



VANCOUVER STATUS OF WOMEN: WOMEN AND WELFARE PROJECT

***FACING THE NEW ERA OF CUTS: Voices of BC Advocates
& Service Providers Working with Women on
Welfare & Poverty Issues***

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Women and Welfare Project
Feminist Working Group

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FACING THE NEW ERA OF CUTS: Voices of BC Advocates & Service Providers Working with Women on Welfare & Poverty Issues

Introduction

This report is based on the results of a survey distributed to BC welfare advocates and service providers by the Vancouver Status of Women [VSW] during the months of July and August, 2003. The survey is a part of VSW's "Women and Welfare Project", a three year project, funded by Status of Women Canada, with the goals of:

- Examining the impact of welfare changes on women in BC;
- Raising awareness, education, and mobilizing the general public, and
- Lobbying the provincial government to restore funding and improve programs.

The project is conducted within a feminist anti-oppression framework. We understand that women, specifically marginalized women, find themselves dealing with multiple government systems around issues of: childcare, violence, employment, immigration, child apprehension, custody and access, family maintenance, housing, and legal aid.

The survey was conducted with the following purposes:

1. To guide the Project in developing resources and tools for advocates/service providers;
2. To assist the Project in identifying the need for community workshops and resources for women accessing or attempting to access the welfare system; and
3. To identify useful educational tools for the public and the media.

We encourage you to use this document as needed in your political, research, policy, and community actions. We ask that you acknowledge and credit Vancouver Status of Women.

Methodology

The survey was developed by the Women and Welfare Feminist Working Group and distributed to service providers and welfare advocates in BC through a combination of email, fax distribution, word-of-mouth and telephone contact (See Appendix A for survey questions). The Feminist Working Group received 52 responses from advocates¹. Sixty-three percent (63%) of those who responded were from outside the Vancouver Lower Mainland. Considering the limited number of advocates working on welfare issues, the percentage of responses is considered to be a good representation of the province of British Columbia. Respondents' level of experience as advocates ranged from six months to 30 years, with an average of 10 years.

Results

Demographics of Clients

Prior to examining the current issues facing women, the survey asked advocates to identify the demographics of their client base. Overall, the findings reflect the disproportionate distribution of wealth in Canada and the “feminization of poverty”, a term which is used to describe the social reality that women are more likely to be poor, women who do not live with or who are not dependent upon men are at higher risk for poverty, and that Aboriginal women, immigrant & refugee women, older women, women of colour, lesbians, and women with disabilities, single moms, and young women are more likely to live in poverty. Chart 1 demonstrates that the advocates' client base was largely women (76%). Therefore, it is clear that advocates in BC provide an extremely important service to women who are in need of support, resources, advocacy and information on a variety of issues.

Chart 2 gives a description of women who are accessing advocates' support. The high numbers of single mothers, rural women, and Aboriginal women, as well as women with disabilities supports the concerns of welfare advocates that policy changes to the welfare system impact those who are already marginalized in Canadian society. It is important to acknowledge that women identify in multiple categories. Therefore, marginalized women need support and resources on a variety of issues and experience compounded barriers resulting in increased feminization of poverty.

¹ For the purpose of this summary, 'advocates' refers both to welfare advocates and service providers

