

CRIAW FACTsheet

CANADIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN, No. 9 - 2007

This fact sheet is based on a 2007 study entitled *Integrating the voices of low-income women into policy discussions on the Canada Social Transfer (CST): First Nations women in Vancouver, immigrant and refugee women in Calgary and women with disabilities in Winnipeg*, by Marika Morris, Colleen Watters, Vilma Dawson, Carol Martin, Cecily Nicholson, Lise Martin, Sara Torres, with Michelle Owen, Kamal Sehgal and Josée Charlebois for the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) in Ottawa. This peer-reviewed research project was funded through the Status of Women Canada Policy Research Fund.

The report combines existing quantitative research with new qualitative research. The women who participated in this research project were from different backgrounds and were subject to a combination of federal and provincial policies in different provinces, yet many of their experiences are similar particularly about social stigma and the failure of public policy. We interviewed First Nations women in Vancouver, British Columbia, immigrant and refugee women in Calgary, Alberta and women with disabilities in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Some members of the first two groups were also women with disabilities, and the Winnipeg group of women with disabilities was mixed in terms of racial and ethnic background. All of these women were living on or had recently lived on social assistance. We also interviewed representatives of community agencies and federal, provincial and municipal policy makers.

Although this study looks at BC, Alberta and Manitoba, the National Council of Welfare noted that some of the conditions we are describing are not unique to the provinces we studied: "The value of most provincial and territorial welfare and related benefits continued to decline in 2004, adding further to the misery of the 1.7 million or so children, women and men who were forced to rely on welfare."¹

Women's experiences of social programs for people with low incomes

PART I: Background on Canada's social programs

Canada's social programs

- The United Nations commented publicly on the high percentage of Canadian women living in poverty, and recognized that the federal government's move in 1995 to change the way it provided funding to the provinces, accompanied by social program funding cuts, contributed to the persistence of poverty particularly among Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, women of colour and immigrant women.²
- A number of federal changes in and around 1995 included the *elimination* of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), which had established certain Canada-wide rights for people in need of government assistance and had ensured that the federal government shared the costs of social programs equally with the provinces.
- The federal government instead established the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) to replace CAP and the Established Programs Financing (EPF), accompanied by deep funding cuts.
- At the same time, the federal government restricted eligibility and cut back benefits under the Unemployment Insurance program, which it renamed Employment Insurance (EI). With tightened eligibility requirements, people who would have otherwise qualified for the federal unemployment insurance program now had to turn to provincial social assistance.
- The federal government also partly withdrew from social housing, leaving Canada as the only industrialized coun-

This fact sheet is divided into three parts. The first gives some background about the federal-provincial/territorial funding mechanisms for Canada's social programs. The second features the voices of low income women and their allies from CRIAW's research. The third outlines the findings and key recommendations of the research.

try without a national housing strategy.

- For the federal government, these changes led to budget surpluses. For the provinces, they led to budget deficits, strain on social programs and cutbacks. For some groups of women, this led to the deepening of poverty and the removal of some avenues out of poverty.

The Canada Social Transfer (CST)

- In 1995 the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) was created by the federal government. It replaced two existing programs, EPF and the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) as a block transfer for health care, postsecondary education, social assistance and other social programs. At the same time, the amount of dollars transferred was cut by six billion (30%) by the second year of the new transfer.
- In 2004, the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) was split into the Canada Health Transfer (CHT), with 62% of the funds, and the Canada Social Transfer (CST) with 38% of the funds.⁵
- The CST is both a cash transfer and a tax transfer. A tax transfer occurs when the federal government reduces its tax rates to allow provinces to raise their own tax rates by an equivalent amount.⁶
- The CST funds all sorts of social programs. In 2007, the federal government introduced “priority areas” within the CST, such as post-secondary education and early learning and child care.⁷ However, in the absence of any conditions or goals, provinces don’t have to prove that they’ve built, fixed or remedied anything with the transfer, they just have to prove that they’ve spent it.⁸
- Although the 2007 federal budget put back some of the social program transfer funds that were cut ten years ago and introduced an escalator (increment) of 3%,⁹ these do not come close to restoring 1994-95 social program funding levels.¹⁰

What is the “fiscal imbalance”?

