

FORWARD



FOR Women's Autonomy, Rights and Dignity

**Report to the United Nations
Committee on the Elimination of all forms of
Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**

Canada's Human Rights Violations Against the Poor

Poverty is the worst form of violence - Ghandi

Introduction

In preparation for our return to the United Nations, this summer our multicultural group of homeless and under housed women visited 20 drop-in centres in Toronto (without funding). We listened to women's concerns, gathered information and stories of their daily-lived experiences and allowed the women and/or the Drop-in Centre the opportunity to create a recommendation for the Committee. Few were aware of the 2001 opportunity to write "shadow" or "small ngo" reports. We have also included women's experiences from communities near the Toronto area. Please understand that each case is not unique; it is an example of common occurrences that are happening among poor women.

Article I Human Dignity

Canada's failure to comply with Human Dignity has continued to allow poor women to languish in the streets, shelters, drop-in centres and jails throughout our country. The women we spoke with this summer have jumped through all the "hoops" from social services and all of its "programs" to the tokenism of legal aid. Its now broad definition of "lawyers" make us useful for their thesis projects - with few issues satisfactorily resolved, Employment resource centres offer menial often immoral work which leaves us going to food banks and drop-in centres while struggling to pay high rents. **Food is a major issue.** "Employment insurance" is impossible to live on at 50% of our low wage. Costs for prescription medications are too often higher than their total income they were so over medicated. Punitive child protection agencies continue to apprehend our children then make it impossible for us to be reunited with them. "Drug programs" send us back to the streets or shelters on termination. Many women reported that violence against women "initiatives" sent them to an ill-prepared shelter system that reeks with "abuse, fraud, and theft of food, donated clothing, personal items and our prescription drugs by staff," especially in Toronto. Domestic torture is real. The trans community is excluded. Sex trade workers continue to be demonized and for those working the streets violence and arrests have escalated. The psychiatric community is ill-equipped to provide the adequate housing and employment that, especially, the older women have lost.

Native Land Reclamation rights are under attack and the missing and murdered native women's cases remain unsolved. Immigration policies deny destitute women/children entrance and are not transparent with new comers about the reality that exists here. Black women live in fear that "maybe the next one will be my child".

No matter what these women have done there lives are what they referred to as "stagnant". They can't move on and they certainly can't fall down any further. Their lives are held in hostage by the Canadian government who continues to rip away at what is left of our social safety net and deny that poverty in Canada really exists. That ideology has prevailed strongly for the last 13 years. The government claims to have spent 60B last year on us. Yet our lives are worse off now than ever before.

In 1995 we were only receiving 72% of our needs on assistance and when the 21.6% was taken off social assistance cheques, it allotted 1,000 calories a day. What kind of a human being could sit down and estimate the reduction on welfare cheques to the measurement of 1,000 calories each a day? What kind of government would even consider the thought?

We are dying premature deaths. The Ontario Medical Association states that there are more people dying from poverty than for any other reason (Gene Swanson, 2001). With a swish of a pen the cornerstone for what we believed to be our security was removed - the Canadian Assistance Program (CAP).

For the past 13 years we have suffered shame and humiliation. Social Assistance made an attempt to finger print us; the media used inflammatory comments and misinformation that bred more hatred toward us; the Premier himself made many derogatory comments about poor women and never apologized for any of them. Tens of thousands of people lost their lifetime jobs with the re-structuring policies and within the first 6 months of Mike Harris's Conservative government foreclosures on homes went up by 17%. Life became very hard for a lot of people at the same time. The middle-class did not disappear; they fell on us and consumed our jobs. Hotlines to catch "welfare fraud" created an intolerable scrutiny of our lives even though Stats Canada 1991 stated that welfare fraud was the lowest of all sectors at 2% nationally. "I usually didn't eat a few days a week to make sure the children had something." We became the scapegoats for a political agenda and have suffered thoroughly for it. We have lost everything. We have been going to the UN about the Harris cuts for the past 13 years and rates have not been restored. In fact, cutbacks continue and make eligibility for disability and social assistance difficult. Women with terminal illnesses said they were denied the special diet.

