

Inaction and Non-compliance:

British Columbia's Approach to Women's Inequality

Submission of the B.C. CEDAW Group to the United Nations
Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
On the occasion of the Committee's review of Canada's 6th & 7th Reports

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Article 13: Housing

Background

The cost of living increases in Vancouver have made British Columbia's largest city unliveable for many, particularly those with the fewest means. Rental market increases have catered to investors but have failed to meet the needs of the poorest residents of the city. Gentrification, combined with an influx of foreign investment on the eve of the 2010 Olympics, has caused rental market rates to soar and has forced many poor tenants out of their homes. Low income tenants have to double up with friends or family, or decrease their standard of living and relocate to the Downtown East side, a community of last resort. Homelessness is growing and the disproportionate poverty of lone mothers, young girls, women of colour, aboriginal women, immigrant women, women with disabilities and women leaving abusive partners make these groups especially vulnerable.

Homelessness

Attempts at measuring the size of the homelessness problem in Vancouver have been undertaken:

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- The most recent "homeless count" in Greater Vancouver found 2, 592 people on March 11 of 2008. This number is more than double those counted in 2002 (1,121);
- 26% of those experiencing absolute homelessness counted in 2005 were women;
- Nearly one-third of the homeless were Aboriginal (though only 2% of the total population of Greater Vancouver are Aboriginal), and 35% of these were women;
- Perhaps most distressingly, 40 families, mostly lone mothers, and 74 children were enumerated, nearly one-third of these children were living on the street;
- According to a one-day survey snapshot, taken on 14 April 2004, of the 6,109 women and children residing in emergency shelters across Canada, about 5,000 had escaped an abusive situation representing about three-quarters of all women residing in shelters;
- A 2004 study has shown that the death rate for homeless women is ten times that of women who are housed.

Homeless count figures are just the tip of the iceberg where women's homelessness is concerned. Women will do almost anything to stay off the streets and out of shelters to avoid violence and the apprehension of their children. As a result, women tend not to show up in homelessness counts in proportion to their experiences of homelessness because women who are homeless often "couch surf" with family or friends, live in compromising situations with men, or continue to reside with an abusive partner, all mechanisms to avoid the streets and shelters.

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Metro Vancouver Homeless Count Figures 2008: Preliminary Numbers. Online: Greater Vancouver Regional District, <http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/homelessness/pdfs/2008HomelessCountPreliminaryFS-April.pdf> (date accessed: 9 June 2008).

On Our Streets and in our Shelters: Results of the 2005 Greater Vancouver Homeless Count, (September 2005), online: Greater Vancouver Regional District, <http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/homelessness/pdfs/HomelessCount2005Final.pdf> (date accessed: 19 June 2008): 2.

Cheung and Hwang, "Risk of death among homeless women: a cohort study and review of the literature" (April 2004), Canadian Medical Association Journal at 1243.

Homelessness and Poverty

In Vancouver, women's homelessness must be understood as occurring as a result of the intersection between women's poverty and the changing housing market.

A single employable women on welfare with three children in Vancouver is given a monthly welfare maximum shelter allowance of \$700, and \$400 to cover the costs of food, transportation, health, recreation, and any unforeseen emergencies that arise for the month.

These rates are not adjusted for increases in the cost of living, which results in falling welfare incomes year after year. This decline is, of course, further exacerbated by the government reductions in welfare rates documented above. The inadequacy of income assistance in meeting housing needs is demonstrated by the fact that 45% of the homeless receive some income assistance.

Low welfare rates and the low minimum wage have collided with gentrification and rapidly rising house prices to make accommodation in Vancouver increasingly unaffordable and unobtainable for poor women. Housing costs in BC are much higher than the national average (5.7 times the median household income compared to 4.1 nationally), and even higher in the Vancouver area (7.2 times the median income). Rental rates are similarly higher and vacancy rates lower. Market housing is simply unaffordable to anyone on low income.

The relationship between poverty and women's homelessness is particularly acute for older women in Vancouver, whose rates of homelessness are of increasing concern. Because women's work is typically in the service industry, part-time and poorly paid, with no pensions or other benefits, older women find themselves in financial straits, with homelessness a real threat. This is compounded by the stress of age-related health problems.