This term is used to describe the federal government’s budget surpluses and the provincial and territorial governments bearing the costs of most social programming. In its 2006 federal budget documents, the Government of Canada admitted that the root of the fiscal imbalance was the change in how social programs were funded, coupled with extensive cutbacks:

In 1996–97, EPF and CAP were replaced by a new block-fund transfer, the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). As part of this restructuring, federal cash transfers to provinces and territories for health and social programs were reduced by about \$6 billion, or 30 per cent, by the second year of the CHST.³

No checks and balances lead to uneven rights for Canadians depending on where you live

- The former CAP funded crucial components of the national safety net, including social assistance, counseling and referral services, child care, child welfare programs, community development services, legal aid and services for persons with disabilities.¹¹
- Although it is true that each province has specific needs and challenges, and therefore different projects in need of funding, having no national guidelines or “checks and balances” is problematic.
- As a result, many researchers and even the UN has noted that there is more uneven social policy across the country for Canadians, depending on the province or territory in which they reside.

No basic standards for social programs

- Of the federal conditions that were set up for the CAP, such as providing benefits that meet the needs of the recipients, providing benefits based on needs, and the right of individuals to appeal decisions about social assistance, the only one that remains is the prohibition of provinces and territories from requiring a minimum residency to receive social assistance.
- While the federal government recognizes the importance of national criteria and conditions with the CHT, this is not the case with the CST. Under the *Canada Health Act*, the provinces must meet the following national standards: public administration, comprehensiveness, universality, portability and accessibility.¹²
- In 2003, the United Nations found that cuts in Canada’s social programs made since 1995 were inconsistent with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which Canada is a signatory. The UN particularly mentioned the elimination of the national standards contained in CAP and the move toward block funding, which has had

a disproportionately negative impact on women.¹³

Complex, ineffective system

- There are 14 social assistance systems in Canada: “one system in each province and territory and yet another system for Aboriginal people who live on-reserve. Despite the fact that each is different, they have many common features. They all have complex rules which regulate all aspects of the system, including eligibility for assistance, the rates of assistance, the amounts of other income recipients are allowed to keep, and the way in which applicants and recipients may question decisions regarding their cases.”¹⁴
- The federal government is also involved in providing income assistance through EI, disability pensions, veterans’ benefits, various seniors’ benefits, and children’s benefits.
- An example of the complexity of social assistance alone was given in a 2004 report which found that there were over 800 rules applying to social assistance in Ontario. These were applied inconsistently because not even the caseworkers were aware of them all.¹⁵
- The TD Bank Financial Group reported that social assistance rates have decreased not because of improved conditions but rather because benefit criteria have been made so strict, that some poor people can no longer qualify. The report also pointed to the fact that government cuts in other areas of social spending such as child care, EI, dental and drug coverage, have turned Canadians who might otherwise have not needed social assistance into welfare recipients.¹⁶

Underlying philosophy

- Reductions in social spending have been accompanied by the emergence of a different social welfare philosophy, which is strong on punitive measures and presupposes the capacity and conditions for complete individual self-reliance¹⁷. It is a move away from viewing the big picture as to how and why social problems come about, and a move away from the idea of collective responsibility and action for society’s well-being. This philosophy is a top-down view of poverty which does not consider the many different reasons why people are or become poor, and assumes the worst of people living in poverty.
- Poverty is unnecessary, and it hurts us all. The federal government and provincial and territorial gov-

ernments are not taking effective measures to eliminate poverty. In fact some of their actions, like replacing CAP with the CST, contribute to poverty.

PART II: The difference between policies on paper and real life experiences: Voices of women living on low incomes, and their allies

People look down on you, inside and outside governments.

People, when you go to them, they humiliate you, more than anything else. You go in as a human being and you come back out like a dirty piece of rag. (Immigrant woman, Calgary, speaking about applying for social assistance)

It’s like you stop being valued on the same level as other human beings once you begin receiving funding of some sort. (Woman with disabilities, Winnipeg)

...welfare workers say, you go back to the country where you came from. (Immigrant woman, Calgary)

If you have children at home and they’re waiting for food or clothing to go to school, then you have to say no to them, and you also have to go to Salvation Army or Value Village to get clothing for them and then they feel less than a person at school, because their clothes are second hand and all the other children’s clothes are brand new...If you don’t get enough money, how do you look after your child’s health, like their teeth and their everything, and then you want them to be in society, well if they’re not looking like part of society, nobody accepts them. (First Nations woman, Vancouver)

Poverty can create more poverty.

It’s pretty hard to get a job if people can’t contact you... (Worker in a Calgary community-based organization)
 [Note: In Alberta, social assistance does not provide enough money for a basic phone service or stable housing.]

