

Sole Support Mothers on Social Assistance in Barriers to Employment and Suggested Solutions

by Marion Lynn and
Milana Todoroff

Cet article fait le sommaire d'un récent rapport sur les mères seules qui bénéficient de l'aide sociale en Ontario et

Participants identified the lack of jobs that women could support children on; fear of losing benefits; and perceived inequities of the labour market. Those who had been in the labour force identified logistics and resources as the second most important barrier.

énonce les difficultés que rencontrent ces femmes sur le marché du travail. Elle suggère une liste de solutions.

Within the current context of changing labour markets, altered family conditions, reduced government spending, and rising welfare rolls and costs, it is increasingly important to understand the barriers that impede the entry of social assistance recipients into the paid labour force. This research study examines the blocks faced by one client group, sole support mothers on social assistance.

Four major categories of barriers to employment have been investigated. These barriers include: (a) features of the labour markets; (b) features of the social assistance service delivery system; (c) characteristics of particular programs, including job training, employment programs, and child care, etc.; and (d) personal disadvantages such as skills, family situations, health, and attitudes.

Barriers to employment in the labour market were the primary ones identified by respondents. Participants identified the lack of available jobs, particularly jobs that women could support children on; fear of losing benefits; and perceived inequities of the labour market. Those who had been in the labour force between

one and two years identified logistics and resources as the second most important barrier; while those who had been in the labour force for more than five years identified human capital limitations with regard to education and training as the second most important barrier. Canadian-born respondents identified the economy and jobs as the major barrier and family obligation/health as the second

most important barrier. In contrast, immigrants perceived human capital limitations as the major barrier, with logistics and resources identified as the second most important barrier.

In terms of the social assistance delivery system, participants identified a wide range of barriers and practical solutions. Overall, women spoke positively of the government's effort to encourage employment through the Steps to Employment (STEP) program. However, they also indicated a number of needed reforms, including changes in the definition of roles for case workers, reductions in caseloads, better information access, measures to extend benefits, an increase in the time-frame of the STEP buffer zone, refined reporting procedures for dealing with overpayments, strategies to market programs, and mechanisms for sole support mothers to share information.

In terms of other related employment program barriers and solutions, participants identified a range of collaborative strategies that could address perceived barriers, including issues related to education, child care, housing, child support payments, and other programs that are not directly the responsibility of the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

In terms of barriers related to personal and family circumstances, participants identified low self-esteem and isolation as barriers that prevent them from seeing themselves as potentially valuable employees, despite their actual skills and knowledge. Lack of education or job training was also identified as the most important personal barrier. Solutions related to interpersonal development, such as individual counselling, small workshops, self-help groups, assistance from the community in the form of volunteer opportunities, and apprenticeship programs were suggested.

The labour market

Employers should be brought in; they should stick their necks out a bit. It takes more than welfare services to provide training. (Cambridge assistance recipient)

Perceived labour market barriers:

- available jobs for which women qualify do not provide wages, benefits, or work schedules that support single-parent led families;
- loss of benefits associated with finding employment and leaving welfare is a major child welfare concern of mothers;
- stereotypes based on sex, race, age, and anti-welfare public sentiments serve as barriers;

Suggested labour market solutions:

Ask the women what they need: they're the ones who have been out there trying to get work. (Cambridge assistance recipient)

- develop community-based job initiatives based on local markets;
- link job development with other local initiatives, including local training and adjustment boards, innovations projects and resource centres;
- include sole-support parents in

Ontario

planning local training and employment strategies;

- develop a flexible post-secondary system that responds to present and future job markets; withdraw funding from programs that do not lead to jobs;

- encourage collaboration between government levels to provide accurate local job market statistics, including profiles on available jobs and who fills them;

- match skills of recipients with available jobs and identify training needs including literacy, numeracy, and academic upgrading;

- continue benefits to sole support

parents who acquire employment where a benefit package is not available;

- provide self-employment training and change subsidized housing policy for home-based jobs.

