in all neighbourhoods.
- Recreation – as a basic right and not a privilege. The modification and expansion of programmes that are gender and culturally sensitive to the needs of the city's diverse and marginalized communities.
- Health and Well Being – a holistic approach to health services that also includes women with disabilities and those with other special needs as citizens with equal rights to city living and all that it offers.

# Building a City Where Women's Lives Count

4. The Women's Equality Report Card must use methods and tools that are participatory in nature, which value the grassroots work that women's groups are doing in the City, and respect women's knowledge and experience of living in Toronto.

In focus groups, women expressed appreciation of the opportunity to share their experiences with the goal of putting together a tool that the City could use to better address women's needs. The Toronto Women's City Alliance (TWCA) used an approach informed by community-based research, and partnered with community organizations that serve marginalized women to facilitate focus groups. Connecting to grassroots initiatives and organizations and ensuring interpretation and accommodation services are available increase the likelihood of hearing from marginalized women.

The Women's Equality Report Card must value the various ways that women engage with the political system, the City, and community organizations.

This means ensuring and increasing access to structures of power is just one component; others include respect and appreciation for the grassroots level organizing that women are doing in their own communities and supporting these measures to empower marginalized women.

Specific measures that could be reflected in the Women's Equality Report Card are:

- A dedicated and properly resourced Women's Equalities Office. Such an office could serve as a resource and repository for women's advocacy groups. It could also be a resource for the City to systemically engage women in the city and ensure that their priorities are included in City policies and programmes.
- The inclusion of gender and culturally sensitive participation methods in the City's community consultation strategies. These could include tools developed by and for empowering women such as healing circles, arts-based work like photovoice, and community forums that are facilitated by community organizations.

## A Call to Action

This report is the result of many conversations with women from diverse communities across Toronto. The women we heard from spoke of what they love about the city. They spoke of the struggles they had accessing services and feeling engaged in political processes. They described actions they were taking to advocate for themselves and other community members.

These women's lives are affected by the decisions made by the City at many points in their everyday lives.

Many of the service issues identified by women in the focus groups are services where there are overlapping areas of government responsibility. Child care, housing, income security and public transportation are all issues which concern provincial and federal governments.

We recognize that the City's revenue base limits its ability to make all of the needed investments. Knowing this, we are calling upon the municipal government to work with community organizations to advocate for more support from the other levels of government to ensure that women in various communities – and cities – have access to the services and support that they need to lead the most meaningful, healthy and safe lives.

### Action for Gender Equality:

#### Commitment to Developing a Women's Equality Report Card

This report sets out a framework which can be expanded to fully develop a Women's Equalities Report Card. A Report Card would include information about the role of the City in providing adequate services to meet the needs of women. It would include women's perspectives and an action plan on how best to move forward for gender equality.

#### Establishment of a Women's Equalities Office

A Women's Equalities office demonstrates a commitment to serving women. This office would spearhead the development of an action plan for gender equality. It would monitor city services, create recommendations about removing the systemic discrimination against women and prepare an annual report card. It would connect with and provide support to organizations serving women across the City. There are many cities where women's offices exist including Barcelona, Spain; London, UK; Naga City, Philippines; San Francisco, USA; Seoul, Korea.

## Appendix A: Preliminary Report Summary

### Making It Work – Women’s Experiences with Services in Toronto, 2009)

The report is based on 3 months of interview-based research in Toronto conducted in 2009 by the Toronto Women’s City Alliance, a grassroots organization working to bring women and girls’ issues to the forefront in Toronto.

In-depth, one-on-one interviews and follow-up phone conversations were conducted with eight women in their communities and work places, to learn about their experiences living in Toronto. Interview participants were selected to represent the diversity of women living in Toronto, and all participants were assured the anonymity of their thoughts and experiences.

Women who were interviewed were from all regions of the city and ranged in age, ethnicity, education, income, employment status and immigration. The majority of women were mothers and about half of all the women interviewed had children under the age of 13. More than half were immigrants to Canada and more than half were women from racialized groups. These interviews are part of a larger project to develop the framework for a Women’s Equalities Report Card.

