



### Women's Poverty in Cities

by Prabha Khosla

Poverty is on the rise in Canadian cities. Women's lived experiences and formal research indicate that millions of women, men, and children across the country are getting poorer each year. Aboriginal women, disabled women, immigrant women, racialized women, single mothers, single women, older women, and the working poor are especially filling the ranks of Canada's poor. While the average poverty rate among all city residents in 2000 was 24.5 percent, the poverty rate among Aboriginal people living in urban areas was 55.6 percent (CCSD, 2000).

This paper provides a brief sketch of poverty with some figures and a discussion of its measurement. The paper also discusses the discriminatory economic and social policy changes in the country that violate women's social and economic rights. Social and economic exclusion of women is increasingly defining women's poverty. This includes the lack of safe and affordable housing, vulnerability to gender-based violence, and women's lack of a living wage and employment opportunities. These three factors are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. The geographical settings of Winnipeg, Vancouver, Toronto, and St. John's will illustrate the impact of poverty on Canada's female residents and their children.

#### Poverty in Canada

- Between 1990-2000 the total number

- of Canadians who were poor increased from 4.39 million to 4.72 million. (NAPO, 2003).
- The total number of children living in poverty in 2000 increased to 1,245,700. Thus, 40,000 more children lived in poverty in 2000, than in 1990. (CCSD Analysis based on 2001 Census Data.) Obviously, these poor children have poor mother and fathers; and they are especially poor if they only have mothers.
- Immigrants living in Canada less than five years had a poverty rate of 35.8 percent in 2000 (NAPO, 2003).
- The number of neighbourhoods in Canada with high concentrations of poverty increased between 1980 and 1995. Three-fifths (60 percent) of high-poverty neighbourhoods were located in Montreal and Toronto. (CCSD, 2000).
- The average income of poor families with working-age members in 2000 was \$14,500, only one-quarter of that earned by average income families (CCSD, 2000).

#### Women's Poverty

- In 2000, one in five Canadian women (2.8 million) was living in poverty (Ministry of Industry, 2000).
- The poverty rate for women raising families by themselves was 45.4 percent (24 percent male lone parent households are poor).



- 45.6 percent of women over 65 who were single, divorced, or widowed, were poor. 40 percent of unattached women under 65 were poor (NAPO, 2003).
- 25 percent of women with disabilities lived in poverty compared to 18 percent of men (Fawcett, 1996).
- Aboriginal women's average income was \$13,300 compared to \$18,200 for Aboriginal men and \$19,350 for non-Aboriginal women.
- 37 percent of visible minority women were poor (compared to 19 percent for all women).
- 83 percent of Canada's minimum wage workers are women and youth earning wages well below the poverty line
- 37 percent of lone mothers with paid work must raise their families on less than \$10/hour (NAPO, 2003).

### How is Poverty Measured?

The measurement of poverty in Canada is the subject of an ongoing debate because the government of Canada does not have an official poverty line. However, when measuring poverty researchers and anti-poverty organizations often use statistics such as the Low Income Cut-offs (LICOs).<sup>i</sup> Low Income Cut-offs indicates that a great proportion of peoples' income is consumed on basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter; as a result, many are living under "straitened circumstance." The LICOs varies by family size and community. Another poverty measure used by some is the Low Income Measure. It is equal to half the median pre-tax income adjusted for family size. In 2000, the Market Basket

Measure<sup>ii</sup> (MBM) was introduced by Human Resources Development Canada to measure the amount of income needed by a given household to meet its "basic needs" of food, clothing and footwear, shelter, transportation, and other necessary food and services.

Each of these measures underscores a fact already well-known by poor people and frontline service workers – poverty is *very* real, and statistics don't speak about pain, hunger, abuse, or cold.

### Structural Adjustment and Neo-Liberalism in Canada

The 1990s was a watershed decade in the Federal government's abdication of the social and economic rights of poor women, men, and children. The decade saw the full force and enforcement of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and neo-liberal economic and social policies at the Federal and Provincial levels of government. The radical turn-around of Canada's historically liberal social policies had devastating consequences on people, especially women and children. The decade witnessed a significant loss of well-paying jobs for men and also women, an increase in low-paying jobs in the service sector, and cutbacks in social assistance and essential services such as housing, health, and education. Other negative changes included the reduction in environmental protection, the weakening of job and employment regulations such as employment and pay equity, the opening of the economy to privatization and uncontrolled foreign investment, and deepening poverty.