I have five kids and when I was on social assistance for two months, when I’m looking for a job I was told that your kids now grow up, so the eldest one can look after the kids. He’s eighteen years and he doesn’t want to stay home all day when I was at work... (Immigrant woman, Calgary)

Your unpaid caregiving work isn't valued, recognized or supported, nor is there enough safe, affordable child care. The government can take your kids away because of your poverty, and pay strangers more to look after them.

You have nobody, you sick, you need to take care of the children too... (Immigrant woman, Calgary)

Interviewer: *Do you think there's any relationship between cuts to programs and child apprehension?*

Worker: *Absolutely, there's definitely a connection, yes. And each time these cuts are made... they're felt by these single mothers tremendously, and enough to cause a great deal of personal frustration and just really getting down to the core of the ability to cope with one more thing taken away from you.*

(Worker in a Vancouver community-based organization)

Inadequate housing can make you and your kids sick, unsafe and keep you poor.

Proper stable long-term housing. I think most people can figure out that in their own lives if they didn't know where they were going to sleep every night, if they didn't know their kids...had a nice place to go to, if you believed you were going to be evicted any minute, or your rent was going up or you had no housing at all and you were relying on temporary shelters and emergency resources, it's pretty hard to get anything else going for you, right?
(Policy maker, Vancouver)

I ended up living in a place that was extremely unsafe. I've been attacked several times. I'm scared to live there, and I have to move, and there's nothing out there. You

can't even rent, you go into a rooming house and they're charging the welfare rate. My last three roommates have been strangers from the paper, and it's all re-

sulted in disaster and them splitting and me spending all my food money to cover people's rent, or I get evicted. (Woman with disabilities, Winnipeg)

Well basic needs would be ... housing, not just somewhere to lay down, but somewhere decent to live, somewhere that has an adequate and private bathroom, kitchen, it's a quiet peaceful place to be, it's not infested with rodents or insects or any other kind of pests, ... you're not harassed by the staff that work at the building, you don't have money or any other kind of thing extorted from you on a regu-

lar basis, you're not sexually harassed or violated by the people who work there or people who are your neighbours...to a lot of people that's not necessarily high standards for housing, but the reality for people, especially women living on welfare is that those become really high standards. (Worker in a Vancouver community-based organization)

It took me almost three years in order for them to make my bathroom accessible. (Woman with disabilities, Winnipeg)

I was new in Canada, and at that time...the money I was receiving was \$402, and my rent was \$750. And when I go out to search for a job, even to go for a cleaning job, they ask you for Canadian experience. (Immigrant woman, Calgary)

Inflexibility: People don't matter, rules matter

A young Ontario woman, Kimberley Rogers, became a national symbol of what was wrong with social assistance policy. She was convicted of welfare fraud, because she was not allowed to get student loans while on social assistance, but neither was enough to live on by itself. She was ordered to repay over \$13,000, which she didn't have, and barred from receiving social assistance for three months, although she did not have paid work. She was also five months pregnant at the time of her conviction, and suffering from a medical condition for which prescription medication was needed. She was sentenced to house arrest in 2001, despite having no income at all to pay the rent. If she had been sentenced to jail, she would have received free room and board, but house arrest can save the provincial government money. She was also barred from the prescription drug coverage she had while on social assistance, despite the fact that she had no means of paying for her prescription. In jail, she would have received medical treatment. She went to court and won social assistance payments back, but this was not enough on which to live. "She received Ontario Works Benefits of \$520.00 per month, minus \$52.00 to repay the overpayment. Her rent was \$450.00 per month, leaving **\$18.00 a month for food and everything else.**" She relied on some charities in Sudbury, but they did not have the capacity or mandate to meet all of her needs for food. In 2002, she committed suicide while five months pregnant, hungry, and confined to her small apartment during a heat wave.

There's also technology that I need like a TTY so I can use the phone, or a lighting system for my house so I know if somebody's at the door, or a lighting system to warn me if there's a fire in my building. They won't pay for those kinds of technologies that keep me safe. (Woman with a hearing disability, Winnipeg)

People take advantage of you because you're desperate.

I work for \$1 an hour at the [name of organization] volunteering to make sure that I have toothpaste, ass wipe, face soap, shampoo, dish soap, laundry detergent, that's what the coupons I make at the [name of organization] helps pay for. And if I didn't have that \$1 an hour job I wouldn't have those, because I can't afford to buy that on my cheque because my disability cheque is not enough. (First Nations woman, Vancouver)

Homeless shelters can be overcrowded, unsafe and you can't always get in.