The purpose of these interviews was to draw a picture of how city services touch women’s lives on an everyday basis. There is no doubt that women who live in Toronto are impacted by City services in their everyday lives from taking out their garbage; walking with their children in the park; to riding the bus to work.

## Appendix A: Preliminary Report Summary

The study addresses the question of how these interactions with city services shape their lives as women living in Toronto. These interviews capture the experiences of a range of women living in Toronto, and reflect the influence of city services on women's lives.

The results of these interviews will be used to inform the development of a framework for a Women's Equalities Report Card project and will be followed up by focus groups which will take place in the fall of 2009. Women who live in Toronto report that they love living in a busy, vibrant city, and benefit from living among Toronto's social and cultural diversity. Many women reported that living in Toronto provided them with opportunities they would not have otherwise been afforded, and that they valued the right to be independent, valued members of society.

However, many women we interviewed face discrimination and harassment in their schools, workplaces, and sometimes even in their homes.

Many women do not know where to find information about services offered by the City, and feel that the City does not have the information it needs to create services with the needs of women in mind. These interviews tell the story of women in Toronto and illustrate how the decisions made within City Hall influence women's abilities to care for their families; access transportation; where and how women live; their sense of safety and security; and how they engage in civic participation.

## Appendix B: Glossary

### Defining Terms

Different words are used throughout this report to describe women, their various identities and social locations. The following section provides definitions of how we have chosen to use these terms.

**Women:** This term is used broadly throughout this report to include all individuals who identify as a woman. It is intended to be inclusive of all women with respect to their age, ability or disability, gender identity, sexuality, First Nations/Aboriginal status, racialization, ethnicity, culture, immigration status, or income.

**Gender:** The culturally specific set of characteristics that identifies the social behaviour of women and men and the relationship between them. Because it is a relational term, gender must include women and men. Like the concepts of class, race and ethnicity, gender is an analytical tool for understanding social processes (Status of Women, Canada, 1996).

**Diversity:** This is a term often used to generalize individuals and groups that do not fit the mainstream or dominant groups. When used in this report diversity is intended to express the range of experiences, identities and social locations of women in Toronto and the women that participated in this project.

**Visible Minorities:** This term refers to “persons, other than First Nations/Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” as per the Employment Equity Act. While the term is commonly used in data collection by Statistics Canada, many community organizations prefer the terms “people of colour” or “racialized.” Importantly, as the methodology section details, the women we spoke with used varying language to self-identify.

**“Queer” Identities:** Queer is an umbrella term used to describe lesbian, gay and bisexual identities. Community groups may sometimes prefer to use the acronym LGBTTIQ2SA. This refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, 2 Spirited, and Ally.

**Disability:** The World Health Organization defines Disability as follows: “Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. This can include physical impairments, mobility restrictions, mental illness, or chronic illnesses. The women we spoke with were given the choice to self-identify.

## Appendix C: Reports on Gender Inequity

### A sample of reports written on gender inequity in the municipal context

**For Women's Autonomy, Rights & Dignity (FORward), The Women's Report from the Grid (2010)**

This report is the result of a 6-month project involving women who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness and under-housing. The methodology was inclusive health circles. While most women had family doctors, half of them went to multiple places (4 or more) to access healthcare. Many had difficulty seeking medical attention and accomplishing what was prescribed. The women involved focused on 10 concerns around health, including food, homecare & honoraria, housing and accommodations, medications, transportation, and language.

**Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Promoting women's leadership in local government: Local Government associations help women meet the challenge (2009)**

This report highlights efforts by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and its partner local government associations world-wide to increase women's participation in local government and access to municipal services and programs.

**Ontario Women's Health Network, Count Us In! (2006)**

The purpose of the report was to look at health and social services in Toronto and Ontario through the engagement of homeless and underhoused women. These women were involved in all stages of the project. The report highlights how important it is to actively involve marginalized women in decision-making. Recommendations of the report include creating safe spaces where discrimination

is challenged and actively resisted, setting up more detox and harm reduction programs for women, and opening more shelters for women and families.