Of course the tension between women's poverty and the increasing costs of housing is only exacerbated by the demise of public housing across the province. This can be traced to the federal government's cancellation of funding for non-profit and co-op housing in 1993, made worse by the current provincial government's cancellation of the Homes BC program in 2001. Although both levels of government have recently made new commitments to social housing, these commitments fall significantly below current needs. Plans for new social housing and SRO (single resident occupancy) units in the City of Vancouver, where the affordable housing

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crisis is most serious, will not even replace units lost to redevelopment. Between 2003 and 2005, 99 SRO units were created while 415 disappeared; between 2005 and 2006 the disparity was 82 to 400.

Vancouver Foundation, Metro Vancouver's Vital Signs 2007, (2007), online: VF, <http://www.vancouverfoundationvitalsigns.ca/> (date accessed: 22 July 2008): 4-12.

Social Planning and Research Council of BC, In the Proper Hands: SPARC BC Research on Homelessness and Affordable Housing (2007), online: SPARC BC, <http://www.sparc.bc.ca/resources-and-publications/category/45/affordable-housing-a-homelessness> (date accessed: 22 July 2008): 3.

David Eby et al., Cracks in the Foundation: Solving the Housing Crisis in Canada's Poorest Neighbourhood, (2006), online: Pivot Legal Society, <http://www.pivotlegal.org/pdfs/CracksinFoundation.pdf> (date accessed: 22 July 2008).

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Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag, Still Waiting for Justice: Provincial policies and gender inequality in BC 2001-2008. A report prepared for The British Columbia Federation of Labour (March 2008).

Housing and Legislation

The housing market in Vancouver is largely characterized as a "landlords' market". Residential tenancy legislation, though supposedly designed to protect the interests of both tenants and landlords, has failed to meet the needs of tenants in Vancouver. Particularly vulnerable renters in Vancouver, including low income women, have been forced to decrease their living standards becoming accustomed to insect and rodent infestation and living with the constant threat of eviction.

The current government has made cuts to the residential tenancy branch offices throughout British Columbia, including branches in Surrey, Kelowna, Vancouver, and Nanaimo. In a 2006 report conducted by the Pivot Legal Society, tenants reported 2-3 hour waits at residential tenancy offices for small tasks such as filing of applications, and often tenants are turned away for lack of capacity and long wait times. Low income women battling the stress of work and keeping families together have little time to deal with the stress of navigating through the legal and bureaucratic loop holes of the Residential Tenancy regime. This has resulted in women tenants not being able to access their rights under the Residential Tenancy Act.

David Eby et al., Cracks in the Foundation: Solving the Housing Crisis in Canada's Poorest Neighbourhood, (2006), online: Pivot Legal Society, <http://www.pivotlegal.org/pdfs/CracksinFoundation.pdf> (date accessed: 22 July 2008): v-vi.

Conclusion - Housing

For women experiencing poverty, securing safe, affordable, housing is the highest priority. Without safe, secure, affordable housing, women are exposed to unacceptable risks of

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violence, of poor health, and of losing their children to child welfare authorities. The resources required to provide foster care for children would be better spent on providing adequate housing and support services to their mothers.

In October 2007, United Nations Special Rapporteur Mr. Miloon Kothari, conducted a mission to Canada to examine the status of realization of the right to adequate housing, particularly focusing on women and other vulnerable groups and the possible impact of the 2010 Olympic Games on the housing situation in Vancouver. Mr. Kothari confirmed the deep and devastating impact of Canada's national housing crisis and its disproportionate impact on women and other groups particularly vulnerable to poverty.

Press Release: United Nations Expert on Adequate Housing Calls for Immediate Attention to Tackle National Housing Crisis in Canada (November 2007), online: United Nations,

Inaction and Non-compliance: British Columbia's Approach to Women's Inequality 60 <http://www.unhchr.ch/hurricane/hurricane.nsf/0/90995D69CE8153C3C1257387004F40B5?opendocument> (date accessed: 19 June 2008).

Without safe, secure, affordable housing, women are exposed to unacceptable risks of violence, of poor health, and of losing their children to child welfare authorities.

Recommendations

- **That the Government of British Columbia commit stable and long-term funding and programmes to realize a comprehensive provincial housing strategy;**
- **That particular funding be directed to women from racialized communities, Aboriginal women, victims of domestic violence, elderly women, and youth. This might include: developing more social housing units, establishing or increasing rent supplement programs, developing creative means of ensuring children are not apprehended by state authorities because of a woman's poverty and inadequate housing;**
- **That the Government of British Columbia ensure that income assistance rates are set at realistic levels that reflect the actual costs of adequate and safe housing.**

That particular funding be directed to women from racialized communities, Aboriginal women, victims of domestic violence, elderly women, and youth.

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