

STILL WAITING FOR JUSTICE – 2009 UPDATE

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

WHILE THE RICH GET RICHER....

Increasing Poverty

- BC has the highest overall rate of poverty (13 percent), the highest rate of child poverty (21 percent) and the highest rate of working poor.
- Children living with single parents have nearly four times the poverty rate than that of children in two-parent families (43 percent compared to 11 percent).
- In BC, poverty among lone mothers rose an astounding 15.8 percentage points between 2000 and 2004; Vancouver was still worse at 24 percentage points.
- Liberals reduced income assistance.
- BC has the lowest minimum wage.
- Full-time earnings for minimum wage workers in BC amount to only \$16,640 a year, more than \$5000 below the Statistics Canada poverty line for an individual living in a large urban centre in 2007.
- Significantly, women constitute two-thirds of all Canadian workers earning minimum wage.
- Liberals reduced income assistance levels.
- 2 percent of British Columbians used a food bank in March 2008.
- Of food bank users: 43 percent on social assistance, 22 percent on disability income support, 14 percent employed.
- 31 percent of food bank users are children.
- Vancouver's poorest neighbourhood, the Downtown Eastside, has an HIV rate the same as Botswana's.

Public Policy on Social Assistance Means Women and Children Stay Poor

- About one-third of BC's social assistance recipients are single-parents, about 90 percent mothers.
- A recent report concluded that BC social assistance policies constitute a clear case of gender discrimination that is contrary to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the ***BC Human Rights Code***.
- Benefits to a single mother with one child constituted only 48 percent of the low - income cut-off established by Statistics Canada; for a single mother with two children this figure was 43 percent.

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- By international comparison, support for single parent families is damning: in 16 OECD countries, BC ranks 15 out of 16 (only ahead of the United States) in disposable income after paying for housing. Single mothers in Norway and Austria had over \$1500 in disposable income after paying for accommodation; BC single moms had \$414.
- Single mothers were redefined as ‘employable’ when their youngest child turned three (previously seven).
- The child support exemption of \$100 was eliminated.
- Full-time students were no longer eligible for social assistance (eliminating access to retraining).
- Back-to-work benefits (e.g. clothing and child care expenses) were eliminated; and childcare subsidies were cut.
- The combination of these cuts discouraged many applicants from applying for social assistance (the number dropped by nearly 25 percent between 2002 and 2004), increased the rejection rate (acceptance dropped from 85 percent in 2001-2 to 64 percent in 2003-4), and made it more difficult for others, particularly single mothers, to get off social assistance and back into the labour force.
- This precariousness exacerbates poverty and vulnerability while hindering efforts to move to the labour force.
- The 2007/8 cuts are worth \$82 a year for those earning between \$15,000 and \$20,000 (and zero for those earning less than \$15,000), but \$864 annually for those earning \$100,000 or more.

Rising Homelessness in Vancouver – Canada’s 2010 “Olympic City”

- 2,660 Vancouverites homeless (March 2008).
- Homelessness has risen by two and one-half times since 2002.
- Homeless in shelters has increased by one-third and reached capacity by 2005.
- “Street” homeless has quadrupled since 2002 (from 333 to 1,574).
- Between 2003 and 2005, 99 new single social housing units were created while 415 disappeared.
- Between 2005 and 2006, 82 were created while 400 disappeared.
- pressures increase have only intensified in the run up to the 2010 Olympics as landlords and developers hope to cash in on the financial windfall that threatens to further displace poorer residents.
- Predictions suggest that there will be more homeless BCers than athletes in Vancouver in 2010.

Public Policy and Budgets

- Notwithstanding today’s especially bad times, Canada remains one of the most affluent societies in the world.
- In the 2008 United Nations Human Development Index ranking, it stands third behind Iceland and Norway, but ranks 31st on the gender gap index.
- Neo-liberal policies in Canada seriously short-change women and girls.
- The BC government, “through Budget 2009, is investing over \$14 billion in a stimulus package for infrastructure projects throughout the province, involving jobs in construction, trades and transportation (93 percent male jobs),

professional jobs for engineers (78 percent male jobs), manufacturing (69 percent male jobs) and primary industries (79 percent male jobs).

- No equivalent additional funding for infrastructure jobs in social service areas that employ large numbers of women such as education and health care, or the creation of a much needed provincial and national child care program?
- No resources to strengthen and broaden social support programs (like EI and social assistance) that were pared to the bone during periods of economic prosperity.
- BC's 'stimulus budget' actually includes three billion dollars in budget cuts in the public sector, including a public sector wage freeze, that will likely lead to more job losses for women.

