

The High Cost of Keeping Women Poor

By Deborah C. Poff

On a accordé peu d'attention à la relation qui existe entre la pauvreté chez les femmes et la pauvreté à long terme, intergénérationnelle et endémique, notamment en ce qui concerne l'impact qu'exerce sur le statut économique de chaque membre de la famille le fait de grandir dans une famille monoparentale dirigée par une femme. L'auteur soutient que si nous décidons de ne pas faire les investissements économiques et sociaux nécessaires en faveur des populations à haut risque, les groupes vulnérables formés de femmes et d'enfants continueront à en subir les conséquences.

Little attention has been placed on the relationship of female poverty to long range, inter-generational and endemic poverty. In particular, what impact does growing up in a female-headed lone parent family have on the economic status of individual family members? Further, what impact does growing up in a poor female-headed family have on the long term economic status of individual family members?

While the interest in relationships among these factors should be self-evident to anyone who cares about women's economic, political and social status, social policy is generally focussed on the political quick-fix and what appears to be the most expedient course of action in the short run. Such political and social pragmatism is both economically and socially short-sighted. If we choose not to make the necessary economic and social investments in high risk populations (i.e. women and their children) we will continue to see the consequences of this lack of investment in vulnerable populations of women and children.

The economic status of children and poor women in Canada

In recent years, in both Canada and the United States, a significant amount of research has indicated the range of problems which children growing up in poverty face. The list of risk factors for poor children include: "premature birth, low birth weight, malnutrition, recurrent and untreated health problems, physical and psychological stress, child abuse and learning disabilities" (Chafel). The growth of child poverty in both Canada and the United States from the 1980s onward is a failure of the Canadian public on both moral and economic grounds. As Duncan and Rodgers note:

Children are completely dependent upon others for their economic security, and that any of them should live in households with living standards below the poverty line can be regarded as socially unacceptable. Second, there is a growing body of evidence that links outcomes such as completed schooling and career attainments to the economic resources during childhood. Thus an impoverished childhood has adverse consequences that may last well beyond childhood.

Since female-headed lone parent families can run a particularly high risk of contributing to long term dependence on social assistance, any effective approach to this kind of endemic poverty requires an integrated needs assessment of the necessary and sufficient components for an effective model of support and intervention to assist these families to exit the social assistance system permanently.

In order to do this, among other things, we must know why some female-headed lone parent families are doing better than others. First, it should be noted that there are common features shared by all of these families. It has long been recognized that factors which contribute to the particular vulnerability of female-headed lone parent families are a combination of women's socio-economic, political, and cultural disadvantages in a male-dominated Canadian society, a condition Canadian women share with other women around the world. However, despite the common features of female poverty, there are also important differences in the types of poor female-headed families. In an American study, Beshavor and Quin found a significant difference between divorced mothers and never-married mothers. According to their data, never-married mothers "work less [because of fewer work opportunities as a result of interrupted education], receive less child support, and are less likely to marry and stay married to someone able to support them and their children. As a result, they go on welfare in large numbers...."

Similarly, children who spend all of their childhood in poverty may have significantly different needs than children who are poor for shorter periods of time. To understand the similarities and differences among poor female-headed lone parent families, it is necessary to get a fully informed picture, not just from experts and national data, but from the individuals themselves. As Prager notes, the analysis has frequently "tended to be based on ideo-

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logical assumptions, anecdotes, and less than rigorous analysis. The available statistics on poverty were annual ones which are inadequate and misleading in the analysis of the many questions that have to be answered." If we are to understand where and how to effectively support high risk families for self-sufficiency we must have an integrated, longitudinal and holistic information base.

The need for client-centred and community-based initiatives is being recognized among policy analysts and service-delivery workers at all levels of government support. There is a growing consensus that an integrated cooperative approach by all stakeholders is necessary for success. With the issue of violence against women, for example, there is increasing cooperation among transition house workers, including treatment measures for both victims and offenders of family violence. Piecemeal approaches to complex social problems just do not work. Without adequate nutrition, housing, social support, and available and affordable child care, children at risk can become adults at risk.

However, despite the recognition that solutions must be collaborative, complex, and integrative in nature, there has not been a complementary and innovative formula for implementing such an approach. The 1988 Report of the Social Assistance Review Committee, *Transitions*, states that within Ontario a "philosophical reorientation is needed so that the provision of assistance to become self-reliant and active participants in the life of the community will be considered as important." Despite this noble goal, as Wright notes, the Committee neglects to address the availability of positions in the existing labour market to provide an adequate standard of living for many social assistance recipients. While the Committee report recognizes that "to be a woman raising children alone can be a passport to a life of poverty," it does not have an adequate analysis which integrates a "coordinated approach to education and skills training" with larger and changing economic concerns. Yet it is precisely this larger vision which is a prerequisite to an informed model for social change.