Chart 1 – Gender²

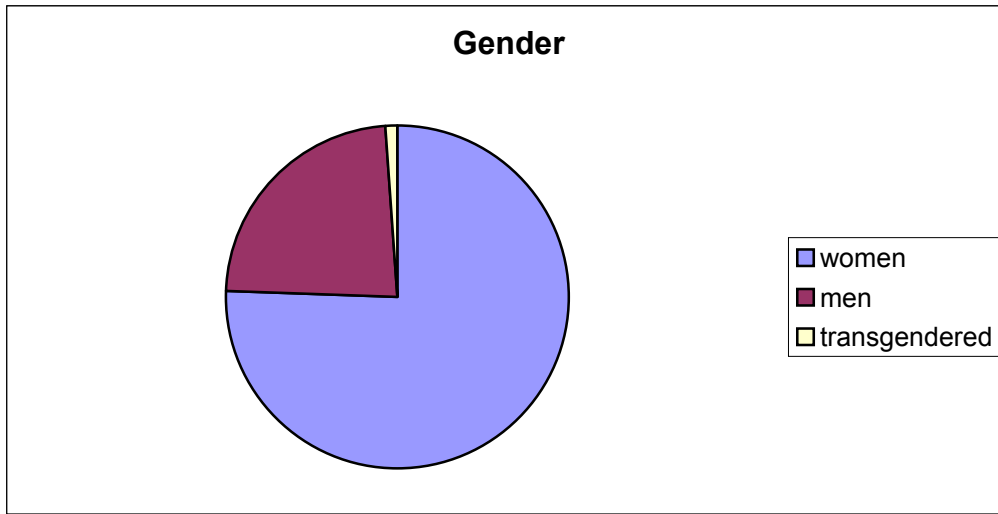
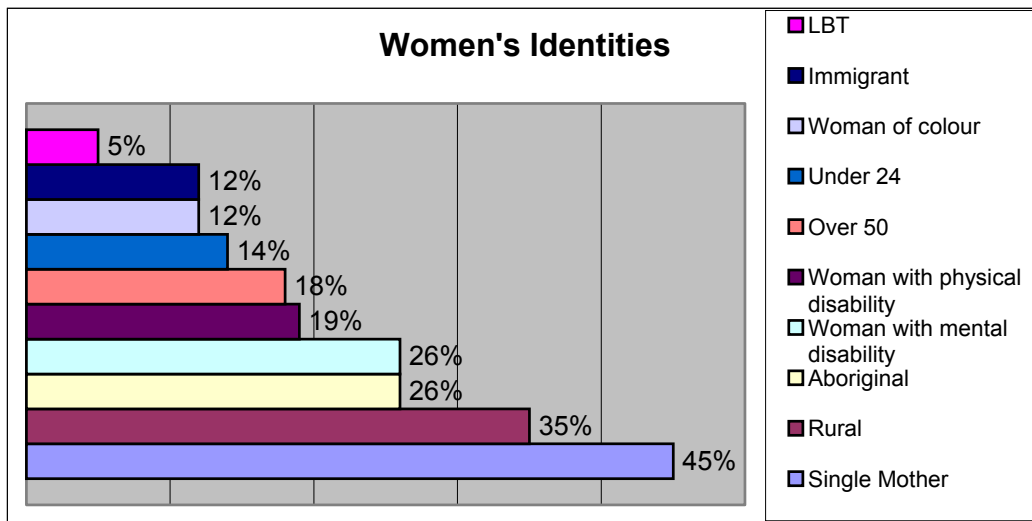


Chart 2 – Women's Identities³



² While all respondents cited percentages in either women or men, several of respondents indicated that the percentage of transgendered clients using their services was not known, suggesting that the percentage of transgendered clients could be higher.

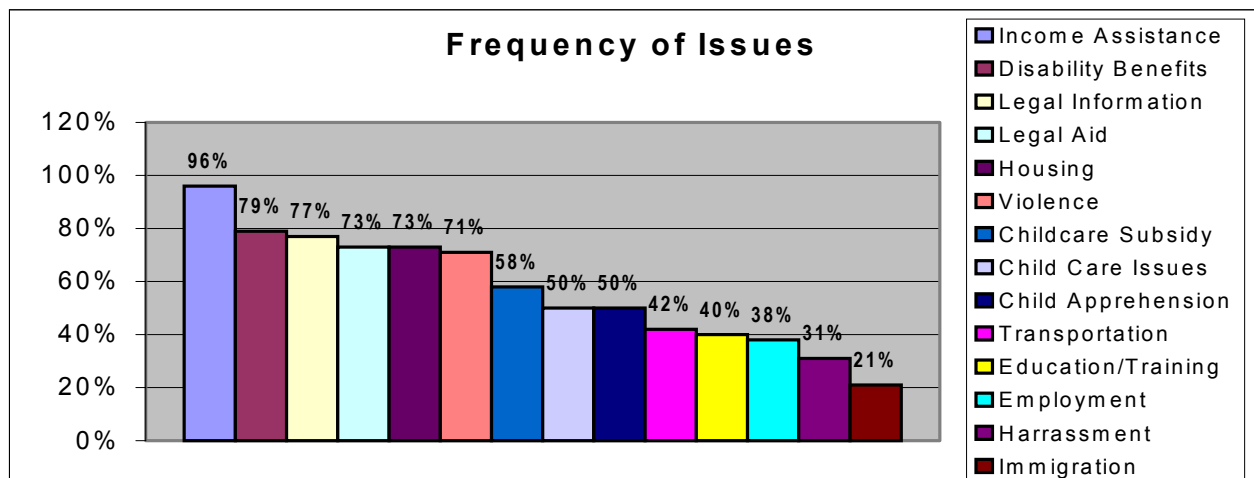
³ Because women identify in more than one category, the percentages do not total 100%. LBT refers to lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered.

