

“Empower women and you will see a decrease in poverty, illiteracy, disease and violence.”
– Michaele Jean, Governor General of Canada 2006

Women and Poverty



Women's Legal
Education and
Action Fund | Fonds d'action et
d'éducation juridiques
pour les femmes

Poverty is a significant threat to women's equality in Canada. More women live in poverty than men, and women's experience of poverty can be harsher, deeper and more prolonged. Women increasingly bear more of the burden of poverty, leading some to talk about the “feminization of poverty.”

Women and other marginalized groups disproportionately experience poverty

Women form the majority (about 53%) of people living in poverty in Canada. About 12% of all Canadian women, and 11% of Canadian men live in poverty.¹ Further, certain groups of women are disproportionately affected by poverty.

- Single mothers: 51.6% of lone parent families headed by women live in poverty
- 41.5% of single, widowed or divorced women over 65 live in poverty
- 35% of women on their own under 65 live in poverty
- 44% of Aboriginal women living off reserve, and 47% of Aboriginal women living on-reserve live in poverty. The average annual income for Aboriginal women is \$13,300, compared with \$18,200 for Aboriginal men and \$19,350 for non-Aboriginal women.
- New immigrant women between 25-44 years old who have a university degree and work full-time earn \$14,000 less than Canadian-born women.²

Women in poverty experience particular gender-based harms

Women living in poverty are especially vulnerable to domestic violence because their poverty makes it difficult for them to escape male violence at home. Women whose housing or financial situation is precarious may also end up being sexually exploited in the sex trade.

Causes of Women's Poverty

Caregiving responsibilities

Women bear most of the responsibility for caring for young children and elderly adults in Canada. This means that more women work part-time, and has a life-long affect on women's income.

Pay inequity

Women who work full-time make only 71% of their male counterparts. Further, female dominated professions tend to be less well paying.

Inadequate government programs

Women who rely on government benefits for their income (for example, many women with disabilities and single mothers), always live in poverty because all welfare and disability benefits programs in Canada fall far short of any poverty line.

¹ Statistics Canada - Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report, p. 133

² Sources cited in: CRIAW Fact Sheet on Women and Poverty

Poverty and Equality Rights

Poverty affects women's equality rights in a number of important ways. It impacts the health and security of women and their families, and deprives women of the freedom to participate fully in their communities. Women's poverty erodes their equality rights.

Women's equality rights are guaranteed by sections 15 and 18 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, by human rights legislation in each Province, and also by international treaties such as the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*.

LEAF and Women's Poverty

LEAF has intervened in a number of cases to argue that issues such as poverty, homelessness and income inequality are relevant to women's equality.

For example, in *JG v. Minister of Health and Community Services of New Brunswick* (1999), the Court ruled that New Brunswick's failure to provide legal aid in child wardship cases violate the *Charter* rights of a woman living in poverty. The Supreme Court recognized that this case raises issues of gender equality because women, and especially single mothers, are disproportionately affected by child wardship proceedings.

In May, 2004 LEAF, in partnership with the Income Security Advocacy Clinic (ISAC), hosted a national consultation focused on an examination of Canadian equality jurisprudence as a tool for advancing social and economic rights.

LEAF continues to work on issues where poverty and women's equality intersect, including legal aid, access to social assistance, pay equity, spousal support and international human rights.

Resources

LEAF cases on socio-economic rights: www.leaf.ca/legal/socio-economic.html#target

West Coast LEAF info and advocacy: www.westcoastleaf.org/index.php?pageID=14&parentid=13

Canadian Research Institute on the Advancement of Women: www.criaw-icref.ca

Statistics Canada, Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report: www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=89-503-X&lang=eng

Poverty and Human Rights Centre: www.povertyandhumanrights.org

Charter Committee on Poverty Issues: www.equalityrights.org/ccpi

Feminist Alliance for International Action: www.fafia-afai.org/

