

Still Waiting for Justice: Update 2009

Provincial policies and gender inequality in BC

Gillian Creese, Phd.
Director & Professor
Centre for Women's & Gender Studies
& Sociology

Veronica Strong-Boag, Phd., FRSC
Professor
Educational Studies & Women's
Studies

Prepared for:

British Columbia Federation of Labour
Centre for Women's and Gender Studies, University of British Columbia

March 8, 2009



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	7
Part 1: While the rich get richer...	9
• Increasing poverty	9
• Rising homelessness	12
• Reduced access to welfare	13
• More regressive taxation	16
Part 2: During boom times and hard times...	17
• The gendered wage gap	18
• Public Sector Employment	21
• Declining employment standards	22
• Reduced Access to Childcare	24
Part 3: While education is the key to the future...	27
• Early Childhood Education	27
• Primary and Secondary Public Education	29
• Post-Secondary and Adult Education	31
• The Educational Challenge Remains	33
Part 4: While healthy living is promoted for some	34
• Monitoring Well-being	34
• Vulnerable Children and Youth	35
• Violence	37
• Home-based Caregiving	40
• The Perils of Childbirth	41
Part 5: While political power is the key to change...	41
• The Higher the Fewer	42
• Moving from the Good of the Few to the Good of the Many	44

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current global economic recession highlights central problems with neo-liberal economics and provides an opportunity to rethink economic and social policies in ways that can promote gender equality. Instead, the BC government has adopted a masculine conception of 'shovel ready' infrastructure projects (to create jobs that will overwhelmingly go to men) plus three billion dollars in budget cuts in the public sector that will likely lead to more job losses (overwhelmingly for women). To develop recovery strategies that will address long-standing inequities, and particularly the dismal record for women in BC, we need to rethink public policies by putting social justice and equity at the heart of policy development. To fail will only lead to deepening the gender and other inequalities documented in this report.

The gap between rich and poor in British Columbia has widened over the first decade of the 21st Century. The province has Canada's highest overall rate of poverty, highest rate of child poverty, and highest rate of 'working poor' families (those with at least one full-time wage earner). The income ratio gap between the richest and the poorest 10% of families increased from ten to one in 1993, to 14 to one in 2005. The depth of poverty is also staggering: the average BCer in poverty in 2006 had an annual income \$7700 below the Statistics Canada low-income cut-off. Single mothers of colour, aboriginal, or recent immigrants are most likely to live in poverty. This increase in poverty is directly related to Liberal policies, including reductions in income assistance levels, low minimum wage rates, disappearing higher-wage jobs in the public sector, and abysmal access to childcare.

According to the *Hunger Count 2008*, more than 2% of the BC population (over 78,000 people) used a Food Bank in March 2008: two-thirds were on social assistance (43%) or disability income support (22%); 14% were employed; and almost a third (31%) were children. Access to social assistance has also been significantly restricted, from 6% in 2002 to 3.5% in 2005; only half of this drop can be attributed to an improved labour market. High rates of poverty among the 'working poor', insufficient support through social assistance and disability benefits, and policies that increasingly deny those in need any access to social assistance or disability benefits at all, collide with gentrification and a housing market that is still in 2009, unaffordable to many. A growing incidence of homelessness is the starkest outcome of this crisis. The most recent 'homeless count' in Metro Vancouver found 2,660 people on March 11, 2008, almost two and a half times the number counted in 2002. After seven years of Liberal changes to income assistance and disability benefits, homeless people in shelters increased by one-third, while the 'street homeless' more than quadrupled. The subsequent economic collapse will only worsen this dreary picture.

In 2002, the Liberals introduced a range of changes to the social assistance program with the intent of saving \$581 million, or 30%, of the budget of the Ministry of Human Resources. Savings were met by closing Ministry offices, laying off staff, and reducing the numbers on social assistance and the benefits of those who continued to qualify. The Ministry's own data show that the savings clawed back through direct cuts to welfare recipients amounted to \$92 million dollars between 2002 and 2004. An

international comparison of social assistance rates for single mothers is damning: in a comparison of single parent families in 16 Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) countries, BC ranks 15 out of 16 (only ahead of the United States) in disposable income after paying for housing.

Provincial tax policies are a key contributor to the deepening gap between rich and poor in BC. The Liberals initiated a first round of tax cuts in 2001/2 with an almost 25% across-the-board cut in income tax; this was followed with a smaller pre-election tax cut in 2005 targeting low-income earners and finally in 2007/8 by a further 1.5 billion tax cut. The combination of these cuts has disproportionately advantaged those who need extra income the least.

A gendered wage gap remains central to the Canadian economy. According to Statistics Canada, women working full-time all year earned an average of 70.5% of the wages of male counterparts. Women with university degrees earn only 69% of men with a university education. In 2005, women in Vancouver earned 73% of men's incomes in management, 58% in sales/service, and 54% in education/ government service. Since women are more likely to be part-time, casual, and low-wage, they are also less likely to have private pension plans, to get maximum benefit from the Canada Pension Plan, or to be able to save significant RRSP contributions. Other Canadian jurisdictions have tried to address the gendered wage gap through pay equity and employment equity measures. Not so British Columbia. The Liberals dismantled the *Public Sector Employer's Council Pay Equity Policy Framework*, removed pay equity from the **Human Rights Code**, and dismantled the reporting process that collected employment equity data.

The public sector is a major employer for women and a significant source of well paid and secure jobs. Yet the Liberal government cut over 20,000 jobs in this sector in their first term in office; three-quarters of all staff cut were women. Other jobs, especially in health care, were contracted out after **Bill 29** stripped union contracts of 'no contracting-out' language. For those who followed jobs to the private sector, wages dropped by more than 40%. Even with the 2007 Supreme Court victory that ruled **Bill 29** violated the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, privatization has turned many previously 'good' jobs in health care into another feminized ghetto of stressful, insecure, low-wage work.

Changes to employment standards have been designed to provide employers with increased flexibility; unfortunately their increased flexibility has meant decreased protection for workers. Union members are now excluded from employment standards, and reduced standards decrease basic protections for those who are covered. Particularly detrimental changes for women include reductions in minimum shifts from four to two hours, the introduction of 'overtime averaging' that can result in a longer and less predictable work week, changes to statutory holiday pay that makes it more difficult for part-time workers to qualify, and an entry level minimum wage of \$6 an hour for the first 500 hours of employment, \$2 lower than the regular minimum wage of \$8 an hour. It has also become more difficult to enforce these rules. Workers who find their rights violated are now required to confront employers in person using a 'self-help kit' that is only available in English.

Two-thirds of women with offspring under three worked for pay in 2006. With so many mothers of young children employed, affordable, accessible childcare alternatives should be a government priority. However, Statistics Canada reports that there were only 80,230 supervised daycare spaces in British Columbia in 2004; in contrast, the province of Quebec, with nearly twice the population, has four times the childcare spaces. Lack of spaces is directly related to inadequate funding of childcare services and programs. With the Federal government's cancellation of the ELCC agreement and the end of federal funds for childcare, the Liberals announced new cuts to Childcare Operating Funds. Six months later, the result included the loss of 150 licensed childcare spaces, including losing 23% of all Group Day Care spaces for infants and toddlers, and the closure of 14 licensed centres, just in the Greater Victoria area.