Issues Facing Women in BC

Respondents identified Income Assistance, Disability Benefits, Legal Information, Legal Aid, Housing, and Violence as the most current frequent issues facing women living in poverty. Other issues identified include health access, alcohol & drug treatment/prevention, custody and access, and assistance with income tax and CPP contributions.

Now instead of struggling to move out of an unhealthy relationship, to go back to work, etc, women have to focus 100% on having enough money to survive physically (food, shelter). They fight to receive basic income assistance and to avoid no income, survival sex, etc, they can no longer look at the next step in life.

-- Thompson/ Okanagan



The depth of issues has increased and the subsequent stress anxiety, and feeling of hopelessness has increased.

-- Thompson/ Okanagan

Overall, 52% of advocates identified a marked increase in the severity of issues and the level of danger that the women they work with are facing. At the same time, advocates also reported an increase in the number of women accessing services just as there has been a severe decrease in the types and kinds of government and community-based services available to women living in poverty in BC. Again, such regressive changes to the welfare system disproportionately affect women with disabilities, single mothers, and other marginalized women.

As an advocate, cuts to welfare have increased, including staffing cuts (in health areas as well). Single women and single mothers had a hard enough time but now it is worse. Women who are confused by the 'system' cannot get a front line MHR person to just listen to the problem and may not know there are advocates to help out. Poor and emotionally disturbed women/single mothers are facing more and more difficulties in obtaining resources to help with the care of their children.

Older women are having their security nets yanked and this is causing more anxiety, more depression, more psychotic episodes.

-- Lower Mainland

According to advocates, the most urgent issues facing women today are⁴:

- 1) access to income assistance
- 2) access to safe, affordable housing
- 3) legal aid
- 4) custody and access
- 5) violence and abuse

Access to Income Assistance

Poverty and legal advocacy have always been big issues here. Fear and the three-week wait are new.

-- North Island

Fifty-two percent (52%) of advocates identified access to income assistance as the most urgent issue facing women today. Advocates spoke to the increased barriers that women face in accessing the welfare system, including the 3-week wait, the Two-Year independence rule, and the reassessment of disability benefits. Advocates identified how these changes serve to further marginalize women, particularly disproportionately affecting women with disabilities, Aboriginal women, and single mothers.

Women are poorer, [with] more health problems [and] less access to help it's harder to be 'disAbled,' harder to qualify. [There are] less resources [and] less crisis grants, and rent, phone, and hydro costs have risen.

-- South Island

[We have seen] an increase in number of people cut off for not following Employment Plan. [It is] difficult to get onto benefits due to the 2-year independence test. Or clients may meet eligibility requirements, but not be able to provide proof. First Nations clients are often forced to move back to their reserve and face the abuse they fled from.

-- Northern Interior

These issues have been identified and stressed by low-income women over and over again, and are a direct reflection of income assistance rates that are too low and minimum wage part time jobs that make it very difficult to escape poverty.

-- Thompson/ Okanagan

More women are forced into minimum wage work to retain income assistance benefits at cost to them and their children (i.e. inadequate childcare). [There is an] increase in depression and neglect of medical/dental needs.

-- North Island

⁴ See the appendices for the complete list of issues identified as urgent with corresponding percentages.

Housing

Housing is also a key issue for women living in poverty, as 48% of advocates identified access to safe, affordable housing as a crucial issue for their clients. Advocates stressed that due to cuts to shelter amounts and changes in the eligibility criteria for income assistance, more and more women are facing the threat of eviction or are remaining in abusive relationships simply to stay off the streets.

For the women who access our program, the main issue is safe affordable, accessible housing, especially for women leaving abusive relationships, women with mental health issues, women re-uniting with their children, all women working in poverty, and working poor women.

-- South Island

My experience has been that women and their families are finding it significantly harder to access safe, affordable and accessible housing because of shelter, support, and childcare subsidy cuts and MHR's [The Ministry of Human Resources] elimination of exemptions for maintenance and employment. In some cases, women have lost \$250.00 plus per month because of the cuts. That is a significant amount given the high cost of rental accommodation in our city. It has forced many women to look for cheaper and in many cases less safe and adequate housing for themselves and their children.

-- South Island

With the further reduction of Income Assistance support and increasing high rental costs, women are simply not making it. Children are the ultimate benefactors of the government 'cuts'.

-- Lower Mainland

Our local fishplants run 12 hr shifts and women have difficulty getting childcare now employment is sporadic at plants and sometimes "on call," rental units are becoming scarce

-- Sunshine Coast

Access to Legal Aid, Custody & Access, and Child Apprehension

Thirty-five percent (35%) of advocates stressed that the cuts to legal aid and courthouse closures have had a severe impact on women, with an increased lack of legal representation, and, in some cases, complete lack of accessible services as women are required to travel up to two hours to get to court or apply for legal aid. Cuts to women's services has also meant that alternative resources and assistance with legal information are no longer available to women in crisis.