Specifically, in the 1990s the Federal government repealed the *Canada Assistance Plan Act* (CAP), and cut Federal support to provincial social programmes by \$7 billion (40 percent of the total cash transfers) (see Romanow Speech, 2004).

Most of this money had been allocated to social assistance and social services needed by all citizens. Furthermore, in the 1990s, both levels of government withdrew from socially assisted housing. Various organizations and institutions across the country have documented the impacts of the violation of human rights by the Federal and Provincial governments. Rights to food, clothing, and housing are recognized as fundamental human rights in international treaties to which Canada is a State Party. Particularly important is Article 11 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. It obligates Canada to realize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living including adequate food, clothing, and housing (UN OHCHR, 1966).

### Poor Women in Cities

#### Winnipeg

Aboriginal women's poverty in Manitoba and Winnipeg illustrates well the consequences of the violation of basic human rights and, specifically, the rights of indigenous peoples and women's human rights. Manitoba has the second highest rate of LICOs (17.5 percent) among Canadian provinces compared to 16.2 percent for the whole country.<sup>iii</sup> In 1995, 42.7 percent of Aboriginal women (excluding those on reserves) lived in poverty compared to 35.1 percent of Aboriginal men. Winnipeg, with its high Aboriginal population, has high

Aboriginal women's poverty. Aboriginal women's poverty is tied to colonialism and racism, the lack of a secure and livable income, the lack of safe and affordable housing, and to ill-health. Aboriginal women are at a much greater risk of violent death and suicide than other Canadian women (WHC, 2002).

Homelessness, whether represented by living on the streets, over-crowded housing, or inappropriate and unsafe housing, is a growing reality for many urban residents, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Many Aboriginal women are renting on the private market and live in sub-standard housing. Their homes are in constant need of repair and landlords are not forthcoming with repairs in a timely fashion. Often the doors do not lock properly and windows are in need of repair and reinforcement. Women worry about their own physical safety. They live in fear of assault from their partners or ex-partners, and racist and sexual harassment by men in the neighbourhood. They are also concerned about raising their children in such insecure environments.

Aboriginal women and their children often do not have enough to eat because rent consumes much of their social assistance or low wages. Lack of nutritious food makes them further susceptible to ill-health. Lack of financial resources for childcare and racism against Aboriginal peoples makes it nearly impossible for Aboriginal women to find work that pays a living wage (McCracken et al, 2004).

Women's poverty is complex. It not only relates to the labour market but also to women's activities in social reproduction



and production. Many women are engaged in unpaid work in the home. They are raising children and managing households. A woman's decision to leave an abusive relationship can impoverish her. Changing her marital status to *separated*, *divorced*, or *widowed* is enough to place a woman and her children in the ranks of the poor. Full-time employment does not necessarily enable a woman to get out of poverty. Statistics Canada (2002) noted a significant gender wage gap in 2002 with women earning only \$0.65.20 to men's \$1.00.

#### Vancouver

The Downtown East Side of Vancouver is only too illustrative of the lives of poor, young, and mainly Aboriginal women who are entrapped in the vicious circle of poverty, violence, racism, homelessness, and un- and under-employment. The example of Cindy, below, illustrates one of these realities.

The colonial impact on Canada's First Nations devastated many communities with alcohol, abuse, and neglect. Cindy grew up in such a household. She was kicked out of school on her prairie reserve and sent to a series of foster homes where she was sexually assaulted and abused. Throughout her young life, she fought the system and paid the consequences with detention, loss of her children, and homelessness. From group homes to psychiatric

hospitals, from alcohol to drugs, at age 32, in 1999, Cindy ended up in Vancouver. She could not get welfare, and had to live on the streets. She stole food to feed herself, and kept herself drugged. . . . Amazingly, Cindy has survived and now has a small home and is creating a new life for herself. (Neal, 2004)

Caroline, age 23, describes her struggles as a woman living in poverty:

Trying to live on the system is not easy and I got behind on the bills and everything turned wrong. My rent was \$550.00 and I was receiving \$680.00 from social assistance. I was also drinking. I got behind on the rent because I had to keep the phone and stuff going. I've got to get my child in subsidized daycare before I can decide what I'm going to do. You have to wait for a space to become available. (Neal, 2004)

Many women from the Downtown East Side are identified in the *500 Aboriginal Missing Women in Canada Campaign*.<sup>iv</sup> Poverty often leads to early death.