Access to Justice

- The BC government remains stubbornly deaf to justice, insisting that the courts have no right to impose legal responsibility on government to fund a legal aid scheme consistent with the *Charter* and that International Human Rights are not enforceable in Canadian law.

DURING BOOM TIMES AND HARD TIMES....

Gendered Wage Gap Grows

- Women earn an average of 62.8 percent of men's income (\$23,500 versus \$37,400 in 2003).
- Regressive changes in BC income tax policies have exacerbated the gap between rich and poor, and hence, the chasm between women and men.
- Women working full-time all year in 2003 earned an average of 70.5 percent of the wages of male counterparts.
- Government policies have actually *widened gender inequalities* in the labour market. Three key areas of labour market policy are particularly detrimental to women: changes to public sector employment, especially in healthcare; changes to employment standards and minimum wages; and policies that limit women's access to affordable childcare.
- In 2004, 25 percent of all BC women in casual jobs worked in health care, a direct result of Liberal restructuring in the public sector.
- The gendered wage gap increases when we factor in women's greater likelihood of working part-time - 26 percent of women in Canada work part-time compared to only 11 percent of men; and fully one-quarter of part-time women indicated they wanted full-time work.
- The most common reason given for choosing part-time employment was "personal and family responsibilities" including childcare and elder care.
- Part-timers typically earn lower wages and enjoy fewer benefits than full-timers, hence widening the gendered wage gap.
- These gendered patterns affect life in retirement as well - since they are more likely to be part-time, casual and low-wage workers, fewer women have private pension plans, get maximum benefit from the Canada Pension Plan, or save significant RRSP contributions.

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- Because women's earning has traditionally been lower than their male counterparts, their contributions, and therefore their subsequent benefits, are in many cases also lower.
- The average income of women over 65 years of age is \$10,000 less than men's.
- Women who never worked outside the home do not receive Canada Pension benefits, and those who do receive an average of \$2000 less per year than their male counterparts.
- Only 26 percent of the income of women over 65 comes from private pensions, compared to 41 percent of senior men's income.
- Twice as many senior women (9 percent) as men (4 percent) are living below Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off, a figure that rises to 19 percent for women living alone.
- Employment policies in BC widen this retirement discrepancy.
- BC Liberals dismantled the *Public Sector Employer's Council Pay Equity Policy Framework*, removed pay equity from the **Human Rights Code** and cancelled the reporting process on employment equity data collection.

Public Sector Employment

- Current economic and social policies should change in ways to promote gender equality.
- BC Liberals cut \$3 billion from the public sector, which will lead to more public sector job losses (a predominantly female workforce).
- Current policies, combined with the global economic recession, will deepen the gender and equity inequalities.

Declining Employment Standards

- Reduced employment standards decrease basic protections.
- Women, who form the bulk of minimum-wage, part-time and casual workers, have more frequent labour market absences for family reasons, and who often have to fit job schedules around childcare or other family responsibilities.
- Minimum shifts reduced from 4 to 2 hours.
- Overtime averaging results in a longer and less predictable work week.
- Changes to statutory holiday pay make it more difficult for part-time workers to qualify.
- An entry level minimum wage of \$6 an hour for the first 500 hours of employment, \$2 lower than the regular minimum wage of \$8 an hour that is already at least \$4,000 below the poverty line for a single person working full-time.
- These changes also disproportionately injure Aboriginal workers and recent immigrants concentrated in low-wage and non-union work.
- Unlike any other jurisdiction in Canada, changes to Employment Standards now allow children as young as 12 to work with the permission of one parent.

Reduced Access to Childcare

- With so many mothers of young children employed for pay, accessible childcare alternatives should become a government priority.
- Governments concerned with enhancing gender equality should see publicly - funded, affordable and accessible childcare as an obvious policy priority.
- In British Columbia, however, this has not happened.
- Given the uneven responsibilities for caring work, it is commonly mothers who must negotiate the childcare crisis in the first instance, even in two-parent households, and who bear the brunt of costs.
- Lack of childcare spaces is directly related to inadequate funding of childcare services and programs.
- The Liberals cut \$24 million from the daycare system in their first term in office; families lost all or part of their monthly subsidies, wage top-ups for staff were eliminated, and a \$7 a day cap on before and after school care was abolished.

WHILE EDUCATION IS THE KEY TO THE FUTURE....