We need help. We need protection. Every attempt in the courts to this point has failed to return the money taken from our cheques or to even consider financial compensation for these illegal acts. Women from different countries recognized strongly that the basis for the inequality was the colonial attitudes and policies of the Canadian government.

The reality of "life, liberty and security of person" doesn't exist in our daily-lived experiences. Apparently "security" means security of body and there have been challenges in the courts around the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and this specific issue. Why do the Canadian courts refuse to acknowledge the inequalities of poor women and their families and protect us in the Charter of Rights? How can poor women have "security of body" in a system that doesn't acknowledge her existence? How can a poor women have "security of body" if her daily concern is for food?

We demand a secure place in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms so that never again can any fluctuations in the market economy, political agendas, discriminatory policies, classist programs, and colonial attitudes toward the poor prevail. We demand to have Social Condition included as a prohibited ground of discrimination.

Article VII Participation in public affairs

How can poor women obtain equality when the sphere in which they live at shelters and drop-in centres they are by policy considered “clients” rather than active paid participants with equal power. Many women from the shelters expressed,

“Why can’t we run these places? We know how the women feel. We don’t need a university degree to care about each other.”(Most had grade 12, college and university educations).

Yet the reality is that we should be looking toward ending these needs and it is going to be more difficult because of the state of post trauma and the multiple abuses through the system the women have endured. Patch work policies reflect more concern over liability rather than the healing of equality for women.

*“They are more concerned about covering their own *%#*# than what happens to me.”*

Treating the poor women as equals and not as “objects of the helping industry” guides poor women toward healing for themselves and their families. The respect equality gives them encourages participation more readily in public affairs other than rallies and marches against inequality, discrimination, poverty, and homelessness. As poor women we have to deal with a charity model based on a patriarchal power structure and a matriarchal “helping industry” to deliver services. We want to participate in our society but on an equal basis with others.

Funding policies too often interfere with creating comprehensive programs to help poor women make the leap off assistance into autonomy. In order to participate we need someone to stand in the gap and deal with the various institutions we need to access or get involved with. The survey we did this summer strongly showed that the women needed advocates.

*“We don’t need social workers. **We need advocates.**”*

With all the cutbacks, advocates have all but disappeared. FORWARD can not get funding if we advocate! That is why we are looking to create a business to support ourselves and this work.

One staff at a shelter said that she had studied 4 years in University with the dream of engaging with the women only to learn she wasn’t even allowed to have lunch with the “clients”. What shelter workers don’t appear to understand is that they are liable, legally and morally to report abuse. With the current job market, that is not likely to happen. One woman with a 4 year Honour Degree in Sociology and General Psychology couldn’t get work at a shelter because she lived in a shelter.

A paradigm shift from punitive/saving us to equal power/respect will go a long way in bringing poor women from a marginalized position in society to one of active participation. We are not the problem to be solved. “Ignore” ance is.

We demand to be treated as equals in all areas of our lives and to be at the front table of discussion for policy and social change. We demand funding for advocacy be reinstated and increased and educational material on the history of the poor and our contributions to Canadian society be widely published.

Article XI Employment

The lower the wage the greater the abuse. Many Canadians assume that labour standards are equally complied with by all sectors. One woman works for an American market research firm. If she goes to the washroom it is deducted from her pay cheque. She is required to lie, deceive and manipulate young people to do surveys for recruitment into the American military. Punitive policies, menial, immoral and too often illegal “survival” jobs are the “Job Opportunities” the Canadian government offers poor women. Even with a university degree, she has been there for 3 years. Everyone in the office knows that to report any illegal actions means they could all lose their jobs and their space at a residence, room, or apartment - we are that close to returning to the streets or the shelter system.

“It’s this work or a shelter.”

Most women in her work place have years of experience in a variety of professions and some have University degrees yet find at their age viable employment is almost impossible. Ageism is a serious issue in this youth oriented society. Like women on welfare or disability, they rely on drop-in centres and food banks for food.

Of course women of colour have other issues to worry about,

“I could hear the gun shots. It was a block from my place.”

