

WACNS

Women's Action Alliance for Change Nova Scotia

Women's (In) Equality

Brief to House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance (FINA)

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Introduction

Canadians are concerned by the negative financial and human consequences of poverty, violence and homelessness on the lives of women and their children and on the well-being of communities. Most Canadians recognize the associated exploitation of women and violations of women's human rights.

And yet women suffer poverty, violence and homelessness in increasing numbers. National and provincial governments have failed to take decisive action despite their obligations to do so under the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Concerted efforts on the part of governments and civil society are required to address these issues and to advance gender equality.

The importance of women's participation in key policy-making roles and the beneficial effects of women's equality (and harmful effects of inequality) have been recognized by scholars and by agencies with various mandates and at different jurisdictional levels. Agencies as wide-ranging as the United Nations, the World Bank, The Public Health Agency of Canada, the BC Health Services Authority, and the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health, to name a few, have found that women's participation has a key and positive affect in areas as diverse as economic development and health.¹

Yet, gender is seldom factored into policy-making. A comprehensive study of women in the economy of Nova Scotia, for example, found that women are invisible in economic policies.² Gender is not being taken into account when the economic and social costs of government cutbacks results in down-loading of caring work onto women. Women's full participation in the new economy is also thwarted by economic policies that ignore women, especially women's contributions to social wealth, and by social and economic policies that are inadequate and exclusionary.

The Women's Action Alliance for Change Nova Scotia (WACNS) expects more from our governments. WACNS is an independent, non-partisan alliance of organizations and individual women. We advocate for women's social and economic justice and for public policies that ensure equality, justice, dignity, peace, and security for all. WACNS works across Nova Scotia and in solidarity with women's social justice movements in Canada and around the world. WACNS brings together a feminist analysis and the diversity of women's voices from across Nova Scotia-- perspectives that including race, income, (dis) ability and sexual orientation--, to advocate for including all women in Nova Scotia's public policy process from setting the agenda to evaluating implementation.

WACNS wants all governmental processes (at all levels and stages) to identify how each policy, program and practice has taken into consideration its impact on women and girls in all their diversity. Until social, economic, political and environmental policies are constructed within a system-wide framework based on principles of respect for women, justice, democracy, equality and peace, both women's equality and the full inclusion of diversity of women will remain unattainable.

On May14, 2011, the WACNS General Assembly identified violence, poverty, and housing/ homelessness as its first priorities because these issues have such a profound impact on women and children. These were re-affirmed at our 2012 assembly.

Income Inequality

WACNS believes that if we address the poverty of mothers and families most at risk, we will go a long way towards not only alleviating but reducing poverty. The issue of women and poverty has all but disappeared from public discourse, despite the continuing problem of the feminization of poverty and its broader repercussions. If there is any discussion of poverty, the focus is often on child poverty with little recognition that poor children live in poor families, many of whom are headed by women. Yet women have been experiencing poverty and its negative effects for far too long.

As much research and women's experience shows,³ poverty and economic insecurity is rooted in many realities, including: sexual division of labour in the home and the paid labour force; discrimination in employment and wages based on gender, race, citizenship status and geographic location; employment in under paid low-wage sectors of the economy; employment in part time or precarious employment (e.g., temporary or contract work) with poor job security, inadequate benefits, or stressful working conditions; unavailable, unaffordable, or inadequate child care; Public sector and social program cutbacks, which have had a disproportionate impact on women's economic security; inadequate federal social and income security programs (e.g., public pensions, employment Insurance—including maternity and parental leave, child benefits) that fail to keep people out of poverty, especially women; high post-secondary education tuition fees that lead to high debt or prevent many low income women (especially aboriginal and racialized women) from participating; weak employment equity programs; limited programs that address the specific needs of immigrant women; poor income support for low income people with disabilities, including women and children with disabilities or special; high cost of ancillary health programs and limited access to public pharmacare programs for low income people with no other access to health benefits.