Liberal democracies commonly hail educational opportunity as the solution to social inequalities, but an overview of education policy in BC suggests equal access is not a priority. Promises to expand the much-heralded Strong Start program that began in 2007 coexist with cuts to childcare spaces and the province's Childcare and Referral Resource Groups, leading advocates for early childhood education. In June 2007, the province was reminded that one in four BC children will begin kindergarten in September without the skills needed to succeed. The publicly-funded K-12 system is not faring much better. Private schools now enrol about 10% of BC's K-12 students as public funds are funnelled into private institutions for the affluent while budgets for special needs students are compromised. With high school completion challenging many BCers, college, university, and adult education programs often prove still more daunting. Even when youngsters qualify for admission, significant barriers exist. From 1999 to 2005, undergraduate university fees rose 84.4%, the steepest rise in any province. In these difficult times, student loans are consistently higher for women than for men.

British Columbians have unequal opportunities for good health. The elimination of the Women's Health Bureau and the Advisory Council on Women's Health in 2001 and the loss of funding for Sexual Assault/Women Assault Centres and local rape crisis lines are a good indication of provincial priorities. The Ministry of Health's 2006/07-2008/09 *Service Plan* fails to address women's particular health needs and does not even disaggregate data by gender. Everything to do with women's health has largely disappeared from public policy. Although it is well-known that sexual violence has life-long consequences, the Liberals attacked BC's violence against women movement and turned to patchwork remedies. Surviving sexual assault and women's centres today provide unfunded crisis line services and struggle with fundraising.

From 2000/01 and 2004/05, the numbers of BCers with home support dropped 24% even as the number of seniors, a majority of whom are women, increased. Women traditionally take up most paid and unpaid care-giving work. Provincial policies, with their decreasing access and diminution of service, jeopardize caregivers and clients alike, and are effectively disenfranchising the elderly and those with disabilities.

Women are best represented politically at the municipal level. The provincial level looks less promising, with only 17 women in a 79 member BC legislature, and five of twenty-

three members of the Executive Council (Cabinet). The paltry record of women in political office corresponds to the dim outlines of women and their needs in most policy and program initiatives. Since 2001, gender has become nearly invisible on official websites and planning documents. The elimination of the Ministry of Women's Equality, the Minister's Advisory Council of Women's Health, the Women's Health Bureau, the Human Rights Commission, much Legal Aid, and the Seniors' Advocate has devastated reporting and research on equality issues. Official retreat from equality goals has included withdrawal of support for community advocates, most notably Women's Centres. BC's rank of 8th among the provinces in per capital funding for the Auditor General and 6th of the 8 with stand-alone Information and Privacy Offices speak to lack of interest in public oversight or government accountability.

Hope for social justice lies in government commitment to a range of policies that aim to ameliorate economic, social, and political inequities. These policies should include progressive taxation, a minimum wage that actually reflects the cost of living, social housing and an end to homelessness, employment standards that protect workers, stopping the drift to privatization of public sector work, the institution of pay equity and employment equity policies, accessible and affordable childcare, increased benefits for those on social assistance and with disabilities to live in dignity, truly equal educational opportunities, reinvestment in single-tier public healthcare, including homecare, reinstated funding for Women's Centres, sexual assault centres and transition houses, and re-institution of a Ministry for Women's Equality and a gender-lens applied to all public policy initiatives. Without such policies, the gender equality will remain missing in action in the province, hailed so hopefully as the 'best place on earth.'

STILL WAITING FOR JUSTICE: UPDATE 2009

PROVINCIAL POLICIES AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN BC

Introduction

The financial crisis that sparked the current global economic recession has highlighted central problems with neo-liberal economics. Decades of state deregulation, the growing power of the stock market and the ‘paper’ economy, and the corresponding decline of the ‘real’ economy (both public and private) and effective state oversight have plunged the world into an economic downturn the likes of which has not been seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The current emphasis on quick fixes through fiscal stimulus – the rapid infusion of public funds to get people spending again – should not blind us to the need to completely rethink the basic premises of neo-liberalism. Only this will help us develop recovery strategies that will simultaneously address long-standing inequities among Canadians. Indeed, if we fail to make this choice, inequities will deepen, and social justice will become still more elusive. For all Canadians, the current economic crisis provides a critical opportunity to rethink public policies and put social justice and equity at the centre of policy development.

Notwithstanding today’s especially bad times, Canada remains one of the most affluent societies in the world and routinely ranks among the top four countries in the United Nations Human Development Index. In the 2008 ranking, it stands third behind Iceland and Norway.¹ Similarly, Vancouver regularly tops *The Economist’s* designation as the world’s most liveable city². For many, however, life in 21st Century BC is darkened by growing gaps between rich and poor and deepening levels of poverty and exclusion. Gender is one among several cleavages – race, class, age, (dis)ability and region - that cut through the façade of prosperity even in good times. While Iceland and Norway also rank among the top 4 countries in the 2008 *World Economic Forum Global Gender Report*, Canada ranks 31st on the gender gap index.³ As this disparity between 3rd overall and 31st when it comes to gender equality highlights, neo-liberal policies in Canada seriously short-change women and girls.

A critical evaluation of proposed economic recovery budgets, including the February 17, 2009 BC budget, illustrates the gendered politics of division and exclusion: at both the federal and provincial levels, governments have prioritized a narrow range of infrastructure projects that are ‘shovel ready’, a term that should immediately alert us to

We wish to thank the many people who have contributed to this and previous reports, including Lesley Andres, Benita Bunjun, Shauna Butterwick, Sylvia Fuller, Preston Guno, Paul Kershaw, Sarah Leamon, Emilia Nielson, Amy Parent, Jane Pulkingham, Jane Staschuk, Katherine Teightsoonian, and Margot Young.

¹ The United Nations Human Development Indices. (2008). *A Statistical update 2008*. Currently ranks Canada number 3 after Iceland and Norway. Retrieved February 14, 2009, from <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>

² The most recent rankings of liveable cities by *The Economist* (April 28, 2008) places Vancouver number 1, as it has done now for several years. Retrieved February 14, 2009, from http://www.economist.com/markets/rankings/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11116839

³ World Economic Forum. (2008). *Gender Gap Report 2008*. Retrieved November 14, 2008, from <http://www.weforum.org/en/Communities/Women%20Leaders%20and%20Gender%20P>

gender differences. As BC's Minister of Finance announced, "through Budget 2009, we're investing over \$14 billion in a stimulus package for infrastructure projects throughout the province. These will be shovel-ready projects to be advanced as quickly as possible."⁴ These projects, funded jointly by the province and the federal government, involve jobs in construction, trades and transportation (93% male jobs), professional jobs for engineers (78% male jobs), manufacturing (69% male jobs) and, after special pleas by Premier Campbell to remember forestry workers, primary industries (79% male jobs).⁵ Where, we might ask, is equivalent additional funding for infrastructure jobs in social service areas that employ large numbers of women such as education and health care, or the creation of a much needed provincial and national child care program? And where are the resources needed to strengthen and broaden social support programs (like Employment Insurance (EI) and social assistance) that were pared to the bone during periods of economic prosperity in ways that increased the feminization of poverty?⁶ The answer, both federally and provincially, is a resounding silence. Instead, governments have adopted a decidedly masculine conception of 'shovel ready' infrastructure projects combined with the same old neo-liberal policies of tax cuts and tax credits that disproportionately benefit men, the most affluent, and corporate interests.⁷ Perversely, BC's 'stimulus budget' actually includes three billion dollars in budget cuts in the public sector, including a public sector wage freeze, that will likely lead to more job losses for women.⁸ Even as the bankruptcy of neo-liberal ideologies is splashed across our newspapers and television and computer screens, these ideas continue their strangle-hold on public policy directions across Canada.