I had a woman tell me a story the other day and it really kind of hit home as a sort of illustration of this. She was talking about being homeless and waiting in a shelter line up a [name of shelter] which is one of the Salvation Army shelters, and she said she was sitting out five hours before they actually start taking names, because she so wanted to make sure that she got a spot in the shelter that night. She has spent the earlier part of the day calling around to see if she could get in anywhere else and she couldn't, so that's why she's there five hours before 11:30, yeah not to mention that at 11:30 is when they start letting people in, at night. So she's there, people start lining up behind her, it gets closer and closer to 11:30, people start cutting in line, you know bigger, stronger, usually male people are now bustling to the front of the line of getting first on the list, she's being pushed to the back, she didn't end up getting in that night... (Worker in a community-based agency, Vancouver)

Not enough money to buy proper clothes.

*The overall amount that they give us, it's like a little over \$700 [for people with disabilities in Winnipeg], and you aren't really given money for clothing and stuff like that. If it wasn't for the help of friends or family to buy me Christmas gifts of a sweater or a skirt or something like that, I'd be walking in rags, because as it is I don't have a winter coat. (Woman with disabilities, Winnipeg)
I'm tired of wearing someone else's shoes. (First Nations woman, Vancouver)*

Support and advocacy services have been cut back.

The fact that [we] exist from project to project has been an impediment to organizational development. Our core group of volunteers has been involved forever. They're getting tired. They want to get involved in other things or just have some personal time. If we were a different organization, we could present a brief to the government once a year. In planning activities, it's very difficult to think about the long term and to initiate things that need to be followed up on every single year because we don't really know where we're going to be at in a year. So those are just some of the challenges that we face in terms of lobbying. (Worker in an organization supporting people with disabilities, Winnipeg)

Low social assistance rates, strange and inconsistently applied rules put women in dangerous and criminal situations.

The Family Maintenance Program. My understanding of it is that when a woman with or without children goes to welfare for the first time out of a relationship, a marriage or common-law relationship with a man, ... the first thing welfare will do when you come to them is try to put you off somewhere else, whether it's EI or whatever, and in this case your ex-partner. So they'll be, oh well, you've got to go back and try to access that alimony or child support or whatever it is that you are legally entitled and without taking into consideration that there's no legal aid to support that and that there's no end to the possible dangers [when coming out of an abusive relationship]. (Worker in a Vancouver community-based organization)

[Note: Although social assistance workers in BC are not supposed to get women to chase after abusive ex-partners, this did happen to women in our study. In all three provinces, social assistance workers were not aware of all of the rules and regulations, and much depended on their individual discretion and knowledge.]

I'm living in this little plywood basically doghouse, you have to crawl to get in there, there's only enough room for two people, and that's where I'm living, and she [the employment assistance worker] says to me apparently you don't need welfare because you've been doing this for 18 months and you have the ability to survive... I finally told her look we take the pizza out of Pizza Hut garbage bin, we eat the chicken out of the chicken garbage bin and that's how we survive,

and we sneak into the Aquatic Center so we can have a shower.... The woman just, she was speechless, and she was almost in tears, and I was laughing at her, I said what are you crying about, you have a home, you have an income, you have food on your table. But if it wasn't for that woman lying for me I wouldn't, probably would never have had, welfare, still be living in abandoned housing. (First Nations woman, Vancouver)

[Note: BC adopted an American model two year rule, that is, one has to have had paid work in the past two years to qualify for social assistance. This homeless woman did not officially qualify. To avoid desperate, even more unhealthy situations women or their workers have to lie.]

Once I got the CPP and Disability then they took away an amount of my welfare, so I thought oh I'll have more money, but, in the end, it wasn't actually more. It was a little bit more, but not much. They said there's tax deductions as well. I'm not allowed to apply for tax deductions for certain things, so I was thinking I was getting extra to help my living, but basically it's forced me to become a liar and not tell the truth, because basically I do things under the table now and I don't like that, but that's the way I feel. The system has forced me to become a liar, and it's not a good feeling. (Woman with disabilities, Winnipeg)

I got cut off welfare ... and when I went back on they wanted me to, because I didn't bring in all my paperwork I had to talk to the supervisor and then the supervisor went on holidays. So I had to go... to the Port Moody office, the supervisor there, and I'm homeless, ...and it's a 45 minute walk from [the place I was squatting to] the free phone and I never got my message that I was supposed to call them until it was like too late, so I phoned and I said what's going on, oh your case, like your file's been closed, and you have to start over again. (First Nations woman, Vancouver)

I had one worker write down in my file that I was being unmanageable, and that I had threatened her, and all I had said to her was I hope that you never ever find your-

self in my situation, find yourself working out there in the professional world, and all of a sudden have your life change overnight. (Woman with disabilities, Winnipeg)

Government policies don't make any sense.