The evidence of women's poverty and its genesis is comprehensive. In light of this,

WACNS expects the Government of Canada to

1. Make women's social and economic equality a priority and identify how each government policy, program and action has taken into consideration its impact on women.
2. Establish a legal framework by which the federal government will provide leadership on poverty and inequality issues. Work collaboratively with the provinces, territories and Aboriginal organizations to renew and extend the Canada Social Transfer to address economic inequality.
3. Implement a Poverty-Reduction Federal Transfer specifically designed to assist provinces and territories to meet clear poverty-reduction targets.
4. Increase the refundable GST credit and the Canada Child Tax Benefit to a maximum of \$5,400 per child.
5. Improve the earnings and conditions of those in the low-wage workforce by re-establishing a federal minimum wage and commit the federal government to becoming a Living Wage employer.
6. With the provinces, create a National Pharmacare Program.
7. Develop a comprehensive, integrated and publicly-funded National Child Care Program that meets the care and early education needs of both children and parents.
8. Reduce tuition fees through a new federal transfer, to be guided by federal legislation based on principles of accessibility, comprehensiveness, collegial governance, public administration, and academic freedom.
9. Prioritize the needs of those most likely to be living in poverty. Focus its efforts on those groups with higher poverty rates, such as Aboriginal people; people with disabilities, addictions and mental illness; recent immigrants and refugees; single mothers; and single older women.
10. Lift all older people out of poverty by increases to the GIS so that all single beneficiaries receive at least \$19,000 in the combined OAS/GIS benefit.
11. Double Canada Pension Plan support rate from 25% to 50% of a retiree's pensionable earnings.
12. Repeal the *Public Service Equitable Compensation Act*, and establish pro-active pay equity legislation, and implementing the recommendations of the 2004 Pay Equity Task Force.⁴

Housing and Homelessness

Women's homelessness and housing needs are related to their disproportional experience of poverty, systemic discrimination, inequality based on gender or other factors, and violence against women⁵. The barriers to women's access to safe and affordable housing are systemic and interconnected. Poverty is the most significant barrier. Stage of life, geographic location, ability, health and being a member of a racialized group or sexual minority contribute to women's poverty, and subsequently our risk for housing insecurity and homelessness.

There are two types of women's homelessness: visible homelessness, which includes women who stay in emergency shelters, and those who sleep outdoors in places such as parks and ravines, wooded areas, doorways, vehicles, beneath bridges and in abandoned buildings, and hidden homelessness, which includes women with insecure

living arrangements. It includes situations where women pay so much of their income for housing that they cannot afford the other necessities of life, where women live in illegal or physically unsafe buildings, or overcrowded households. They may be “couch-surfing,” temporarily staying in a series of housing situations with friends and/or relatives, staying with a man only in order to obtain shelter, or living in households where they are subject to family conflict or violence.

Women most at risk include:

Single mothers. For a single mother with one child surviving on Income Assistance in Nova Scotia, for example, the annual income is \$14,851.00, including GST and benefits (Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre Fact Sheet, 2010). In HRM, her average rent would cost \$9144.00, which is almost 62% of her annual income. For rural women, geographic isolation and lack of transportation are additional barriers.

Women leaving abusive relationships. Second-stage housing for women does not exist in most areas. Many women must choose between remaining in or returning to an abusive relationship or becoming homeless. They must accept living in unsafe accommodations and neighbourhoods due to insufficient housing options.

Women who are members of racialized groups face systemic barriers to housing that are historical in nature and discriminatory in practice. Homeless counts across Canada have found that racialized people are vastly over-represented in homeless populations.⁶

Aboriginal women and children. One in four Aboriginal renters pays more than the accepted norm of 30% while 15% pay more than 50% of their income on housing, placing them at increased risk for homelessness. Twice as many Aboriginal children live with a single parent than non-Aboriginal children. Visibly Aboriginal women often experience landlords who attempt to find ways to refuse to rent to them.⁷

Immigrant and refugee women. Immigrants are over-represented in the at risk for homelessness population - 22% of non-official language speakers and 30% of recent immigrants pay more than 50% of their income on rent, much higher than the 9% average for the population as a whole.

Women with disabilities. Women with disabilities face problems that are compounded by a higher prevalence of poverty and the fact that few dwellings are accessible and modified (or modifiable) for unique health needs. Nova Scotia has the highest proportion of persons living with a disability among all the provinces, with one in five women over the age of 15 reporting a disability or chronic health condition in 2001.

Older women. Older women are much more likely to be poor than older men. They tend to have more limited access to public or private pensions because of the way our pension systems are based on employment. Moreover, on average they live longer than men and are disproportionately affected by disability.⁸ Older women are often faced with the challenges of keeping and maintaining older, family homes in order to avoid homelessness.