In *Where are the Women? Gender Equity, Budgets and Canadian Public Policy*⁹, Janine Brodie and Isabella Bakker document the process by which women, and consideration of gender equity issues, have been systematically eliminated from the public policy process in the last 15 years. They identify three strands of a process of 'de-gendering': delegitimization (whereby feminist scholars and activists were rebranded and discredited as 'special interests' who did not represent 'real' women), dismantling (whereby institutional structures established to monitor and advocate for women's equality were cut back or completely eliminated), and disappearance (such that women cease to be an analytic category in social policy development). The combined outcome of the '3Ds' of de-legitimization, dismantling and disappearance is the intentional and systematic removal of considerations of gender equality in policy development, a trend evident in the BC Liberal government's refashioning of public policy during its two terms in office. The elimination of the Ministry of Women's Equality is a prime example of the process of 'de-gendering.' Residual responsibility was shifted to a newly-created Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services in 2002; redefined simply as the Ministry of Community Services in 2005; and in 2008, in a move that went largely

⁴ Hansen, C. (2009, February 18). Swift action to protect jobs and families during turmoil. *Vancouver Sun*, p. A11.

⁵ Lahey, K. (2009). *Gender Analysis of Budget 2009*. Retrieved February 14, 2009, from The Progressive Economics Forum. Web site: <http://www.progressive-economics.ca/2009/01/31/gender-analysis-of-budget-2009/>

⁶ For example, after EI was restructured in 1996 the proportion of unemployed workers eligible for EI fell by 9% for men (to 44%) and 16% for women (to 33%). Brody, J. & Bakker, I. (2008). *Where are the Women? Gender Equity, Budgets and Canadian Public Policy*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

⁷ Lahey, K. (2009).

⁸ Hunter, J. (2009, February 18). Two years of deficit, public sector battle brews. *Globe and Mail*, p. A1.

⁹ Brody, J. & Bakker, I. (2008).

unnoticed, the women's portfolio was shifted to the Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport, in what one can only consider a gesture of derision.¹⁰ Women's equality issues have now completely disappeared from the official policy landscape. The result of the 'de-gendering' (or perhaps more accurately the re-gendering¹¹) of public policy has increasingly thrust women and other disadvantaged groups in BC to the margin over the last decade.

This Report, like its predecessors,¹² addresses specific policies pursued by the BC Liberal government to show why so many women are among the province's disenfranchised and how government policies contribute directly to the privileging of the few while the rest fall further behind. It attempts to redress the invisibility of equality issues created by the present government's dismantling of reporting bodies and elimination of mandates to report on gender and other forms of equity. We draw on research by a wide range of scholars and community-based researchers in order to shift the spotlight from the disembodied individuals (those without gender, race, class, age, etc.) of neo-liberal theories back to issues of equality for marginalized groups who are decidedly worse off now than they were in 2001, and whose situation will continue to deteriorate unless we embed equity concerns into policy development.

Part One: While the rich get richer...

The gap between rich and poor in British Columbia has deepened over the first decade of the 21st Century. This is not a natural phenomenon attributable to economic processes of globalization nor a new phenomenon tied to the current economic crisis. Measures of equality must be assessed within the context of public policy decisions, and hence as social outcomes that we can work to change. Neo-liberal policies adopted by the BC government since 2001, buttressed by federal policies enacted since the election of the Harper government in 2006, have left many women— and disproportionately those who are Aboriginal, immigrant, of colour, elderly, unemployed, low wage workers, single mothers, and/or with disabilities - in an increasingly precarious position. Policies in BC have repeatedly diverted resources away from those most in need and created growing levels of inequality.

Increasing poverty

The poor are disproportionately single parents, low-wage workers, recipients of social assistance, elderly residents living alone, those with disabilities and chronic health conditions – *all predominantly women* - as well as children, recent immigrants and men and women of aboriginal descent. Since poverty is feminized, any measures that increase poverty simultaneously increase gender inequality and deepen disadvantages linked to race, class and age.

¹⁰ B.C. CEDAW Group. (2008, September). "Inaction and Non-compliance: British Columbia's Approach to Women's Inequality", Submission to the United Nations Committee on The Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

¹¹ Re-gendering is more accurate because social policies enacted by neo-liberal governments are indeed gendered in that they reinforce male advantage and female disadvantage.

¹² *Losing Ground: the effects of government cutbacks on women in British Columbia, 2001-2005* (2005) and *Still Waiting for Justice: Provincial policies and gender inequality in BC 2001-2008* (2008).

The province of British Columbia continues to have the *highest rate of poverty in the country*. Perversely, it also has more millionaires per capita than any other province.¹³ In 2006, 13% of all British Columbians, or over half a million people, lived below the poverty line, well above the national average of 10.5%.¹⁴ Rates of poverty among aboriginal men and women are more than double those for non-aboriginals.¹⁵ Poverty varies across the province, with the highest rates in Metro Vancouver. In 2004, 17% of all its residents were below the low income cut-off (after taxes) as calculated by Statistics Canada.¹⁶ “The gap between the rich and poor [individuals] increased by 8.7% between 2001 and 2005 in Metro Vancouver”, with the average income of the richest 10% of individuals now 10.3 times that of the poorest 10% (\$145,800 compared to \$14,100).¹⁷ In 2006, the “richest 10% of BC’s families with children had an average income of \$201,490, up from \$153,899 in 1989 in constant 2006 dollars. By comparison, the poorest 10% of families with children had an average income of \$15,657 in 2006, down from \$16,966 in 1989.”¹⁸ In fact, the discrepancy deteriorated more in Vancouver than in any other Canadian city. When we look at households (rather than individuals), the gap mounts; the income ratio gap between the richest and poorest 10% of families jumped from ten to one in 1993, to fourteen to one in 2005.¹⁹ The depth of poverty is also staggering: in 2006 the average person in poverty in BC had an annual income \$7,700 *below* the Statistics Canada’s low-income cut-off.²⁰

In 2005, the percentage of children living below the poverty line varied across the country from a low of 9% in Prince Edward Island, to a high of 21% in British Columbia (before taxes).²¹ The rate of child poverty is even higher in larger cities: in 2006 it was 24% in Metro Vancouver while the national rate was 16%; this included more than one-third (35%) of all households headed by single mothers.²² BC’s first place for child poverty emerged in 2002 and has persisted. “BC is the only province where the child poverty rate was actually higher in 2005 than in 1997 despite increases in [federal] child benefits”.²³

In 2006, the poverty rate for children living with single parents was nearly four times that of children in two-parent families (43% compared to 11%).²⁴ One in every five BC families with children (21%) is headed by a single parent,²⁵ 80% percent are headed by mothers.²⁶ Single mothers of colour, aboriginal, or recent immigrant are most likely to live in poverty. The incidence of poverty rises from 50% for all single-parent families, to 60% in families headed by a person of colour or an aboriginal parent, and 70% in

¹³ Kline et al., (2008). *A Poverty Reduction Plan for BC*. Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Vancouver Foundation. (2006). *Vancouver’s Vital Signs 2006*.