Education is not a priority

- Cuts to BC childcare.
- Cuts to the province's Childcare and Referral Resource Groups, leading advocates for early childhood education.
- From 1999 to 2005, undergraduate university fees rose 84.4 percent, the steepest rise during this period in any province. From 2001 to 2007, BC went from the lowest (\$2,527) postsecondary tuition rates to the highest (\$4,855) in the country.
- In supposedly 'good' times, female students increased their debt.
- [The nearly] two-thirds of women university graduates coming from less privileged families (64 percent) also reported that financial barriers stood in the way of their post-secondary education.
- In contrast, financial barriers were acknowledged by only 36 percent of men with similar family backgrounds, and by 49 percent (female) and 51 percent (male) of graduates with university educated parents.
- Female students are also more likely to work part-time during the academic year, a choice reflecting their lower wages.
- Loss of tuition-free upgrading and targeted post-secondary funding, together with welfare regulations that deny recipients upgrading, literacy and English Second Language (ESL) programs, have devastated access and retention.
- While we cannot expect our post-secondary institutions to reverse the cumulative effects of socio-economic disadvantage among young people ... our system of post-secondary financing should not create additional barriers (BC Progress Board).

WHILE HEALTHY LIVING IS PROMOTED FOR SOME....

Women Remain the Primary Caregivers

- Women continue to perform most caring work, both paid and unpaid.
- Nearly twice as many women (22 percent) as men (12.5 percent) in Vancouver in 2001 performed more than 15 hours of unpaid childcare each week; and three times as many women (9 percent versus 3 percent) performed more than 60 hours.
- Women were much more likely to report more than 10 hours of unpaid senior care each week (18 percent of women and 13 percent of men).
- Twice as many women (41 percent versus 19 percent) performed more than 15 hours of unpaid housework each week.
- This unpaid caring labour underpins the health of individuals, families, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and other social institutions, yet remains largely invisible and socially unvalued.
- This uneven burden affects participation in the labour market, shaping when to seek or leave paid-work, whether full-time, part-time or casual-work can most readily be negotiated, and whether promotions, further training, or overtime can be sought or accepted.
- No area of public education has recovered from the budget cuts, tuition increases, and disconnection from social justice goals that typified government initiatives after 2001.
- When schools are inadequately funded to assist our most vulnerable youngsters, parents must draw on their own limited resources to fill in the gaps.
- Mothers are forced to step in to add tutoring to their already full caring roles, while those who are financially able buy additional support for their children.
- Between 2000/01 and 2004/05, the numbers of BCers with home support dropped 24 percent even as the number of seniors, a majority of whom are women, increased.

Women's Health at Risk

- BC is the only province to require residents to pay a flat-rate health care premium, a tithe of special advantage to the better-off.
- Ministry of Health service plan and data does not include gender comparisons.
- Many women's health services disappeared from public policy.
- From 2000/01 and 2004/05, the numbers of BCers with home support dropped 24 percent even as the number of seniors, a majority of whom are women, increased.
- Statistics Canada in 2009 once again confirms that women are more vulnerable to a wide variety of health problems than men because of the double and triple day of duties they are more likely to shoulder.
- The lack of reporting by BC's Ministry of Health combines with the disappearance of important advocates, such the BC Institute on Family Violence, to make the full impact of gender hard to trace.
- No provincial information clearing house on sexual violence exists, nor is there any up-to-date compilation and analysis of statistics.

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- Everything to do with women's health has largely disappeared from the public policy radar.
- Only the beginning of an assessment can be attempted here, first in pointing to the special health problems of children and youth, who are Lesbian and Bisexual, First Nations, and in foster care; second in considering pervasive violence against women, third in noting the failings of home care and fourth in assessing key issues in pre-peri-and post-natal care. In each instance, gender matters to well-being.
- Low pay regularly means that aging workers themselves find independent living difficult. As BCers live longer and more often with chronic conditions, they require more out-of-hospital supports that offer humane, cost-effective alternatives to institutionalization.
- Provincial policies, with their 'downdrift in access' and diminution of service, jeopardize caregivers and clients alike.
- Since 2000, twenty hospitals in British Columbia's most northern regions alone have stopped offering maternity services, forcing residents to head for regional hospitals often many hours away. Many try to postpone trips as long as possible, sometimes endangering themselves and their babies.
- These women have to cope not only with loneliness and isolation, but additional costs and hardships.