**Federation of Canadian Municipalities, A City Tailored to Women – The Role of Municipal Governments in Achieving Gender Equality (2004)**

This report provides an overview of Canadian tools and resources as well as a framework for municipalities to examine gender equity in their local practices.

**Punam Khosla, If Low-Income Women of Colour Counted in Toronto (2003)**

The report was the result of The Breaking Isolation, Getting Involved project, looking at the realities of low-income and racialized women. An initial sketch of the realities, perspectives and ideas of low-income women was provided. The concerns outlined include: poverty as a serious challenge, the difficulty in finding decent housing, social assistance not providing enough to fully support women's lives, and highly limited places for healthy activity that are accessible and non-commercial.

**Working Group on Women's Access to Municipal Services in Ottawa, Making the New City of Ottawa Work for Women: The results from focus groups on women's experiences accessing municipal services in Ottawa (2001)**

This report looked at accessibility and suitability of local services for women at the beginning of the new City of Ottawa (replacing the regional municipality). Most women reported not having enough information to access services and that when accessing services it was mostly through networking and word of mouth. Specific barriers were listed, including those for women with disabilities or older women.

# Acknowledgements

The first acknowledgement of this report must be to the struggles of the Indigenous peoples of this land – in particular, the Mississaugas of New Credit on whose land the site of this work (Toronto) is located.

Any social justice concern on this territory must necessarily be intertwined with the fight for Indigenous sovereignty. One of the First Nations/Aboriginal women we heard from says clearly:

*“You know, the government owes every Aboriginal person here, not just benefits but more than an allowance, royalties, from everything that they’ve gained from our land, our people, from people suffering. It’s not just residential school, it’s intergenerational”.*

Thank you to each woman who was kind and brave enough to share her experiences and time with us through the research process. While we have tried to capture your experiences, your individual names and histories are not detailed here. This anonymity allowed for a certain freedom in speaking but also means that we are left without the opportunity to appreciate individually the women whose experiences are shared here.

The TWCA’s Steering Committee played a significant role through all phases of this work – grant writing, project design, interview and focus group facilitation, transcription, writing and editing.

Melissa Wong, the coordinator of the TWCA, has patiently guided the process.

Anu Radha Verma was the lead writer of this report and developed the framework of this report.

Beth Wilson, Senior Planner with Social Planning Toronto contributed research and writing to the report.

Thank you to the community organizations who hosted the focus groups. These groups support women on a daily basis: Native Women’s Resource Centre, Maggie’s: The Toronto Prostitute’s Community Project, Women Moving Forward Program, through Jane Finch Community & Family Centre, Women’s Habitat, Scadding Court Community Centre, Older Women’s Network, South Asian Women’s Rights Organization, Ethno-Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario, Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, and Houselink

# About The Toronto Women's City Alliance

The Toronto Women's City Alliance (TWCA) was formed in 2004 by a diverse group of women who have been organizing to end the growing silence and invisibility of girls' and women's voices and issues from the political agenda in the City of Toronto. Poverty, homelessness, unemployment and under-employment, gender discrimination, and domestic violence and sexual abuse remain the alarming realities for many girls and women.

The TWCA has worked to make women visible and audible in local government in Toronto by pursuing concrete actions in six priority areas:

- Governance (Gender Mainstreaming in Municipal Programs and Policy)
- Violence against women
- Affordable housing
- Policing
- Childcare (accessibility and affordability)
- Environment

## The Goals of the TWCA:

1. Ensuring political commitment to and action on anti-racism and gender equity
2. Removing barriers to women's active participation in all spheres of public life
3. Securing an equal share in all decision-making processes
4. Institutionalizing inclusive, democratic and participatory processes
5. Supporting women across their diverse backgrounds to meet their rights and needs through systemic institutional change
6. Reversing cutbacks to services to women and initiate gender-responsive budgeting

Toronto Women's City Alliance  
647-235-8575  
[info@twca.ca](mailto:info@twca.ca)  
[www.twca.ca](http://www.twca.ca)

Toronto Women's City Alliance  
647-235-8575  
[info@twca.ca](mailto:info@twca.ca)  
[www.twca.ca](http://www.twca.ca)