¹⁷ Vancouver Foundation. (2007). *Metro Vancouver’s Vital Signs 2007*.

¹⁸ BC Campaign 2000. (November 21, 2008). *Incomes of Families with Children*. Fact Sheet #6.

¹⁹ BC Campaign 2000. (2007). *2007 Poverty Report Card*, Fact Sheet # 6.

²⁰ Kline et al., (2008).

²¹ BC Campaign 2000. (2007). Fact Sheet #2.

²² Vancouver Foundation. (2008). *Vital Signs for Metro Vancouver 2008*.

²³ B.C. Campaign 2000. (2007). *2007 Poverty Report Card*, Fact Sheet # 3.

²⁴ Kline et al., (2008).

²⁵ Statistics Canada. (2006). *Women in Canada*.

²⁶ Statistics Canada. (2007). *Family Portrait: Continuity and Change in Canadian Families and Households in 2006*, 2006 Census; The Canadian Press. (2007). “Women head most single-parent families in Vancouver: Census,” from CBC Web site: www.cbc.ca/Canada/british-columbia/story/2007/09/12/bc-census.html.

families headed by a recent immigrant.²⁷ “In BC, poverty among lone mothers rose an astounding 15.8 percentage points between 2000 and 2004; Vancouver was still worse at 24 percentage points.”²⁸ This increase is directly related to government policies, including reductions in income assistance levels, low minimum wage rates, disappearing higher-wage jobs in the public sector, and inadequate access to childcare. A recent study concludes that average government transfers to BC’s lone mothers declined by \$2300 between 2001 and 2004.²⁹

Holding a full-time, full-year job is no guarantee of economic security. In 2005, BC had the highest proportion of ‘working poor’ families (those with children living below the poverty line in which at least one adult held a full-time, full-year job): 14.5% in BC compared to a national average of 8.7%.³⁰ “A person working 40-hours a week for 52 weeks would have to earn \$9.99 an hour in 2005 to reach the poverty line for a single person in Vancouver”.³¹ In 2007, nearly one in every six workers in BC (16%) earned less than this \$10 an hour threshold.³² Two-thirds of workers earning less than \$10 an hour were women, more than one in six (18%) of all employed women in the province.³³ With a provincial minimum wage of \$8.00 an hour and a lower ‘training wage’ of \$6.00, minimum wage workers (5.6% of the 2005 BC labour force) are condemned to poverty.³⁴ Full-time earnings for minimum wage workers in BC amount to only \$16,640 a year, more than \$5000 below the Statistics Canada poverty line for an individual living in a large urban centre in 2007.³⁵ Significantly, women constitute two-thirds of all Canadian workers earning minimum wage.³⁶ Raising the minimum wage to at least \$10 an hour would be a beginning, but will not lift anyone out of poverty who is also supporting dependents. A new initiative to define a ‘living wage’ for Metro Vancouver and Victoria has set a full-time living wage at \$16.74 for a single parent with one child, or two working parents with two children.³⁷ This is a far cry from BC’s current \$8 an hour (or the \$6 training wage). The courage and determination of the province’s low-waged women are also clear, as Paul Kershaw, Jane Pulkingham and Sylvia Fuller have recently documented, in their determination to preserve self-respect and struggle to support their families in precarious jobs, and in face of official indifference to their plight.³⁸

²⁷ Vancouver Foundation. (2007). *Metro Vancouver’s Vital Signs*.

²⁸ Pulkingham, J. (2006, Summer). Bucking the National Trend: The Campbell Cuts and Poverty Among Lone Mother in BC. *SPARC BC News*, p. 26.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ BC Campaign 2000. (2007). *2007 Poverty Report Card*, Fact Sheet #7.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Klein et al, (2008).

³³ Canadian Union of Public Employees. (2007, November). *CUPE Economic Brief*.

³⁴ Campaign 2000. (2007). *Raising the Falling Fortunes of Young Families with Children*.

³⁵ Kline et al., (2008).

³⁶ Murray, S. & MacKenzie, H. (2007). *Bringing Minimum Wages Above the Poverty Line*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

³⁷ Richards et al, *Working for a Living Wage: Making paid work meet basic family needs in Vancouver and Victoria*. (2008, September). Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, and the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria. The rates vary slightly between Vancouver and Victoria. The rate for Vancouver has been cited.

³⁸ Kershaw, P., Pulkingham, J., & Fuller, S. (2008, Summer). Expanding the Subject: Violence, Care, and (In)Active Male Citizenship. *Social Politics*, p. 182-206.

Rising homelessness

Homelessness is growing in British Columbia. High rates of poverty among the 'working poor', insufficient support through social assistance and disability benefits, and policies that increasingly deny those in need any access to social assistance or disability benefits at all, collide with gentrification and a challenging housing market to make accommodation increasingly unaffordable. Although the real estate market has declined over the past year, housing costs in BC remain much higher than the national average; in 2006 buying a home in Metro Vancouver cost eight times the median annual income of residents of the area, compared to six times the annual income in 2000.³⁹ Rental rates are similarly higher and vacancy rates lower; in 2007, the Metro Vancouver vacancy rate was 1%.⁴⁰ Market housing provides a major barrier to the security of those on low income.

The dearth of affordable social housing can be traced to the federal government's cancellation of funding for non-profit and co-op housing in 1993, exacerbated by the Liberal's shutdown of the Homes BC program in 2001.⁴¹ Although both levels of government have recently made commitments to social housing, these fall significantly below current needs. In recent years, new social housing and SRO (single resident occupancy) units in the City of Vancouver, where the affordable housing crisis is most serious, have not matched units lost to redevelopment. Between 2003 and 2005, 99 new SRO units were created while 415 disappeared; between 2005 and 2006 the disparity was 82 and 400.⁴² These pressures have only intensified in the run up to the 2010 Olympics as landlords and developers hope to cash in on the financial windfall that threatens to further displace poorer residents.⁴³

A growing incidence of homelessness is the starkest outcome of this crisis. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation identifies two stages that precede homelessness. Those with 'core housing need' spend more than 30% of their pre-tax household income on accommodation; in BC this includes nearly 16% of all households, and almost one-third (31.4%) of renters. Those with 'severe housing need' spend at least half of their pre-tax income on housing and are typically one divorce, illness, layoff or other personal catastrophe away from homelessness: 6.7% of BC households, and 13.3% of renters, fall into this category.⁴⁴ Although these statistics are not available by gender, the feminization of poverty and their disproportionate impoverishment make single mothers, women of colour, aboriginal women, new immigrants and women with disabilities most vulnerable. Those fleeing abusive partners are particularly in danger.