[Issues] were critical before, now they are more dangerous and lives will be lost... Legal aid was cut and offices closed, courthouse closure, cuts to violence against women in intimate relationships policy cuts to childcare, assistance, housing. All these things not only make it more difficult for women and children to survive, but have a direct bearing on court cases where the outcome is determined by the child's best interest. It puts many more women at risk of losing custody of their

children to violent fathers/children at risk of living with them because courts see that they are able to financially provide a 'better' home. It will make women less likely to leave violent relationships as they realize the implications and that too puts women and children at increased risk.

-- Lower Mainland

As a result of cuts to legal aid, more and more women are facing greater degrees of crisis in dealing with custody and access issues with their children. 19% of advocates identified custody and access as a key, urgent issue for their clients, especially since without legal aid, many women are being forced into representing themselves in the presence of past abusers or violent fathers.

The courts [are] increasingly favoring fathers and shared parenting and not seeing abuse ... The dismantling of violence against women in intimate relationship policy puts women in a catch 22 – a woman can only get legal aid if she can show violence has occurred, but the pro arrest policy is gone and if she gets a no contact order [through the police] and if the father is arrested she does not qualify for legal aid.

-- Lower Mainland

Women are facing safety and health issues regarding their ability to take care of themselves when ill. [Many women have an increased] concern regarding child apprehension -- e.g. 'what if the government decides after [my disability] reassessment that I cannot take care of my child if I cannot lift a certain amount or walk a certain distance?'

-- Lower Mainland

Violence and Abuse

Advocates noted an increase in women confronting violence, with 19% of advocates identifying violence as the most urgent issue facing women. Advocates stressed that due to changes to income assistance, disability benefits, and access to housing, many more women are remaining in abusive relationships so as to access food and shelter.

More women are staying in abusive relationships with no legal aid support

-- North Island

Abusers are becoming more violent & vicious; abuse is no longer only controlling, abusers aim and threaten to kill spouses. [Women have a] lack of funds to support self and kids.

-- North Island

Women have no ability to pay rent & food, [support & shelter] amounts not enough; women returning to abusive partners b/c they can't afford to live alone and provide for kids

-- Lower Mainland

Impact of Changes on Advocates in BC

An overwhelming 85% of advocates reported that they are facing changes to their organizations. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of respondents reported that they face an increased workload. An advocate in the North Island region reported a 300% increase in caseload since September 2002, with an increase from 841 clients in 2002 to 2949 clients in 2003. This workload is compounded by the fact that the situations facing women are increasingly complex, with women needing to negotiate multiple government systems with changing regulations.

At the same time, 58% of advocates reported that their organization is facing cuts to staffing or core funding. The 100% core funding cut to all women's centre in BC by the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services will have a severe impact on the advocacy provided in rural areas – in some cases resulting in the complete closure of a women's centre or advocacy organization. The increase in demand for services just as services available are being destroyed means that individual advocates are increasingly isolated, facing high levels of stress, depression, and burn out.

Moreover, the offloading of services onto community organizers and advocates has meant that organizations have little time to contribute to grassroots organizing, networking, and support, resulting in the lack of advocates for those who are most impacted by the cuts to services.

The desperate need for services is undermining women's equality because organizations have no time or energy to network, and advocate for the systemic changes are needed. This is even more prevalent in Aboriginal, immigrant, serving communities where there is the greatest need and expectation for advocates to participate on committees etc at a time when women needing their services are increasing in numbers

-- Lower Mainland

When asked to identify current barriers to their work, advocates again stressed lack of funding, loss or lack of provincial services, high workload, and changes to the welfare system as the key barriers and struggles to their work. Other issues identified include isolation, lack of community support, and barriers to communication.

Needed Resources and Tools

Advocates identified a range of resources and tools that would help support their work, and therefore, the women they work with. Listed below are the identified resources and tools:

- Resource Booklets
 - Self-help booklets written at a grade 7/8 level on welfare & appeals process, custody and access, PPMB & PWD benefits, and Family maintenance orders.
 - Organizational charts of the Ministry of Human Resources and Income Assistance workers.
 - Addresses of politicians and media contacts.
 - A booklet of provincial services for women.
 - An anti-poverty group start-up training manual, including public education and media kits.
 - Women's rights to welfare and how the system actually works (in plain English).
- Advocacy Training Sessions – including how to organize and mobilize communities.
- Updated information on Welfare Legislation – especially with regards to tribunals and appeals.
- Advocates noted that PovNet is especially helpful, but calling a real person would be even more accessible for the more rural areas.
- Public Education – including legal issues, and outreach to women who need advocates.
- Networking between advocates.
- Access to pro-bono legal counsel to assist/provide support.