Significant Federal dollars are required to close the equality gaps for these women. Provinces and municipalities, and the non-profit sector cannot do this alone. **WACNS expects the Government of Canada to**

1. Commit \$2 billion a year to the affordable housing sector. This will double the allocation for both the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy and the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program and provide significant funding for new home construction. It will also support maintenance of the existing stock of affordable housing.
2. Develop a comprehensive and integrated strategy for affordable, adequate housing that includes gender analysis to address the particular needs of women most at risk for homelessness and consultation with women and relevant women’s organizations.
3. Establish and fund a pan-Canadian housing strategy and to prioritize immediate and substantial investment to address the housing crisis for First Nations communities on and off reserve across this country.

Violence Against Women and Girls

If we are to end or even significantly reduce violence against women and girls, we must make the safety, security and well-being of women and girls a visible, articulated priority in government programs, policies and actions. While Canadians would agree that women and girls have the right to live their lives free from violence, abuse and coercion, the reality is that violence against women and girls is pervasive here. Around half of all women will experience some form of violence in their lifetime – be it sexual assault, stalking, harassment or domestic violence.

Violence against women is perhaps the clearest indicator of the failure of Canada to address longstanding gender inequality and social inequity issues. It is intertwined with poverty, economic disparity, racism, ableism and sexism and it impairs women's political, associational, economic and social rights.⁹ In the case of Aboriginal women, it is connected to an historical legacy of colonialism, residential schools, discriminatory provisions under the *Indian Act*, and the residual effects of related community trauma.¹⁰

Reports on and studies of gender-based violence tell us:

- Aboriginal women face a rate of violence that is 3- 5 times higher than non-Aboriginal women⁴ and the violence they experience is likely to be of the most severe and life-threatening type.¹¹
- Women with disabilities¹² and women living in poverty face an increased incidence of gender-based violence¹³ as do homeless women and women from marginalized communities.¹⁴ This violence can be home, street and institution-based. Women in prostitution face the risk of physical and sexual violence on a daily basis.
- 8% of women in a five year period experienced violence by their current or former spouse/ intimate partner.¹⁵
- Women are much more likely than men to be assaulted multiple times, experience the most serious and severe forms of violence, be killed by their partner, hospitalized due to injury, suffer greater physical and emotional consequences.¹⁶
- Non-Aboriginal women are 45 times more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than by a stranger.¹⁷ Women with disabilities are 50% to 100% more likely than those without disabilities to experience violence by an intimate partner.¹⁸
- Nova Scotia has the highest rate (40 per 1,000 population) of sexual assault and some of the lowest charge, conviction and sentencing rates in Canada. 31,000 Nova Scotians aged 15 and over indicated in 2004 they had experienced sexual assault – a rate of one in every 25 most of whom are women.¹⁹
- 84% of Canadians reporting sexual assault were women; 91% of those accused of perpetrating sexual assault were male.²⁰
- Girls and young women ages 16 to 25 years are highest risk for sexual assault. 44% of victims of sexual assault are under the age.

Given this evidence, **WACNS expects the Government of Canada to**

1. Establish immediately a National Public Inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women. There exists a glaring disparity as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women are significantly more likely to be victims of violence, more likely to experience more severe and potentially life- threatening forms of violence, more likely to be assaulted by strangers than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, and less likely to receive justice.
2. Develop a National Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women. The framework will advance an integrated comprehensive approach based on the principle that all people affected by violence against Aboriginal women (including the victim, abuser, the families impacted and the witnesses of the violence) need specific and appropriate supports.
3. Invest in a National Action Plan to Address Violence Against Women that would include dedicated CST funds for programs and services for women and girls who are victims of violence, and violence prevention initiatives; and an increase funding for Status of Women Canada and fund women's groups to carry out independent policy research and advocacy.

Women in Public Policy

In summary, our introductory position bears repeating. "The importance of women's participation in key policy-making roles and the beneficial effects of women's equality (and harmful effects of inequality) have been recognized by scholars and by agencies with various mandates and at different jurisdictional levels. Agencies as wide-ranging as the United Nations, the World Bank, The Public Health Agency of Canada, the BC Health Services Authority, and the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health, to name a few, have found that women's participation has a key and positive affect in areas as diverse as economic development and health."