They're Deaf but they're employable, but it's also really hard to get a job. So there's irony there. They can't get that extra money, and they're having trouble getting a job. It's [Deafness] considered a disability with the federal government, not the provincial government. (Woman with disabilities, Winnipeg)

Women give so much to their communities through raising children, volunteering and through paid work. It's time to give something back to them. It's time to acknowledge that all women are valuable human beings and valuable residents of Canada. It's time to treat them with respect, and work in a constructive manner with those who need help.

Governments need to work with low-income people, not against them. We need a national plan to eliminate poverty, to be developed with the input and participation of low-income people who know better than anyone else what barriers they face.

It's all backwards because if you're a single person on welfare and you make \$500 a month why aren't you allowed to make that extra \$400 so you can bring up your standard of living? Or if you're a single mother, but you're on disability, ... then all of a sudden you're allowed to make \$400 a month, it just doesn't make sense to me. Like the reason I went on disability is because I can't work, so now they're saying I can...how does that make sense? (First Nations woman, Vancouver)

The thing about the government is when you go in and tell them about their policies or whatever is written down, they turn it around and tell you that information is wrong, so even if they put that in place the day before, the next day it's already old news. So what they write up and what they do are two different things, so basically you just go with what you feel, kind of like the weather, if it's raining out you just go with it, that's how the government is, very unpredictable. (First Nations woman, Vancouver)

Nobody wants to know you exist.

The United Way just did a survey in Calgary of public opinion and found that three percent of Calgarians believe that poverty is an issue in Calgary, when we've got 20 percent child poverty rates, one in five kids going to school. (Community-based worker, Calgary)

It's like we're less than human or something, that you know our voice isn't valued. I think that that's something that policy makers and politicians need to start paying attention to the fact that we are people and we do have a voice. These policies that they're making are affecting real people, and it's time that they started to talk to the people that they're affecting. (Woman with disabilities, Winnipeg)

According to the National Council of Welfare, **THE MAJORITY OF THOSE WHO RELY ON SOCIAL ASSISTANCE BENEFITS IN CANADA TODAY ARE WOMEN, CHILDREN AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**, yet government policies focus on getting them into the paid labour force without adequate supports like child care, safe and healthy housing, money for basic expenses such as a phone, clothing and transportation, without adequate access to education, training and literacy programs that suit the individual, without full and adequate disability supports and workplace accommodations, and without access to adequate, timely and free psychological counselling for addictions and trauma. These policies make no sense and are creating much misery in Canada today.

ASK THE PEOPLE MOST AFFECTED BY THE POLICY HOW IT PLAYS OUT IN REAL LIFE. There's

a huge difference between how a policy is imagined in a well-to-do office and is written out on paper, and how it is lived out in practice. There is an enormous difference between the assumptions made about people living on social assistance and who they actually are and how they live. Research involves more than numbers. It must also involve talking to human beings. Consultations run by community organizations are key in identifying problems and proposing workable solutions. The media and public should also be involved to build support for new policies that reduce socio-economic inequalities.

How do we pay? There is a price to pay for poverty and inequality too, in terms of higher health care costs, criminal justice and corrections costs, and lost productivity. Keeping people poor means high social service and income support costs, instead of having these same people fuel the economy and pay higher taxes with adequate wages.

PART III: The many roots and experiences of poverty: Building comprehensive solutions

Keeping women in poverty is unhealthy and dangerous.

Low social assistance rates and lack of adequate and coordinated social programs such as affordable hous-

ing, child care, access to food, transportation and health and disability supports are directly leading to the following situations:

- Some women are being physically and sexually abused with no long-term alternative except to live with the abuser.
- Some women and their children go hungry.
- Some women are becoming sick, both mentally and physically.
- Some women need to lie, cheat, commit crime, and/or prostitute themselves to support themselves and their families, if they do not have social networks of better-off family and friends who can help them.
- Avenues out of poverty and violence have been curtailed or eroded.
- Women living on low incomes deal with inaccurate and offensive assumptions on the part of some higher-income people, such as “people choose to live in poverty” or be homeless. Not one participant in our study “chose” to live in substandard conditions, on the street, or in one case, in a doghouse. They did not choose to live in neighbourhoods in which they and their children are at greater likelihood of being robbed or raped. They live in these conditions because they have few or no choices.