Nonetheless, advocates stressed that the restoration of funding and services is the main change that will support them in their work. Advocates noted that the current government had been very closed or exclusionary in consulting with community advocates. It was repeatedly noted that the current welfare and social service changes "are a part of an attack upon women living in poverty in BC".

We believe things are only going to get worse and this will generate feelings of hopelessness and despair with clients and can end in death.

-- Squamish

Conclusion

We are tired! We have lost 20 years of progress in women's rights in the dawning of 'the new era'.

-- North Island

The insights shared by the welfare advocates that participated in this survey speak to disproportionately high numbers of BC women living in poverty and the complex issues that they face. Women continue to struggle with issues of access to income assistance, affordable housing, and legal aid as well as custody and access issues, violence, and abuse. Within this climate, welfare advocates are themselves fighting to maintain a level of meaningful work while simultaneously faced with increased workloads and cuts to workplace funding. Nevertheless, as evidenced in the positive response rate to this survey, advocates continue to be deeply committed to seeking out new resources, networking with their peers, and organizing with the women that they work with, to fight the debilitating effects of poverty on women in BC.

APPENDICES

A) SURVEY QUESTIONS

Greetings! We are the Women and Welfare Project (of the Vancouver Status of Women) and we encourage you to participate in our short survey. We understand that in the current climate your time is very limited but we hope that you can take the next 5 – 10 minutes to contribute your thoughts. Your analysis of the issues women face in the current welfare system will help us identify the support women & advocates/service providers need.

The Women and Welfare Project is a three year project with the goals of:

- examining the impact of welfare changes on women in BC;
- raising awareness, educating, and mobilizing the general public; and
- lobbying the provincial government to restore funding and improve programs.

We understand that it is women's reality, specifically marginalized women, to find themselves engaging simultaneously with multiple government systems such as childcare, anti-violence against women, employment, immigration, child apprehension, family maintenance and legal aid.

Purpose of the Survey

Your responses to the survey will guide our project and provide information to develop:

- Resources and tools for advocates/service providers
- Community workshops and resources for women within the Welfare System
- Educational tools for the public and the media.

We hope to continue to survey advocates/service providers as new needs and issues arise.

1. CONTACT INFORMATION:

Name:

Job Title:

Mailing Address:

Email Address

Organizational Affiliations:

Preferred Method of Contact:

How long have you been a welfare advocate/service provider?

2. CLIENTS

a)What percentage of your clients are: women ___% men ___ % transgendered ___ %?

b)Of those who identify as women, including transgendered women, what approximate percentages identify as the following: *(we recognize that women may identify in more than one category – please reflect this in your answers)*

aboriginal women	___ %	women of colour	___ %	immigrant women	___ %
lesbian/bi/trans	___ %	rural women	___ %	single moms	___ %
women over 50 yrs	___ %	women under 24 yrs	___ %	women with disabilities:	mental ___ %
					physical ___ %

3. SURVEY QUESTIONS:

1. a) Please check the issues that women are bringing to you most frequently:

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Child care issues | <input type="checkbox"/> Child Apprehension | <input type="checkbox"/> Welfare Access/Changes: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Education/Training | <input type="checkbox"/> Employment/Training | income assistance <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Harrassment | <input type="checkbox"/> Housing/Tenancy | disability benefits <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Legal Aid | <input type="checkbox"/> Legal Information | childcare subsidy <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation | <input type="checkbox"/> Violence | <input type="checkbox"/> Immigration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please identify): | | |

b) What issues are the most urgent for women?

2) Have the issues facing women changed in the last two years? Please explain.

3) Is your organization facing cuts or changes to your workload?

4) What are current barriers to your work as advocates/service providers?

5) What resources and tools would support advocates working on welfare and poverty issues? Please be specific as possible.

6) Additional Comments?

7) Would you be interested in being surveyed again? Y____ N____

B) Urgency of Issues Facing Women in BC

Access to Income Assistance	52%
Housing	48%
Legal Aid	35%
Custody & Access	19%
Violence and abuse	19%
Access to Health Services	17%
Food Security	15%
Transportation	13%
Childcare	12%
Access to Disability Benefits	8%
Access to alcohol & drug services	6%
Immigration	4%