The social assistance system

Attitudes towards mothers on assistance is one of hatred—from neighbours, from the media—it is just propaganda from those who know nothing about it. (Cambridge service provider)

Perceived social assistance delivery system barriers:

- social assistance workers tend to focus on eligibility, benefits, and benefit compliance, failing to provide information about employment and training opportunities; system supports, i.e. STEP or benefit continuation while part-time employed;

- STEP procedures result in continual over-payments to recipients that are later deducted from their cheques, making financial planning precarious and creating public perceptions of high welfare fraud (administrative over-payments factored in with over-payments due to delays in new information);

- worker scrutiny when recipients pick up their cheques; the system and its workers discourage work-

ing and income reporting;

- lack of worker availability to get or give employment-related information in a timely way that does not interfere with recipients' hours of work;

- inability to pay family members to provide child care if they are part of the benefit unit;

- programs and policies that are generally unresponsive to recipient employment-related needs and to opportunities in the labour force;

- confidentiality of the system isolates recipients from each other as a resource to share information on system supports to employment and ways to get off the system;

- system has contributed to public misperceptions that recipients are irresponsible, unmotivated, and abusers of welfare, reducing employer confidence.

Suggested social assistance delivery system solutions:

FBA workers get into work in the morning and they have a hundred phone messages, and a lot of changes in Toronto come by e-mail. So they have so much going on and the person who gets the attention is the person with the most burning issue. They only have time to do crisis management. (Algoma service provider)

- require workers to do more than hand out cheques; evaluate their performance against how quickly recipients on their caseloads come off the system;

- train workers and reduce their caseloads so they can provide accurate and up-to-date information to recipients about their rights, responsibilities, available opportunities, and supports to employment;

- develop income reporting procedures that do not result in overpayments to recipients and an



Sima Elizabeth Shefrin, "Woman Ironing," fabric applique and quilting, 29" x 40", 1991. Photo: Brenda Hemsing

information system approach that separates overpayment due to administrative error/slow response from overpayment due to new circumstances;

- implement strategies to market programs and disseminate information to recipients including information in monthly cheques and through computer technology;

- support communication between recipients to enable job-skills coaching, sharing of resources (housing, transportation, and baby-sitting) and job-networking;

- reduce stereotypes of recipients by providing accurate profiles of recipients regarding their ages, training, skills, number of children, and their activities in studying, working, volunteering, and raising children.

Other program barriers

It was just a crash course. It was useless. (Peel assistance recipient)

Perceived barriers in related programs:

- a lack of consistency in offering employment-related supports to recipients who need to access training or employment means inequities in treatment and outcomes;

- government-funded training is not related to opportunities in the job market;

- funding of blocks of seats/specific training programs means recipients are sent to training that does not match their skill deficits and needs;

- not enough training spaces are available;

- insufficient and inflexible child care provisions neglect the reality that there are care and supervision needs for adolescents too;

- transportation is costly and inaccessible, especially in northern and rural areas;

- housing that is not subsidized takes most of welfare income, leaving little assets to support participation in training and work;

- recipients fear loss of subsidy or eviction from subsidized housing by taking work opportunities;

- post-secondary education is difficult for sole-support mothers and often provides dead-end diplomas;

- women lack resources to find fathers who neglect court-ordered child support; they require more help in pursuing child support.