And native women,

“They(OPP) put the gun to the mother head and said I’ll shoot you and your children.”

Employment Insurance is all but impossible for us to get. In order to apply we must be laid off and these abusive companies are going to do every thing possible to avoid that. Shifts can be “cut back” to less than 20 hours a week, much less or nothing. At 50% of our wage it is absolutely impossible for us economically to survive on Employment Insurance. If we do qualify, after 6 months it is terminated and we are left getting another similar job. Older women again have more difficulty finding work. With 20 years or more of work experience and/or a University degree they are often deemed over-qualified for menial work even though they are desperate enough to do it. There are options to start your own business but we need \$5,499 to qualify. In other words the programs are made not to include the poor. We pay into the system and receive nothing from it.

When dealing with illegal actions by employers, women must sign a statement to not disclose the abuse or not receive compensation. Open disclosure of abusive work places help women to make better decisions and leads to greater equality. Avoiding abuse is just as much of a strategy for survival as any.

Minimum wage would have to almost double in order for us to get “affordable”, safe, secure housing the rents are so high. With neglect from the government, public housing has deteriorated into substandard dangerous places to live. It’s not affordable if “subsidized” means we pay with our health, our families or by being a victim of a crime.

We demand the government create a fair and equitable employment system that includes the poor and that takes into account our specific needs. We demand strict enforced regulations on low income employers especially foreign companies.

Article XII Health

We received this letter from a mother. It's edited to protect the daughter and to add more particulars (in brackets).

This letter concerns my daughter and her journey through the Canadian **housing for disabled women system** in Toronto:

“My daughter lived with us for the first 21 years of her life. She, with the help of a social worker, went into a group home for developmentally disabled young adults. She did well with a lot of support for quite a few years. She has a family that were always there for her.

*By the mid 90's housing of a supportive nature became harder and harder to find in Ontario. She has lived in a warehouse facility for a year with no grocery shopping (support) and cockroaches; to a women's residence on and off for 8 years where she was violently attacked by 4 men outside the shelter (A shelter worker told her someone wanted to see in the parking lot. **There were 3 women to a room that stank of urine with no sheets on plastic mattresses**). Then to a 2 year treatment home to re-train life skills where she was assaulted 3x by a male client. When the program terminated, they offered to dump her back into the crisis/shelter system at the women's residence. The government had no planned place for her to go. She then went to another place and again was **treated as a commodity** and thrown back into the crisis bed/shelter system of Toronto, Ontario - a known developed country. She is again recycled with her Dual Diagnosis needs not met in a **broken-down social system**. What will happen to my daughter and all those women in similar transitional situations?”*

(At the moment this 74 year old mother is spending \$1,200 a month to give her adult child a safe place in a student residence at a college. Witnesses to this situation agreed the mother was considered by staff to be interfering with the system - she brought her daughter organic food and wanted to look into holistic medicine as an alternative when her daughter's needs were not met. The condescending ways they openly talked about her implied mental health instability. This mother has spent a lifetime looking after her child at the expense of her own health.)

Health concerns among the women at the drop-in centres ranged from food, misdiagnosis, over-medication, lack of safe, secure affordable housing that only added to their duress, evictions, transience (many have moved 8-12 times in the last 6 years alone), the extreme duress dealing with Children's Aid and the inadequacies of the special food allowance **if** they received it.

“When there is very little food, I don't eat for a few days so the kids can eat.”

Women with terminally ill diseases (ie. Lupus) had the special diet supplement amount removed from their cheque. One woman with a need of 4,000 calories a day and another who had a stroke were also denied. Anyone on welfare or disability is in some state of malnutrition. There is no money for a dentist, glasses or hearing aids for poor working women.

The last 13 years had brought many of these women into their middle ages. With no or little pensions, the future is bleak for their survival. Aging strategies are absolutely paramount! Older women were well over represented in our meetings.

Women expressed concern over prescription medication and indicated that they would prefer medical marijuana laws expanded to include post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and sleeping and eating disorders. The long term effects of prescription medications are exacerbating their health problems. A more holistic approach that “takes time with us not a five minute visit and another prescription.”