The most recent 'homeless count' in Metro Vancouver found 2,660 people homeless on March 11 of 2008. This number increased by 22% from 2005 (2,174); which in turn

³⁹ Vancouver Foundation. (2008). *Vital Signs for Metro Vancouver*.

⁴⁰ Vancouver Foundation. (2007). *Metro Vancouver's Vital Signs; Vital Signs for Metro Vancouver*. (2008).

⁴¹ Social Planning and Research Council of BC. (2007). *In the Proper Hands: SPARC BC Research on Homelessness and Affordable Housing*.

⁴² Pivot Legal Society. (2006). *Cracks in the Foundation: Solving the Housing Crisis in Canada's Poorest Neighbourhood*.

⁴³ Ibid.; Lee, M. (2007, Fall). The Clock is Ticking on Homelessness and the Olympics. *BC Commentary*, 10(3), 1.

⁴⁴ Social Planning and Research Council of BC. (2007). *In the Proper Hands*.

almost double from the 2002 count (1,121).⁴⁵ After seven years of Liberal policies, homeless people in shelters increased by more than one-third and reached shelter capacity by 2005; but the 'street homeless' continues to increase, and more than quadrupled between 2002 and 2008 (from 333 to 1,574). In addition, enumerators identified an additional 402 people that they 'perceived' to be homeless, but were not able to speak to and so were not included in the count. Nearly two-thirds (64%) had some income from income assistance, pensions, or disability benefits, a measure of their inadequacy. One fifth (19%) had income from employment. One-third were aboriginal in origin in spite of constituting only 2% of the population of Metro Vancouver area; 35% of the aboriginal homeless were women (compared to 27% of the non-aboriginal homeless). The number of seniors (over 55) more than quadrupled (from 51 in 2002 to 212 in 2008). Perhaps most distressingly, 94 homeless children were counted with their parents. In all, 6% were under 19 years of age, and 9% were over 55. Nearly half (48%) had been homeless for more than one year. The rising tide of homeless and 'severe housing need' (those who are one personal catastrophe away from losing shelter) reflects the failure of public policy and diminishes the quality of life for everyone in British Columbia. No wonder predictions suggest that there will be more homeless BCers than athletes in 2010.⁴⁶

Reduced access to welfare

For those unable to work or find employment, social assistance promises a critical safety net. The Liberal government in British Columbia has systematically reduced access to social assistance while lowering meagre welfare rates for those who qualify. The result increases poverty and hardship for thousands of our most vulnerable citizens. Social assistance is especially important to single mothers who have the highest rates of poverty, and more limited employment options due to childcare responsibilities and lack of affordable childcare. About one-third of BC's social assistance recipients are single-parents, about 90% mothers. Indeed a recent report concluded that BC social assistance policies constitute a clear case of gender discrimination that is contrary to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *BC Human Rights Code*.⁴⁷

In 2002, the Liberals introduced a range of changes to the social assistance program with the intent of saving \$581 million, or 30%, of the budget of the Ministry of Human Resources which administers the welfare program.⁴⁸ Savings were obtained by closing Ministry offices, laying off staff, reducing the numbers on social assistance and the benefits of those who continued to qualify. Almost all categories of recipients suffered: families with more than two children, single parent families, single adults, and couples without children lost between \$47 and \$145 each per month. In addition, single parents

⁴⁵ Greater Vancouver Regional District. (2005, September). "On Our Streets and in our Shelters: Results of the 2005 Greater Vancouver Homeless Count," *Homeless Count 2005 Bulletin*; Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. (2009, September). *Still on Our Streets...Results of the 2008 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count*. The statistics that follow all come from the 2008 count.

⁴⁶ See Paulsen, M. (2007). *Can Vancouver's Olympic pride be saved?* Retrieved February 16, 2009, from The Tyee.ca Web site: <http://thetyee.ca/News/2007/05/28/Homeless1/>

⁴⁷ Brodsky, G., Buckley, M., Day, S., & Young, M. (2005). *Human Rights Denied: Single Mothers on Social Assistance in British Columbia*. Poverty and Human Rights Centre.

⁴⁸ Klein, S., & Smith, A. (2006, April). Budget Savings on the Backs of the Poor: Who Paid the Price for Welfare Benefit Cuts in BC. *Behind the Numbers*.

saw their exemption for spousal support (\$100) disappear, and everyone lost the earned income exemption (\$100 for singles and \$200 for families). BC is the only Canadian jurisdiction that does not allow welfare recipients to retain any earnings.⁴⁹ The Ministry's own data, obtained through a Freedom of Information request, show that the savings clawed back through direct cuts to welfare recipients amounted to \$92 million dollars between 2002 and 2004.⁵⁰ Benefits to a single mother with one child constituted only 48% of the low-income cut-off established by Statistics Canada; for a single mother with two children this figure was 43%.⁵¹

In 2006, a single person in BC received \$510 per month; a single parent with one child \$969; taking inflation into account, these rates are lower than welfare recipients received in 1994.⁵² In 2007, the Liberals raised shelter allowances for all recipients by \$50, plus an additional \$50 in support for single parents and single adults.⁵³ In most cases these new rates remain lower than before 2002. The current rate for a single 'employable' person is \$610 per month, including \$375 for housing, and \$235 for everything else; this amounts to only 40% of the poverty line in 2007.⁵⁴ A single parent with one child now receives \$946 a month; leaving the family in poverty even with federal government transfers (through the child tax credit) of about \$300 a month.⁵⁵ An international comparison of support for single parent families is damning: comparing single parent families in 16 OECD countries, BC ranks 15 out of 16 (only ahead of the United States) in disposable income after paying for housing. Single mothers in Norway and Austria had over \$1500 in disposable income after paying for accommodation; BC single moms had \$414.⁵⁶

As the Dieticians of Canada point out in *The Cost of Eating in BC 2007*, it is impossible to maintain a healthy diet on social assistance. Indeed, it is difficult for anyone who pays more than 30% of their income on housing to eat nutritiously and cover other essentials, the situation of 16% of all BCers.⁵⁷ One outcome of inadequate incomes for social assistance recipients, the unemployed and low-wage workers, is increasing reliance on food banks. According to the *Hunger Count 2008*, more than 2% of the BC population (over 78,000 people) used a food bank in March 2008: two-thirds were on social assistance (43%) or disability income support (22%).⁵⁸ Another 14% were employed, a 26% increase from the previous year (11%); and almost a third (31%) relying on food banks were children.⁵⁹

Cutting benefits is only part of the Liberal social assistance legacy. Access to support has also been significantly restricted. The percentage of British Columbians on social assistance dropped from 6% in 2002 to 3.5% in 2005; only half of this drop can be

⁴⁹ Pulkingham. (2006). Bucking the National Trend.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Brodsky et al. (2005). *Human Rights Denied*.