To address the gap, WACNS expects the Government of Canada to

1. Introduce gender based analysis in federal departments and agencies by implementing the recommendations of the 2009 Report of the Auditor General on gender-based analysis, including providing adequate human resources to conduct gender-based analysis in all government departments and agencies.

Endnotes

¹ See UNIFEM, Progress of the World's Women 2008- 09. *Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability*. The World Bank Gender and Development Group, *Improving Women's Lives: World Bank Actions Since Beijing*, January 2005. Final Report, Commission on Social Determinants of Health, World Health Organization, 2008; *Fact Sheet*, National Collaborating Centres for Public Health, July 2008; Dennis Raphael, *Social Determinants of Health: Canadian Perspectives*, Canadian Scholars' Press, 2009.

² Ann Manicom , Janet Rhymes, Nan Armour and Doreen Parsons, *Public Policy and the Participation of Rural Women in the New Economy, Status of Women Canada*, May 2005.

³ Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, *Women and the Minimum Wage in Nova Scotia: A Brief to the Nova Scotia Department of Environment and Labour*, 2005. The Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action 2008. *Women's Inequality in Canada: Submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*. Osberg, Lars and Andrew Sharpe. 2008. *Economic Security in Nova Scotia*. Ottawa: Centre for the study of living standards. Mikkonen, Juha and Dennis Raphael 2010. *Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts*. Toronto: York University School of Health Policy and Management. Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, *Paid and Unpaid Work: Women in Nova Scotia*, Part 5 of a Statistical Series, 2009 edition.

⁴All solutions in all sections of this brief are from *Doing Better Together Alternative Federal Budget 2013*. Canadian Centre For Policy Alternatives, Ottawa.

⁵ Women's Housing Equality Network 2009, *Women's Housing Facts* <http://www.equalityrights.org/when/whf.html>

⁶ In the 2001 Census, 34,524 individuals identified themselves as a racialized group which is just under four per cent of Nova Scotia's population--the largest group is African Nova Scotians. In 2006, the Canadian Census indicated that just fewer than 4% of Haligonians identified as being African Nova Scotian, and just over 1% identified as being Aboriginal. However, 14% of a sample in a study entitled Health and Homelessness in Halifax, 2009 were African Nova Scotian and 12% were First Nations. According to *Homelessness in HRM: A Portrait of Streets and Shelters*, 19% of persons who are members of racialized groups are at risk for homelessness.

⁷ "Frequently, there is no question that discrimination is at play because telephone applications and prospective renter conversations preceding in-person appointments are positive, and landlords show willingness to rent to them. Excuses on arriving to view the premises though, can suddenly include that it has already been rented, there was a mistake in the address or availability timing, etc." (*Aboriginal Women and Housing*, Native Women's Association of Canada, 2004)

⁸ NSACSW, *Women with Disabilities in Nova Scotia: A Statistical Profile*, 2006.

⁹ Statistics Canada, *Measuring Violence against Women*, Statistical Trends 2006.

¹⁰ Mann, 2005 noted in a report, *Aboriginal Women*, prepared for WACNS by Debbie Boyd, Program Manager of the Family and Community Healing Program: Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services of Nova Scotia, September 2011.

¹¹ Roehrer Institute, 1995, cited in DAWN Canada, *Women with Disabilities and Violence Fact Sheet*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ General Social Survey, Statistics Canada, 2004, cited in *A statistical portrait of intimate partner violence: Nova Scotian and Canadian Perspectives*, Nova Scotia Department of Justice, Policy, Planning and Research, July 15, 2010.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada, *Measuring violence Against Women*, Statistical Trends 2006.

¹⁵ Nova Scotia Department of Justice, Policy, Planning and Research, July 15, 2010.

¹⁶ S. Perreault, 2009, cited in DAWN Canada, *Women with Disabilities and Violence Fact Sheet*.

¹⁷ General Social Survey, Statistics Canada, 2004, cited in *Fact Sheet on Sexual Assault*, Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ METRAC, 2011 cited in *Avalon Sexual Assault Centre fact sheet, Sexual Assault in HRM and Nova Scotia: A Statistical and Social Reality*, <http://www.avaloncentre.ca/assaultsinhrm.htm> downloaded 20/09/2011.