Poverty creates mental health illnesses. Therapy that includes alternative approaches help women to get a handle on the insanity of the situations they are forced to live, helps stop internalizing government failures and places the issues in a different perspective. We are taught “to take responsibility for your actions” at a time when the Canadian government takes no responsibility what so ever for the suffering they are causing. Canada must be held accountable for its human rights violations. Passing out pills does not solve the problem nor will it make us go away.

Shelters where much abuse was reported did not follow Canada’s Food Guideline. Women who got sick from the food had to pay out of their own pockets for the medication. One woman who has a calcium deficiency ended up being rushed to the hospital. The shelter had refused to give her more than 1 glass of milk a day even though they had her medical history. None of the staff by policy assisted, not even the elderly with their belongings when they arrived and left the shelter. Another woman with food allergies returned at night to the shelter from work to find her supper had food in it that she was allergic to - again. She reminded the staff of the situation and asked for something else. She was refused and went to bed on an empty stomach. One day all of the women from all cultures uniformly refused to pray before eating. They were told, “If you do not pray. You will not eat.” One worker actually instructed the women to fold their hands and bow their heads to pray. Poor women in Canada have failed to live up to the status quo colonial expectations of Canadian society and it gives each institution we deal with permission to enforce that ideology with impunity.

We demand comprehensive health programs focused on the specific needs of the poor that includes alternative methods to deal with the multiplicity of issues we experience on a daily basis. We demand aging strategies for women be a priority. We demand recognition and compensation for the work women do as caregivers for children and disabled adult family members. We demand safe, affordable and adequate housing and treatment programs for women with physical, psychiatric and developmental disabilities and the resulting complications of trauma. We demand access to adequate healthy food for families, as mothers are the family members whose diet is most inadequate when food is insecure.

Article XIII Economic and Social Life

Foreign policies, especially American, have a devastating effect on poor women in Canada. NAFTA and globalization has brought “Third World” poverty into our country and like Mexico wages have gone down significantly and a handful at the top are seeing record profits. Stats Canada reports that 4.9M Canadians are living below the low-income cut off line. When the 21.6% was taken off our cheques, the government opened many employment resource centres to solve the problem. So for the last 13 years, we have malnourished people looking for menial labour that will not even provide for basic necessities. Attempting to dismantle the health and welfare system, remove rent controls, restructure the work force with severe cutbacks and a deregulated economy, the Canadian government has managed to create homelessness and poverty at rates that reflect the Great Depression.

Food Banks are inadequate. **Food is a major issue.** We can only go once or twice a month depending on where you live and with the help of the computer this is very regulated. The food lacks any real nutritional value and should be used as a supplement but becomes a meal. It is not possible to make one complete meal out of the patchwork of food items they give us. Women also reported theft of food by staff.

After food, housing is the next major issue for the drop-in centre women. Stories of

“evicted while in the hospital”
“woke up and the landlord was beside my bed”
“the basement apartment was flooding”
“no repairs in 5 years”
“mole and fungus all over the place”
“cockroaches and bed bugs”
“gangs and drugs”
“heat not turned on until the end of October”
“landlord went into my place and stole my TTC tickets and money”

were prevalent. When short on money for the rent,

“You can pay the rest with your ass.”

Affordable housing in Toronto is a 7 year wait to get into rundown, crime infested, neighbourhoods with no or under funded support systems and programs. One woman’s 12 year old daughter was raped the first year and gang-raped the second year they stayed in public housing. If the government is not capable of understanding the concept of prevention perhaps it should consider the \$100,000’s of dollars that has come from taxpayers money to help her daughter continue to this day survive these ordeals.

Punitive policies hinder us from attempting to have any quality of life by improving our environment or increasing our incomes through home based businesses that can provide essential services at the community level. Public housing policies don’t allow women to establish home childcare businesses that would elevate greatly the hardships of poor women in the area getting to work and/or school with children. No home businesses are permitted at all. If we plant a garden, when we leave policies state that

everything must be returned to its original order; Everything is pulled out. That means for the last 20-30 years these public housing areas that are so desolate and depressing to look at could have had flowers and plants from all over the world growing throughout their neighbourhood. The basements are empty except for a laundry area and any renovations are removed on leaving also.