Putting Children "In Care" At Risk

- More than half of elementary-school children in Ministry care fail to meet provincial standards in reading and math, while just 20 percent manage to graduate from high school, compared with 80 percent of non-care students.
- Lack of support for youngsters who 'age' out of the foster care system at 19 readily ensures the continuation of disadvantage into adulthood.
- Unlike the majority of the province's 19-year-olds, who like those elsewhere in Canada are likely to cope with soaring housing and education costs by staying at home and borrowing from families, former foster kids are normally on their own.
- Because of their lower wages and greater vulnerability than boys, girls may well find themselves trading sex for housing and often premature pregnancies compromise hopes for further schooling.
- In a 2007 study, 61 percent of such young women were parenting by the close of the study, and depression and anorexia were commonplace, hardly a healthy postscript to provincial oversight.

Violence

- In 2001, newly-elected Liberals immediately attacked BC's violence against women movement and turned to patchwork remedies.
- Violence against women and children has largely disappeared from official reporting on provincial well-being.
- In 2000, the majority (54 percent) of female victims of sexual assault were under age 18 (20 percent were under age 12 and 34 percent were from 12 to 17 years old).
- Aboriginal women also receive far less help than their situation demands.

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- 20 percent of all the criminal charges laid by BC police departments are related to domestic violence.
- The BC Centre of Excellence for Women's Health further concludes that women with diagnoses of borderline personality disorder, women with co-existing substance use and mental illness, women in prison, women with developmental disabilities and Aboriginal, immigrant and refugee populations suffer additional trauma and mental disability as victims of abuse.
- BC women who have experienced domestic violence are poorly supported and at times re-victimized in the child protection system.
- Crown charging policy in cases of violence against women in relationships has been relaxed and funding for victim services remains un-restored from the earlier cuts.

WHILE POLITICAL POWER IS THE KEY TO CHANGE....

The “De-Gendering” of Public Policy

- Government funding is no longer available to women's advocates, who are told they can't advocate, can't make noise about things that are wrong, can't criticize the government.
- In November 2008, the direct attack on pay equity in the federal Throne speech and the almost deafening silence that followed as pay equity was the only cut retained in the subsequent January Budget, made it very clear how far women's rights have receded in Canada in the last decade.
- Charting public policy shifts in BC and Canada since 2001 shows that movement towards equality has not just stalled, it has been deliberately eroded.
- Women, and consideration of gender equity issues, have been systematically eliminated from the public policy process in the last 15 years.
- The elimination of the Ministry of Women's Equality is a prime example.
- Women's equality issues have now completely disappeared from the official policy landscape.
- The result of the 'de-gendering' (or perhaps more accurately the re-gendering) of public policy has increasingly thrust women and other disadvantaged groups in BC to the margin over the last decade.
- Government has dismantled reporting bodies and eliminated mandates to report on gender and other forms of equity.
- Marginalized groups are decidedly worse off now than they were in 2001.
- This will continue to deteriorate unless we embed equity concerns into policy development.

The Higher the Fewer

- Canada ranks 46th among 189 countries in November 2008 in women's political representation.
- Women make up 52 percent of the Canadian population but are under-represented in political office.
- Only 17 women in a 79 member BC legislature.
- Only 5 women out of 23 members of the Executive Council (Cabinet).

- Policies don't reflect social and political equality, such as: progressive taxation, a minimum wage that reflects the cost of living, social housing/ending homelessness, employment standards that protect workers, anti-privatization, pay equity and employment equity, accessible/affordable childcare, higher social assistance and disability rates, equal access to education, single-tier public health care, funding for women's centres, sexual assault centres and transition houses and the reinstatement of a stand-alone Ministry of Women's Equality.
- No gender lens applied to government policy initiatives.
- Gender equality missing in BC.

Moving From the Good of the Few to the Good of the Many

Hope for social justice lies ultimately in government commitment to a range of policies that aim to ameliorate longstanding inequities. Rather than continuing the current path, the BC government should adopt policies that will promote women's equality and thus the well-being of the province as a whole.

These policies should include:

- progressive taxation;
- a minimum wage that actually reflects the cost of living;
- social housing and an end to homelessness;
- employment standards that protect workers;
- stopping the drift to privatization of public sector work;
- the institution of pay equity and employment equity policies;
- accessible and affordable childcare;
- increased benefits for those on social assistance and with disabilities to live in dignity;
- truly equal educational opportunities;
- reinvestment in single-tier public healthcare, including homecare;
- reinstated funding for Women's Centres, sexual assault centres and transition houses;
- re-institution of a Ministry for Women's Equality; and
- the application of a 'gender-lens' to all public policy initiatives.

Only such recognition will promote gender equality. In 2009, the global economic recession provides an opportunity to recognize the human costs of failed economic policies and to abandon the neo-liberal orthodoxy that has turned back the clock on equality.