⁵² Klein & Smith. (2006). Budget Savings on the Backs of the Poor.

⁵³ Kershaw, P. (2007). Measuring Up: Family Benefits in British Columbia and Alberta in International Perspective. *IRPP Choices*, 13(2): 33.

⁵⁴ Kline et al, (2008).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Kershaw, P. (2007).

⁵⁷ The Dieticians of Canada. (2007). *The Cost of Eating in BC 2007*; Social Planning and Research Council of BC. (2007). *In the Proper Hands*.

⁵⁸ The Canadian Association of Food Banks. (2007). *Hunger Count 2007*; Food Banks Canada. (2008). *Hunger Count 2008*.

⁵⁹ Ibid., (2008).

attributed to an improved labour market.⁶⁰ The rest emerges from policies that ‘discourage, delay and deny’ applicants; in particular, the three-week job search requirement before an in-take interview is conducted, the two-year ‘independence’ test whereby applicants must prove they earned a minimum of \$7000 or worked 840 hours in the previous two years, and implementation of a 1-800 number for initial enquiries and compulsory on-line computer orientation, wholly inappropriate requirements for this population. Other changes specifically affected women, including those leaving violent relationships: single mothers were redefined as ‘employable’ when their youngest child turned three (previously seven); the child support exemption of \$100 was eliminated; full-time students were no longer eligible for social assistance (eliminating access to retraining); back-to-work benefits (e.g. clothing and childcare expenses) were eliminated; and childcare subsidies were cut.⁶¹ The combination discouraged many applicants from completing an application (the number dropped by nearly one-quarter between 2002 and 2004), increased the rejection rate (acceptance dropped from 85% in 2001-2 to 64% in 2003-4), and made it more difficult for others, particularly single mothers, to get off social assistance and back into the labour force.⁶²

New policies also made it harder to qualify for disability benefits by forcing people to re-apply with new criteria, reducing supports for rehabilitation, employment, housing, and mental health services, and reducing benefits (though some were increased again in 2005).⁶³ With a higher incidence of so-called ‘invisible’ or ‘fluctuating’ disabilities such as chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, arthritis and depression,⁶⁴ women are especially hurt by more restrictive definitions of disability. The insecurity associated with periodic review of disability status has exacerbated the precarious economic circumstances and health status of many women with disabilities.⁶⁵

The new welfare and disability benefits regime has increased recipients’ insecurity while subjecting them to more intense state monitoring. With most only eligible for ‘temporary’ assistance, the threat of being cut off social assistance at any time is real: 500 people were cut off in 2006, and 350 in 2007.⁶⁶ A recent three-year study of single mothers on welfare documents how this precariousness exacerbates poverty and vulnerability while hindering efforts to move to the labour force.⁶⁷ Single mothers parenting in poverty face the additional danger of state apprehension of their children. As Mary Russell, Barbara Harris and Annemarie Gockel have recently argued, poverty is not addressed as a structural context that impairs the ability to parent effectively. Instead mothers find themselves almost automatically interpreted as inadequate and

⁶⁰ Wallace, B., Klein, S., & Reitsma-Street, M. (2006). *Denied Assistance: Closing the Front Door on Welfare in BC*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

⁶¹ Brodsky et al., (2005).

⁶² Wallace et al., (2006). Note that these figures were obtained from the Ministry through a Freedom of Information request.

⁶³ Morrow, M., Frischmuth, S., & Johnson, A. (2006). *Community-Based Mental Health Services in BC: Changes to Income, Employment and Housing Supports*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

⁶⁴ Tom, A., Prieur, D., & Zingaro, L. (2003, February 15). Cutting Social Supports in the Name of Independence, Self –Sufficiency and Choice: Women and Children with Disabilities. *Friends of Women and Children in BC Report Card*.

⁶⁵ Dyson, J. & Laxton, R. (2007, Winter). Editorial, *Transition*. BC Coalition of People with Disabilities.

⁶⁶ Klein et al., (2007).

⁶⁷ Gurstein, P. & Goldberg, M. (2008, December). *Precarious and Vulnerable: Lone Mothers on Income Assistance*. Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia.

'neglectful'.⁶⁸ Aboriginal single mothers are especially vulnerable, and their children continue to be apprehended at an alarming rate: aboriginal children are ten times more likely than non-aboriginal children to be in care in BC.⁶⁹

More regressive taxation

Provincial tax policies are a key contributor to the deepening gulf between rich and poor in BC. The Liberals initiated a first round of tax cuts in 2001/2 with an almost 25% across-the-board cut in income tax; this was followed with a smaller pre-election tax cut in 2005 targeting low-income earners; and finally in 2007/8 a further 1.5 billion tax cut was implemented.⁷⁰ These initiatives reshape the social landscape in two ways: 1) the loss of significant government revenues restricts the province's ability to provide services and supports at previous levels, reductions that disproportionately affect women and other poorer members of our society; and 2) the income tax system in BC has become more regressive, shifting more economic resources away from lower income residents and toward those with higher incomes. Even though the BC government has recently acknowledged that more money must be spent to stimulate the economy as unemployment levels rise and global recession deepens, eliminating the most recent tax cuts has not been considered. Instead, despite many earlier promises of 'saving for a rainy day' and years of intentionally reducing government revenues through large tax cuts, the province plans a deficit for the first time in years.

The combined effect of 2001-2008 income tax cuts has disproportionately advantaged those who need extra income the least. The 2007/8 cuts are worth \$82 a year for those earning between \$15,000 and \$20,000 (and zero for those earning less than \$15,000), but \$864 annually for those earning \$100,000 or more.⁷¹ Not only do tax cuts put more money into the pockets of the most affluent BCers, this cash also represents a larger percentage of their taxable incomes:

Annual Taxable Income	Tax Cut (2000-2008) as Share of Taxable Income
\$15,000	0.37%
\$20,000	2.84%
\$30,000	1.94%
\$50,000	2.55%
\$70,000	2.94%
\$100,000	3.90%
\$150,000	4.27%

⁶⁸ Russell, M., Harris, B., & Gockel, A. (2008). Parenting in poverty: Perspectives of high-risk parents. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 14(1), 83-98.

⁶⁹ Bennett, D., & Sadrehashemi, L. (2008). *Broken Promises: Parents Speak about B.C.'s Child Welfare System*. Pivot Legal Society.

⁷⁰ Murray, S. (2005, April). Shifting Costs: An Update on How Tax & Spending Cuts Impact British Columbians. *Behind the Numbers*; Murray, S. (2007, May). "Who Gets What from the 2007 BC Tax Cut?" *Behind the Numbers*.

⁷¹ Murray, (2007).

Source: Stuart Murray, "Who Gets What from the 2007 BC Tax Cut?" *Behind the Numbers*, May 2007:2.

This pattern has significant gendered consequences in a province where women earn an average of 62.8% of men's income (\$23,500 versus \$37,400 in 2003).⁷² Regressive changes in BC income tax policies have exacerbated the gap between rich and poor, and hence, the chasm between women and men, and unnecessarily restricted the flow of resources that our government needs to address the recession in ways that benefit all BCers.⁷³

Part 2: During Boom Times and Hard Times...