By cleaning up these area and allowing the residents to buy their apartment or unit with \$500 (cash) or kind (work), mortgages can be paid according to their incomes. Ownership not only creates stakeholders for the community but security for the individual or family as well. Home Ownership programs must include a green component where hydro and heat bills will be a thing of the past for us. Policies that deny social assistance or disability to homeowners must be abolished.

The “marketization” of poverty is a very real issue in Canada. How can the government spend \$60 Billion dollars on us last year when **food is a major issue**. A lot of people make a very good living off our poverty yet, our lives are worse now than ever. If they just divided the \$60 Billion equally among the 4.9M Canadians living below the StatsCanada low income cut off line (the most realistic), we would all be multi-millionaires. Considering the wealth we create, you would think we would be able to enjoy some of it.

Canada is a wealthy nation with many natural resources. The natural resources of a nation belong to all of the citizens of that nation and is for the benefit of all those citizens. The poor women do not benefit from the incredible natural resources of our country.

Poor women and their children live in substandard, insecure, and dangerous housing while Canada defers taxes for corporation to a sum of 10’s of Billions of dollars. In 1994 BCE Inc. had deferred taxes of over \$2B; Alcan Aluminium - \$914M; Ford Motor Company - \$60.9M; Hollinger Inc. - \$133M; Imperial Oil - \$1,2B; Inco - \$465.6M; MacMillan Bloedal - \$231.8M; Maclean Hunter - \$133.4M; Petro Canada - \$570M; Shell Canada - \$867M; and Xerox - \$300.6M to mention just a few.

Embedded in Canadian thought are deep rooted seeds of colonial attitudes toward the poor. All institutions reflect this negative ideology. From “alms” to “aid” to a modern day sophisticated welfare system, it’s all the same. Punitive, scrutinizing, and demeaning.

Enough is enough. The last 13 years of trauma from decreasing social assistance rates, high rents, low wages, homelessness and malnutrition left us in whirl wind of lay offs and cutbacks all around us. There was nothing to hold onto. A Stats Canada “poverty line” that secures this standard will go a long way in gaining equality for poor women. We don’t need more resource centres, programs, food banks, shelters, drop in centres, or whatever else they have created “to help” us. We need money.

Canada’s flagrant violation of Human Rights must be dealt with.

We demand compensation for the multiple human rights abuses that the Canadian government knowingly and willingly inflicted on us. We demand the StatsCanada low income cut off line be used to measure our needs and to use this line to ensure that all Canadians will have assurance of that standard for their lives.

Article XVI Marriage and family life

Ontario is the only province in Canada with no jurisdiction over child protection agencies. In Oshawa, Ontario a woman entered a shelter running from an abusive situation. She breast-fed her 4 year old child once a day in the evening. A shelter worker deemed this sexual, informed Children's Aid and she has not seen her child since. When women have turned to the police they have been told they can do nothing if Children's Aid is involved. In Kitchener, Ontario a lawyer offered to take a case for \$10,000 (an impossible amount to pay) then immediately declined stating the one case he took involving Children's Aid the lying and deception on their part was so outrageous he almost took 2 workers and threw them against a wall. He said he never wanted to feel that kind of anger again.

Another case is of a woman with 2 children fleeing abuse and ending up in a shelter. When she went to court no one from the shelter accompanied her. So much for advocates. The husband didn't want his children in a shelter "with all those crack-head whores." The Judge agreed. The 8 year old was put in a teen group home for 14 to 18 year olds and found in a fetal position in the corner of his room the next morning. His sister became a ward of the state. These children had witnessed their father tie their mother up and beat her in front of them. The woman expressed that if she knew what they would do to her children she "would have stayed and taken the abuse."