- It is getting harder to get off social assistance since the social safety net has been severely cut back and since people are forced into greater reliance on friends, family or supportive organizations. Many of the women in our study are isolated from family, support other family members rather than receiving help from them. Community organizations they rely on for supports struggle to survive because their funds have also diminished. Many of the women in our study are mothers with no reliable child care, so they cannot find paid work or go to school. Some start from very poor physical or mental health conditions. Almost all the women in our study reported racism, barriers to people with disabilities, or both. They struggle in an environment of high costs of living and skyrocketing costs of shelter. They are not allowed to get ahead. They feel they are treated like garbage. They are forced into dangerous situations through lack of funds, including situations that participants themselves find immoral.

Canada continues to fall behind

- Canada is near the bottom of 12 industrialized countries in terms of poverty reduction.¹⁸
- Since Canada has implemented the cutbacks to social program funding, Canada's place on the United Nations Human Development Index has slipped. Canada used to boast of being "the best place in the world to live." This is no longer true, especially if you are a low-income First Nations, Inuit or Metis woman, immigrant or refugee woman, or a woman with a disability.

Canadians living on low incomes are not poor for the same reasons.

- The majority of people relying on social assistance in Canada are women, children and people with disabilities. Not all mental and physical limitations are even recognized as barriers to employment. The goal behind most social assistance programs is to get beneficiaries into paid work, even though there may be no affordable child care available, or adequate accommodation for people with disabilities.
- Many full-time workers in Canada are also poor, because the minimum wage is not high enough to meet basic needs in a society with rising housing and living costs. Many low-wage jobs have no health or other benefits.
- Canada has a problem of structural unemployment. This means there is a mismatch between the jobs available and the skills of the population.
- Some women and men experience racism in hiring and finding a place to live.
- First Nations, Inuit and Metis women deal with the effects of colonialism. For some this has meant enforced separation from families, forced relocation, a residential school system in which they may have been physically and sexually assaulted as well as told they were dirty and not good enough. Whole communities and families have been deeply scarred, leading to many kinds of social problems.
- Most workplaces do not accommodate people with mental and physical disabilities. More women than men live with a disability, and more First Nations, Inuit and Metis women than non-Aboriginal women live with a disability.
- Some people live with unrecognized disabilities. One deaf woman in Manitoba was considered disabled by the federal government, but not the provincial government. She therefore did not qualify for additional assistance in finding work, to purchase TTY telephone

equipment or a visual fire alarm to let her know she was in danger. A bedridden woman with multiple sclerosis in Alberta was not considered disabled enough to qualify for disability benefits. Some women in our study also coped with family members with unrecognized disabilities, such as the mother of a young man with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder considered employable in BC, when no employer would hire him. In some provinces and territories, addictions are not considered disabilities, despite the fact that it is difficult to find and keep a job. Some mental health issues are not visible, but come out over time, making it difficult for some people to keep paid work.

- Although substance abuse and mental health issues are recognized in most of the literature about poverty and homelessness, provincial governments have yet to find effective ways in which to blend social and income support. Substance and mental health issues can lead to poverty, but racism, poverty and other stigma can also lead to substance abuse and mental health issues, becoming an ever deepening spiral.

Once you are poor, government systems help you stay poor

- The women in our study wanted policy makers to know how they lived. Many had to cart children around repeatedly to appointments in offices that were not close by without funds for transportation or child care. Some were homeless and had no phones. Some had difficulty reading English, yet were given a mountain of paperwork to fill out correctly within certain time frames. Some were sent after ex-husbands with no protection or resources. Some were shunted around from organizations to doctors to get paperwork filled out, each involving time delays and stress in conditions of destitution, desperation and depression. There is a need to include women on social assistance in policy making that concerns them, so these barriers can be identified and resolved.
- Neither EI nor social assistance addresses the underlying reasons why some women find it more difficult than others to find and keep paid work.
- Many organizations that work with low income people have simultaneously experienced cutbacks and increased workloads, so that they have fewer resources to provide services, do public education and policy development.
- In each province in our study (BC, Alberta,

Manitoba), social service offices were understaffed, leaving workers with enormous caseloads, which do not provide enough time to help recipients adequately. In addition, social service workers particularly in BC and Alberta seemed to be operating on instructions to disqualify as many applicants as possible. This situation can lead to misunderstandings and errors, which may leave qualified recipients without benefits.