For the past half decade the BC economy has been booming and unemployment rates reached lows not seen in several decades. In July 2007, unemployment averaged 4.1% provincially and was below 5% in every region except the North Coast Nechako (where it was 7.7%).⁷⁴ Men had slightly higher unemployment rates than women; as did those under 25 years of age, but all age groups have lower levels in recent years.⁷⁵ However, even in boom times, prospects are not equal across differently racialized communities: aboriginal men and women⁷⁶ and recent immigrants of colour⁷⁷ typically experience unemployment rates double other Canadian workers. Similarly, rates of employment vary for different groups, with women, aboriginal Canadians and new immigrants with lower rates than non-aboriginal native-born men. In BC, employment rates have dropped slightly for both men (77.1%) and women (57.3%) over the last few years, indicating that fewer people are looking for work.⁷⁸ With the global recession beginning in 2008 this pattern is bound to shift. Already unemployment rates have begun to climb. The province lost 35,000 jobs in between December 2008 and January 2009 alone, raising BC's unemployment rate to 6.1%.⁷⁹ Although provincial data is not yet available by gender, across the country unemployment rates rose from 5.8% to 6.7% for men, and from 5.0% to 5.4% for women during the same time period.⁸⁰

Rates of employment and unemployment are crude measures of economic health. They tell us something about how many people are struggling to find work, but tell us little about changes in types of jobs available, or wages, working conditions and benefits. A closer look at BC employment trends during the boom period that preceded the current recession shows that the benefits of a booming economy are both uneven

⁷² Statistics Canada. (2006). *Women in Canada: A Gender-Based Statistical Report*.

⁷³ The gap between the diversified urban economies of Greater Vancouver and Victoria and the less diversified resource-based economy in the rest of the province is also exacerbated through tax policies. Victoria, Vancouver and the Fraser Valley are home to 66% of tax filers in BC but received 71% of the total tax cuts between 2001 and 2005. Lee, M., Murray, S., & Parfitt, B. (2005). *BC's Regional Divide: How Tax and Spending Policies Affect BC Communities*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

⁷⁴ Service Canada. (2007). *BC/Yukon Region Labour Force Survey*. Retrieved February 2, 2008, from Service Canada Web site: <http://www1.servicecanada.gc.ca/en/bc-yk/59/jwtc/lmi/lfs0707.shtml>

⁷⁵ Ibid. Under 25: men 7.1%, women 6.5%; over 25: men 3.7%, women 3.5%.

⁷⁶ Vancouver Foundation. (2007). *Metro Vancouver's Vital Signs 2007*; Statistics Canada: *Women in Canada, Fifth Edition: A Gender-Based Statistical Report*. (2006).

⁷⁷ Creese, G. (2007). Racializing Work/ Reproducing White Privilege. In V. Shalla & W. Clement (Ed.), *Work in Tumultuous Times* (p. 198). Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

⁷⁸ Service Canada. (2007). *BC/Yukon Region Labour Force Survey*; Statistics Canada, *Women in Canada: Work Chapter Updates 2006*.

⁷⁹ Statistics Canada. (2009). *Labour Force Survey*. Retrieved February 15, 2009, from Statistics Canada Web site: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/090206/t090206a4-eng.htm>

⁸⁰ Ibid.

and gendered. The current economic downturn can be expected to exacerbate these trends. Moreover, government policies have done much to reshape the landscape of employment opportunities in ways that have been particularly detrimental for women, aboriginal peoples, and recent immigrants of colour.

The gendered wage gap

The gender division of paid and unpaid labour remains a central feature of the Canadian labour market. Women continue to work in a more limited range of occupations than men, and earn less across all categories of occupations and educational levels. It remains the case in 2006 that two-thirds of all employed women work in four areas: teaching, nursing/other health care, clerical, and sales/service; in comparison, less than one-third of men are similarly concentrated.⁸¹ Women are under-represented in the more lucrative fields including management (36% female), science/engineering (22% female), primary industries (20.5% female), transport/construction (6.5% female), and manufacturing (31% female).⁸² A large body of scholarship in Canada and elsewhere has documented that wages are directly related to whether jobs have historically been staffed by women or men, with ‘men’s work’ earning a premium while ‘women’s work’ is systematically undervalued.⁸³

According to Statistics Canada, women working full-time all year in 2003 earned an average of 70.5% of the wages of male counterparts.⁸⁴ As Table 1 shows, the gendered wage-gap persists across all occupational groups, ranging from women earning just over half of men’s incomes in medicine/health and sales/service, to 80% in science, artistic/recreation and clerical work. Moreover, as Table 2 illustrates, the wage-gap does not diminish with higher levels of education; women with university degrees earn only 69% of men with a university education. Although the proportion of women with higher education has increased such that more women than men now hold university degrees, nevertheless the wage gap has not appreciably declined. According to Statistics Canada this is because during the 1990s “while real wages increased in male-dominated areas such as engineering, mathematics and computer sciences, they fell in female dominated sectors such as health and education”.⁸⁵

Table 1: Average Annual Earnings, by Occupation and Gender, Full-Time, Full-Year Workers, 2003

Occupation	Women	Men	Women’s Earnings as % of Men’s
Managerial	46,600	69,000	67.4
Administrative	35,500	55,700	63.7

⁸¹ Statistics Canada. (2006). *Women in Canada: Work Chapter Updates*.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ For one BC study for example see Creese, G. (1999). *Contracting Masculinity: Gender, Class, and Race in a White-Collar Union, 1944-1994*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press.

⁸⁴ Statistics Canada. (2006). *Women in Canada, Fifth Edition: A Gender-Based Statistical Report*.

⁸⁵ CBC News. (2007, June 12). *Women hold more degrees, but still earn lower wages*.

Professions

Business/finance	55,800	80,400	69.3
Natural Sciences	55,300	66,500	83.1
Social Sciences/Religion	63,900	91,200	70.0
Teaching	47,500	63,300	75.0
Medicine/Health	61,100	116,300	52.5
Artistic/Recreational	33,600	41,900	80.0
Clerical	33,300	41,800	79.7
Sales/service	24,100	43,300	55.7
Trades/transportation	24,800	43,500	57.1
Primary	19,200	31,500	60.8
Manufacturing	26,200	45,100	58.1
Total	36,500	51,700	70.5

Source: Statistics Canada, *Women in Canada Fifth Edition: A Gender-based Statistical Report*, 2006: 153.

Table 2: Average Annual Earnings, by Education and Gender, Full-Time, Full-Year, 2003

Educational Attainment	Women	Men	Women's Earnings as % of Men's
Less than Grade 9	21,700	31,200	69.4
Some Secondary school	22,900	40,000	57.3
Secondary School Graduate	30,500	43,000	71.0
Some Post-Secondary	31,500	41,600	75.6
Post-Sec Certificate/Diploma	34,200	49,800	68.6
University Degree	53,400	77,500	68.9
Total	36,500	51,700	70.5

Source: Statistics Canada, *Women in Canada, Fifth Edition: A Gender-based Statistical Report*, 2006:152.