#### Toronto

The last 20 years have seen a marked





increase in poverty in the neighbourhoods of Toronto. Studies are only now documenting the hidden poverty of immigrant women (in newer as well as older communities) and racialized women. Many of these women are working in low-paying, part- and full-time jobs, and are trying to raise children and manage families at the same time. Others are homeless due to abusive relationships, breakup of marriages, stress and mental health issues, racist employers, and/or loss and lack of jobs. The lack of safe and affordable housing and a secure job with a living wage keeps many of these women poor. A home is essential to stabilize women's lives so that they can live in safety, raise their children in an environment of non-violence, and go to school or get a job.

Pauline's situation describes in detail the poverty and related stresses thousands of women in Toronto are facing daily.

Pauline is 45-years old and a single mother with three children. Four years ago, she collapsed on the subway platform. Since then, she has not been able to go back to her job in the bank. Her health has deteriorated and she has had endless visits to doctors and hospitals. She is raising two sons and a 9-year old daughter. They live on social assistance of \$1,075 a month and \$230 monthly baby bonus. After paying rent, Pauline is barely left with \$300 for all other expenses –

food, phone, clothing, school supplies, etc. To survive, she buys sugar and flour in bulk, does not buy milk when the price is high, rations her medication to stretch it out for a month, pays her rent in installments and has given up all outings, including any chance of visiting her first home – Guyana. (Porter, 2004)

#### St. John's

In St. John's affordable housing is declining. Rental prices in the private market have skyrocketed due to downtown gentrification caused by offshore oil development and other factors. A recent study of low-income women living in boarding houses, bedsitters, and shared apartments found that all women interviewed (ranging in age from 16 to 56) were living in poverty due to inadequate income from social assistance, low wages, casual or seasonal employment, or low rates of employment insurance (SJSWC, 2002).

Women on social assistance receive from \$350 to \$615 per month to cover all their costs. Of the women who were interviewed, three quarters spent half their income on rent; half had a disability; more than 69 percent did not have proper locks on their room doors; and, the majority were not permitted to keep their children with them (SJSWC, 2002).

Significantly, the depth of women's poverty in St. John's echoes many women's lives in



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Atlantic Canada. Nearly one in five women in the region lives below the LICOs, and more than 70 percent of single mothers and their children in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia live in poverty (GPI Atlantic, 2001).

Much has been said about the “feminization of poverty” in Canada. A gender lens, inclusive of the complexities of differences in women’s lives due to age, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and status in Canada, has yet to inform the country’s social and economic policies. Outstanding among these are: housing; minimum wage laws; social assistance; a national child care programme; employment and pay equity; a national campaign and strategy to address violence against women; student loans; and a guaranteed adequate income.



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<sup>i</sup> Measures of low income cut-offs (LICOs) were first introduced in Canada in 1968 and were based on 1961 Census income data and 1959 family expenditure patterns. At that time, expenditure patterns indicated that Canadian families spent about 50 percent of their total income on food, shelter and clothing. It was arbitrarily estimated that families spending 70 percent or more of their income (20 percentage points more than the average) on these basic necessities would be in "straitened" circumstances. With this assumption, low income cut-off points were set for five different sizes of families. Subsequent to these initial cut-offs, revised low income cut-offs were established based on national family expenditure data from 1969, 1978, 1986 and 1992. These data indicated that Canadian families spent, on average, 42 percent in 1969, 38.5 percent in 1978, 36.2 percent in 1986 and 34.7 percent in 1992 of their total income on basic necessities. Source: <http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/deffamil60a.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> For additional information and an analysis of the Market Basket Measure see <http://www.napo-onap.ca/en/issues/Market%20Basket%20Measure.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.statcan.ca>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.sistersinspirit.ca/engmissing.htm>





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