- The tax system is not a good way of providing social programming to low income people. All of the participants in this study, in three different provinces, were unaware of some of the tax credits and deductions they might have been entitled to.
- One area that has received little attention in research and policy is the psychological impact of being poor or receiving social assistance in Canada. Although our focus group members were strong, resilient, had made the best possible of a bad lot in life, and retained a sense of humour, many also spoke of anxiety, depression, and the accompanying paralysis of despair and hopelessness. When people are “treated like shit”, they “feel like shit”, and sometimes they act in accordance with those low expectations. Being treated as sub-human has a profound impact on people and directly affects many people’s ability to escape the cycle of poverty and social assistance because they may internalize the view that there is something wrong with them and they can’t possibly succeed.
- Canadians do not all have access to the same rights. Your rights and benefits depend on where you live in Canada (which province or territory as well as urban or rural) and on your access to mechanisms to enforce your rights.

Contradictory and poorly thought-out policies make no sense

- Canada’s immigration policy gives points for post-secondary education, yet it has no coherent and effective system to recognize these foreign credentials for employment. This left some of our participants in Calgary whom are immigrant women with university degrees, on social assistance in a city that has a shortage of skilled labour.
- One goal of social assistance policy in most provinces is to get recipients into the paid work force. Yet, barriers are put into place which impede many recipients from effectively engaging in the paid work force. This includes monthly payment rates so low that adequate food and shelter cannot be purchased, which leads to physical and mental illness and disability. Low rates also mean recipients are often tran-

sient or have no consistent telephone service, which hinders the ability of potential employers to contact them.

- Child care and social assistance policies do not work well together. Many mothers cannot accept paid work because they have no child care. Others on social assistance lose child care after a short time if they have not found paid work, even though they experience multiple barriers, such as lack of proficiency in an official language, lack of recognition of foreign credentials and assumptions of inferiority on the part of employers about people on the basis of skin colour, accent, religion, disability, appearance, or class background.
- Employment Insurance (EI) and social assistance policies do not work well together. Two thirds of part-time workers in Canada are women, and many of these must pay into the EI program, but cannot accumulate enough hours to qualify to receive benefits. Even if they qualify, EI benefits may be so low at their wage levels as to be less than social assistance.
- EI and early childhood development policies do not work well together. Outside Quebec, EI offers the only public paid maternity and parental leave. One in ten Canadian women with paid work is self-employed, which means these 840,000 Canadian women are completely excluded from EI maternity and parental benefits, sickness and unemployment benefits.
- Federal child tax benefits do not always work well with social assistance policies. Some provinces and territories continue to claw back the National Child Benefit Supplement (i.e. as this child benefit increases, social assistance rates decrease by the same amount). Women and children on social assistance in these jurisdictions are no better off as they have no access to these benefits meant for low-income Canadian families. Whether Canadians on social assistance can access federal benefits to which they are entitled depends on their province or territory of residency.
- Labour market and social assistance policies do not work well together. Instead of trying to match people with suitable jobs and education plans, the goal of social assistance may be to get you into any job as quickly as possible, even though the person may be overqualified for the job, or the job is exploitative and does not pay enough on which to live. Some jobs have a high turnover for a reason: they may be exploitive, high stress, low income, no benefits, and endanger one’s mental and physical health. More active and ag-

gressive enforcement of labour standards is necessary to ensure that the onus is not on the economically desperate to risk their employment by reporting an employer. As well, where employment and education plans are used by social assistance officials, they should not be misused to deny benefits to those who are not able to follow the plan.

- Minimum wage and anti-poverty policies do not work well together. As long as the minimum wage in any province yields an annual income below the Low Income Cut Off (LICO), there will always be poverty in Canada.
- Governments have been making living on social assistance difficult by not investing sufficiently in job creation to ensure that there are actually enough jobs with liveable wages for everyone capable of paid work.
- Health policies do not combine well with social assistance and minimum wage policies. Poverty literally causes mental and physical ill health. Health promotion policies tend to focus on educating the public about lifestyle choices, when lower-income members of the public have very limited choices. The social assistance recipients in our sample did not have enough money to buy fruits and vegetables, and many were afraid to walk or let their children play outside in their neighbourhoods. They ate whatever the food bank offered, which tends to be primarily starchy foods. Junk food is cheaper to buy than healthy foods. People living on low incomes may spend their limited funds on filling foods in order to last the month. They had few choices about the quality of housing, which also has a profound impact on health (mould, rodents, insects, overcrowding, or simply lack of housing altogether). Some people may spend some limited funds on self-medication with available substances to cope with anxiety, stress and depression. One of Canada's priority health policies should be to eliminate poverty. This would greatly reduce health costs now and in the future.
- Social assistance, disability and health policies do not combine very well. Some people are not capable of long-term paid work due to addictions, mental health issues, physical health conditions or disabilities, yet these are not always recognized as disabilities by provincial social assistance systems or federal disability programs. Instead of getting the help they need, these individuals are given very low incomes and told to get out and find paid work, even though employers are reluctant to hire them and they may not be able to sustain paid work for long.
- Policies concerning education and training do not