Suggested related program solutions:

They shouldn't immediately take money away from us when we are trying to help ourselves. They should continue to give us assistance for a few months after we start working. (Cambridge assistance recipient)

- examine use of clerical units to administer STEP in benefit offices and develop an income-reporting system that is responsive to recipients' work obligations e.g. clearer forms, use of technologies to report income;

- increase the time-frame of the STEP buffer zone for sole-support parents. Market availability of employment-related supports and provide consistently to recipients;

- let recipients select their own training program based on a plan and use of a voucher approach;

- fund training that provides on-the-job experience (co-op), matches opportunities in local job markets and has good cost-benefit results in getting graduates into jobs;

- expand child care subsidies and remove regulation barrier to paid care of children by other benefit unit members;

- provide on-site child care as part of training programs;

- explore ways of reducing transportation barriers to job search and employment;

- remove regulation barriers to pursuing self-employment in subsidized housing units;

- track employment/self-employment earnings prior to raising rents to market value;

- move towards non-profit housing co-op approach by permitting recipients who leave the system to apply rent paid to purchase subsidized housing units.

Personal and family circumstances

Focus on Change should be available to all women on assistance. They do a wonderful job of making you feel better about yourself and teaching you life skills and job-related skills. (Cambridge assistance recipient)

Perceived barriers due to personal and family circumstances:

- low self-esteem keeps recipients from accessing the services and resources available to them;

- lack of appropriate work experience;

- concern about leaving children for long periods of time hinders ability to take further educational and job training;

- isolation of clients reduces their opportunity to network with each other about available government resources, educational programs, and available jobs.

Proposed solutions:

Why don't they encourage companies to take you on for three months while you are on assistance to train you, and then give you a job and let you gradually off assistance? (Cambridge assistance recipient)

- facilitate individual counselling, small group workshops, and self-help groups to enhance self-esteem and rapport among recipients;

- train case workers on how to develop and encourage self-esteem among their clients;

- provide opportunities for volunteer work, apprenticeships, and mentors to enable women to get the up-to-date work experience that will lead to a paid job.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the barriers to employment most frequently identified by participants included: the lack of appropriate available jobs, particularly jobs on which women could support children; fear of losing ben-

efits; lack of sufficient and appropriate care for children and adolescents; social assistance overpayments that require time and energy to sort out; inability to access training and education; and low self-esteem. The economy/jobs was seen as the most important barrier, while family obligations/health was the second major barrier.

Participants actively suggested a large number of things that could be done to reduce or eliminate the barriers to employment for sole support mothers on assistance. They emphasized the need for solutions to emanate from the local level and suggested that solutions to labour force barriers should come from their communities; community-based training and job-initiative development should be encouraged; skills of recipients should be matched with available jobs and needs for training within their community; and local job and training initiatives should include sole-support parents and local em-

ployers in the planning process.

Most of the respondents saw self-employment as one of the possible solutions to the lack of employment opportunities. The type of help they needed includes: training in starting and running a business; changes in government regulations and policies, such as housing regulations; and small loans. They expressed strong support for the government's efforts to encourage employment through the STEP program, but nevertheless identified a range of reforms. On the whole, they felt that the system must become more responsive and respectful. They also wanted better information, consistency, and transparency in the information held by all parts of the system.

The conclusions from this study indicate that a complex combination of factors from the economic, governmental, and community systems intersect with personal and individual liabilities to create a mismatch between people and jobs.

Excerpted from a larger report (of the same title), funded by and prepared for the Ministry of Community and Social Services (December 1995).

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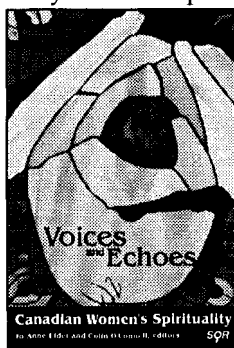
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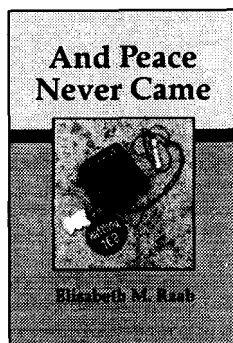
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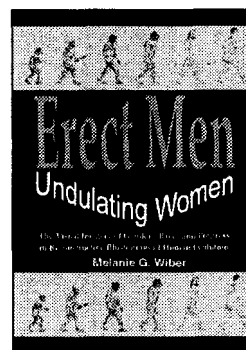
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