In the case of a grandmother who reported to Children's Aid a confession from her daughter's partner that he had in fact lied to get the children (fabricated an entire journal against her daughter) and in the same breathe admitted that he had "beaten the face off" a guy her daughter knew after the case was dismissed for lack of evidence. There was not a drop of remorse for any of it. He was a well-known "crack-head drunk" in that town and given the responsibility of 3 children under the age of 8. The house was filth and squalor and Children's Aid hadn't been there for 8 months. Due to the extenuating circumstances (one of the women in the gang was taken to the US, hit up with crack and left dead in an ally), the grandmother's final words to both the police and Children's Aid was to get her daughter and grandchildren out of this province. The police said they didn't have resources for that and Children's Aid defended him. The grandmother believes there are multiple domestic torture cases involved in this situation.

A women's ex-husband refused to pay his child support payments. She and her 3 children were soon evicted from their apartment and went to live with her terminally ill mother. Children's Aid considered this housing "unsuitable" and had the right to apprehend the children. At the time she was working and taking an intensive course that required her to have 0 absentees. In a state of extreme duress with work, school, 3 children and now Children's Aid, the woman had not slept for almost 3 weeks and had to take one day off to go to court and jeopardized her staying in the program. We need programs that reflect the multiplicity of issues which we experience in our daily lives. This newcomer could not believe that Children's Aid "had that kind of power" (to put families under such scrutiny). This woman got into a "dream program" with punitive policies set up for failure. She had passed the test of "deserving" and "rugged individualism", now she must prove how "proper" her skills as a mother are based on colonial classist standards. A lot of people get good pay checks questioning the very soul of our existence - our children.

There is no other class in Canada so scrutinized, researched, studied, analysed and put under the microscope as much as poor women.

“Get out of our way.”

Another concern poor women have is the amount of drugs given to their children “in care”. A lack of respect for our opinions excludes us from the process. One mother moved out of the city to a small northern town running from an abusive partner. When her child began to act out in school as a result of seeing the abuses and the abuses both he and his mom had suffered through the system a reaction from a teacher to the mother was, **“It’s better off if he were a half-breed instead of a nigger.”**

We live in a multicultural stratified society with a colonial system which enforces a specific ideology on a specific group called the poor. From sewing and Bible classes in shelters to a dress code for court we are expected to jump through the hoops of specific social rules. One grandmother recalled, “At the top of a list for baby needs (at a home for “unwed mothers”) was a fleece blanket.”

In the summary of responses by Children’s Aid Societies to the 2006 Annual Report of the Auditor General of Ontario, they agreed with Recommendation 8, “Timely responses are required if children are to be protected. Sometimes this is impossible because the volume of calls (telephone calls) is in excess of available resources.” It is well known in low income areas that a call to Children’s Aid has more to do with an irate neighbour/partner/spouse, a barking dog, a bad drug deal or what ever. “Snitch lines” are not reliable sources of information. One man to get even with his partner for charging him with domestic abuse, had friends phone Children’s Aid to report her. He gained custody of the 3 children and in order to see her children, he made her get on her knees and beg to hold her 6 month old child. Most Children’s Aid Societies are highly unionized.

The Ombudsman’s Office has been trying to get jurisdiction over child protection agencies and has failed at this point. This Office has a history of impartiality and transparency that we need and trust. An audit released by Office of the Auditor General of Ontario in the spring of 2007 provides additional evidence to strengthen our argument. However the Office of the Auditor General did not delve into the question of why the children are appended in the first place. We do not trust the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Their neglect in the past does not fare well with us. A Family Model approach is more equitable.

We highly recommend the Ombudsman be given jurisdiction over all child protection agencies in Ontario and that the complaint system take our grievances seriously without prejudice. We demand apprehension and adoption of our children and grand children be investigated.

Conclusion

Historically Canada has taken the lead in Human Rights but the last 13 years has seen changes so drastic the women in the drop in centres expressed,

“This is not my Canada.”

They never thought that “freedom from fear and want” would ever be experiences that would become a reality in their lives.

The recognition of human dignity of all people is the foundation of justice and peace in the world.

Freedom from fear and want have been “proclaimed as the highest aspirations” of the people.