seem to mesh well with either EI, social assistance policies, disability-related policy and Aboriginal policy. Not everyone qualifies for student loans, and EI and social assistance will only sponsor recipients for certain types of training for certain lengths of time. Students need a guaranteed means of support to pursue avenues of study that they would be good at, regardless of their financial background.

Canada needs a plan to eliminate poverty

Eliminating poverty benefits everyone.

- Every progressive policy, such as the eight hour work day, has been opposed by those predicting business bankruptcies and the collapse of the economy.
- The economy actually grows and thrives when lower income people have leisure time and cash in their pockets.
- Low income people tend to spend money in their local communities, which fuels the local economy.

The report lists 85 recommendations in 11 areas. Key recommendations include the following:

- Appoint a royal commission on the elimination of poverty with a mandate to consult widely, particularly with a diversity of people living on low incomes across Canada, look at international models, and review all existing policies and programs at different levels of government.

In the meantime, the federal government should:

- Invest more significantly in the Canada Social Transfer (CST), making up for what was lost since the mid-1990s, to allow provinces and territories to raise social assistance rates, remove eligibility barriers for those with currently unrecognized disabilities, and fund social programs to lift and keep people out of poverty.
- Realize that investing in young children and in women's health and equality benefits everyone. Instead of relying solely on direct benefits to parents which neither create child care spaces nor replace lost wages, work with the provinces and territories to ensure free, good quality child care with nutritious food for low-income families who wish it, and adequate income and supports (such as local early childhood development centre drop-ins, play groups, workshops, community kitchens,

community laundry facilities) for low-income parents who wish to stay at home.

- Reform the Employment Insurance (EI) system so part-time, contract and self-employed workers can qualify for unemployment, sickness and maternity/parental benefits. For part-time and contract workers, this involves reducing the number of hours to qualify. For self-employed workers, this may mean waiving the employer contribution.

Federal and provincial/territorial governments should:

- Develop a framework for the CST that involves consultation with organizations and recipients of programs funded through the CST such as social assistance and post-secondary education.
- Invest significantly in building new affordable housing and subsidizing existing units.
- Educate themselves about the living conditions of people living in poverty, and set guidelines for service delivery staff about the respectful treatment of all human beings. This must also involve anti-racism training and ongoing training in the causes of poverty, barriers facing people with disabilities and conflict resolution. It must also include accountability measures for staff, involving monitoring and follow-up of their treatment of clients.
- Establish ongoing meaningful consultation mechanisms so women living on low incomes can share their expertise about the policies and programs that affect their lives. This can take the form of focus groups, such as the empowering model proposed in this study, in addition to consultation with service and advocacy organizations.

Provincial and territorial governments should:

- Raise the minimum wage so a full-time worker earning minimum wage can at least earn a poverty line income for the most expensive city in the province or territory.
- Set aside turf issues to work in partnership with the federal government to overhaul and invest in affordable housing, affordable good quality child care, pharmacare and denticare, and adequate income support programs that allow beneficiaries to maintain or improve their mental and physical health.

End Notes

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This fact sheet was prepared by Marika Morris in June 2007 with the financial assistance of the Status of Women Canada's Women's Program. The opinions expressed in this document do not necessarily represent the official policy of Status of Women Canada.

Regretfully, since the changes in mandate of the Women's Program in 2006-07, fact sheets such as this are no longer eligible for funding. The research on which this fact sheet was based was funded through Status of Women Canada's Policy Research Fund, which funded many community-based research projects on issues of particular importance to women living on low incomes, Aboriginal women, immigrant and refugee women, women of colour, women with disabilities, mothers, senior women and girls. Unfortunately, this Fund was eliminated in 2006, so research such as this will be harder to undertake.

CRIAW acknowledges its presence and work on Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization upon Indigenous Peoples.

Ce feuillet d'information est disponible en français sous le titre
« L'impact des programmes sociaux : des femmes à faible revenu racontent ».