Furthermore, as the recent evolution of client groups and self-help support networks have illustrated, services "done to" clients, rather than provided in consultation with clients, not only do not always meet the perceived needs of the client but also result in the production of a hostile and needy clientele. As Mannette and Meagher state of their study of Cape Breton women, "paramount to the success of this project was the involvement of low income women throughout the entire process of the research. Their voices, resounding with those of community agencies, determined the outcome of the project."

Much of the recent literature addressing issues of family dependency and social assistance has stressed the need for informed cooperation and integrated services among the various sectors in the community which respond to families in need or in

crisis. The implication of this for service delivery is that mechanisms for inter-agency cooperation must be streamlined and facilitated.

Another recurring theme in the literature is the impact that the past decade of conservatism has had in increasing exponentially the feminization of poverty, with a corresponding increase in child poverty. The critical theoretical issues here concern ideological differences in interpretations of the social and economic benefit of investing in high-risk families and whether the return for the investment makes the cost warranted. As Butler (1990) notes:

An assumption made by advocates of higher welfare benefits is that we 'invest' in the future generation by guaranteeing an adequate income for children today. In contrast, others, most notably George Gilder and Charles Murray, argue that welfare undermines the work ethic and relieves the poor of the responsibility for their own actions. Children learn that failure is rewarded with government largess; only the chump works hard. Thus, it would be better, according to those who hold these views, to keep welfare benefits low (or to eliminate welfare completely) and to thereby force the poor to finish school, to work, to marry and stay married, and to limit their family size—in short, to behave in ways which will alleviate their poverty in the long run.

Given the regressive Canadian government which has been in power for the past eight years, it is not surprising to find that the current government is cutting back on social service delivery and education, and reneging on promises for a national child care programme and policy while at the same time articulating a commitment to eliminating violence against women and children. In particular, the initiation of a National Taskforce on Violence Against Women concurrent with the elimination and cutting-back of social programmes speaks to the lack of understanding of the relationship between poverty and violence against women within Canada's patriarchal society.

Policy recommendations

We currently have a government in place that wishes to have women exit from the social welfare system, but without the necessary prerequisites for a healthy, safe and autonomous existence for themselves and their children. In order to meet the necessary conditions for fully participating as self-sufficient and equal citizens, we must know what the needs of poor women and children are in a complex, integrated and holistic manner, and we have to know these things from a feminist, woman-centred approach. For these reasons, we must have integrated, women-

oriented social assistance which takes the following questions into consideration:

1. What are the current estimated costs of public support for female-headed lone parent families?
2. What are our best estimates of the numbers of these kinds of families, their composition and location?
3. What are the specific needs of these families as perceived by: a) the families themselves, b) front-line workers in crisis intervention, c) community service workers, d) community service policymakers, e) legislators, and f) educators?
4. Are there significant similarities and differences among the perceptions of these various stakeholders?
5. Is there sufficient consensus among perceived priority needs to construct a minimum set or alternative sets of goods and services provisions (*i.e.*, Is there sufficient consensus for the development of a testable model?)
6. What are the estimated costs of introducing an intensive and relatively short term (*e.g.*, 3 to 5 years) intervention with these families which incorporates training and education, personal and vocational counselling, adequate financial aid, nutritional counselling and adequate child care provisions and which addresses any other relevant needs of both mothers and children?
7. Relative to the investments, what is the estimated probability of achieving self-sufficiency?
8. Is the estimated cost of short term massive intervention lower than current long term costs?

Such questions have to be answered by feminist social scientists who engage and empower the women and children for whom the services must be provided. We also need to implement the following recommendations immediately:

- that transition houses receive adequate compensation for the realistic amount of time it takes women to re-establish their lives when they leave their abusive partners
- that women who leave abusive partners receive the necessary financial support to establish an independent existence for themselves and their children (including support not only for such basics as furniture and clothing but also for counselling)
- that levels of social assistance in Canada are raised to a level such that no persons or families in Canada live below the poverty line
- that women living on social assistance have significantly higher levels of support while they seek further education and training, including flexible child care support, not just for when they are in class but as respite to enable them to study
- that rather than cut back on pay equity promises, governments at both federal and provincial levels strengthen their employment equity programmes and increase available funds for pay equity compensation
- that perpetrators of violence receive mandatory counselling rather than imprisonment or fines which economically disadvantage the families of batterers *
- that the government introduce progressive taxation including taxation on the corporations in Canada which currently do not pay taxes to offset the costs of the initiatives outlined here
- that a net wealth tax be introduced in Canada to offset the costs of the initiatives outlined here

These are massive recommendations in their scope. But so is the scope of the problems they are meant to solve.

* Ed. note: *Across Canada women's groups are currently debating whether mandatory counselling is really effective. This recommendation raises the question of whether wife assault should be considered a criminal offence requiring a prison sentence or whether it should be considered a character flaw that could be addressed through counselling.*

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