These broad patterns of gendered employment inequities are no different in British Columbia than in the rest of Canada. In 2005, women in Vancouver earned 73% of men's incomes in management (\$52,600 versus \$71,800), 58% in sales/service (\$21,500 versus \$36,700) and 54% in education/government service (\$37,800 versus \$70,600).⁸⁶ These comparisons are for full-time, full-year employment. The gendered wage gap increases when we factor in women's greater likelihood of working part-time. More than one quarter of all women (26%) in Canada work part-time compared to only one in ten men (11%); and fully one-quarter of part-time women indicated they wanted full-time work.⁸⁷ The most common reason given for choosing part-time employment was "personal and family responsibilities" including childcare and elder care.⁸⁸ Part-timers typically earn lower wages and enjoy fewer benefits than full-timers, hence widening the gendered wage gap.

These gendered patterns affect life in retirement as well. Since they are more likely to be part-time, casual and low-wage workers, fewer women have private pension plans, get maximum benefit from the Canada Pension Plan, or save significant RRSP contributions. As Statistics Canada notes, "because women's earnings have traditionally been lower than their male counterparts, their contributions, and therefore their subsequent benefits, are in many cases also lower".⁸⁹ The average income of women over 65 years of age is \$10,000 less than men's.⁹⁰ Women who never worked outside the home do not receive Canada Pension benefits, and those who do receive an average of \$2000 less per year than their male counterparts.⁹¹ Only 26% of the income of women over 65 comes from private pensions, compared to 41% of senior men's income.⁹² Not surprisingly then, twice as many senior women (9%) as men (4%) are living below Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off, a figure that rises to 19% for women living alone.⁹³ Employment policies in BC widen this retirement discrepancy.

Other jurisdictions in Canada have tried to address the gendered wage gap through pay equity and employment equity measures. Not so British Columbia. Among the Liberals' first acts in office was to dismantle the *Public Sector Employer's Council Pay Equity Policy Framework* enacted by the previous government. They removed the pay equity provision from the **Human Rights Code**, and simply abandoned the policy of redressing the gendered wage gap.⁹⁴ In regard to employment equity (policies designed to redress hiring disadvantages for women, people of colour, those of aboriginal origin and those with disabilities), they dismantled the reporting process and no longer collect equity data, a process Abigail Bakan and Audrey Kobayashi refer to as public policy "through

⁸⁶ Vancouver Foundation. (2007). *Metro Vancouver's Vital Signs 2007*.

⁸⁷ Statistics Canada. (2006). *Women in Canada: Work Chapter Updates 2006*.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Statistics Canada. (2006). *Women in Canada, Fifth Edition: A Gender-based Statistical Report*.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Griffin Cohen, M. (2004). *A Return to Wage Discrimination: Pay Equity Losses Through the Privatization of Health Care*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; Bakan, A., & Kobayashi, A. (2004, Fall). *Backlash Against Employment Equity: The British Columbia Experience*. *Atlantis*.

the back door”.⁹⁵ Failing to collect data makes it difficult for critics to demonstrate ongoing, or increasing, labour market disadvantages.

These actions reflect the ‘3 Ds’ of neo-liberal policies of ‘de-gendering’: delegitimization (there is no equality problem to address), dismantling (hence existing policies or structures can be eliminated) and disappearance (no need to consider equity issues in the construction of new employment policies). The result, as we show below, is not just that the Liberal government has failed to address gender inequality in the BC labour market; government policies have actually *widened gender inequalities* in the labour market. Three key areas of labour market policy are particularly detrimental to women: changes to public sector employment, especially in healthcare; changes to employment standards and minimum wages; and policies that limit women’s access to affordable childcare.

Public Sector Employment

The public sector is a major employer for women and a significant source of well paid and secure jobs. High rates of unionization, the concentration of professional jobs associated with higher levels of education, and greater gender parity in public sector wages combine to make public sector employment among the best of ‘women’s work’.⁹⁶ In 2001, nearly one in five women in BC worked in the public sector, representing over 70% of all public employees.⁹⁷ As Sylvia Fuller has noted, public sector employment in British Columbia is considerably more advantageous for women than for men. Relative to women working in the private sector, public sector employees receive a ‘wage premium’. This ‘premium’ does not exist for men because, Fuller notes, it is really “the absence of the disadvantage they [women] face relative to men in the private sector”.⁹⁸ The more substantial gender pay gap in the private than the public sector means that shrinking public sector employment increases the gendered wage gap.⁹⁹ Yet the Liberal government cut over 20,000 jobs in the public sector in their first term in office; three-quarters of all staff displaced were women.¹⁰⁰

Cuts to the public sector have involved the adoption of ‘alternative service delivery’, a euphemism for privatization through contracting-out. This has been particularly prevalent in health care, where the Liberals unilaterally stripped union contracts of ‘no contracting-out’ language (**Bill 29**) for hospital and long-term care workers; union protection would not follow the tens of thousands of jobs in housekeeping, laundry, security, and food service contracted out in 2002.¹⁰¹ For those who followed jobs to the

⁹⁵ Bakan & Kobayashi. (2004). On the failure to distinguish girls from boys in Canada’s international reporting see Taefi, N., Czapska, A., Webb, A., & Aleem, R. (2008, October). *Submission to UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women at its 7th Periodic review of Canada* (Justice for Girls & Justice for Girls International).

⁹⁶ Fuller, S. & Stephens, L. (2004). *Women’s Employment in BC: Effects of Government Downsizing and Employment Policy Changes, 2001-2004*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; Fuller, S. (2005). Public Sector Employment and Gender Wage Inequalities in British Columbia: Assessing the Effects of a Shrinking Public Sector. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 30(2), 439.

⁹⁷ Fuller & Stephens, (2004).

⁹⁸ Fuller, (2005).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Fuller & Stephens, (2004).

¹⁰¹ Cohen, M. (2004). *A Return to Wage Discrimination: Pay Equity Losses Through the Privatization of Health Care*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

private sector, wages were cut by more than 40%¹⁰², and “more than 30 years of pay equity gains for women in health support occupations” that had narrowed the gap for female hospital support workers – disproportionately immigrant women of colour – were eliminated.¹⁰³

In 2007, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down sections of **Bill 29** and found that disregarding processes of collective bargaining by unilaterally eliminating contracting out protection violated the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.¹⁰⁴ Six months later the province finally reached an \$85 million settlement with the Hospital Employees’ Union (HEU) and other unions, and agreed to consult on future contracting-out.¹⁰⁵ In spite of this victory, the long-term consequences of privatization in health care continue: “low pay, meagre benefits, heavy workloads, poor training, and no job security”.¹⁰⁶ A recent study documents a diverse range of ill effects: lower morale, increased staff turnover, higher rates of absenteeism, decreased productivity, less time for patient care, personal financial difficulties, longer hours, impaired health and well-being, more stress in family relationships, and less ability to participate in community and volunteer activities.¹⁰⁷ In sum, Liberal privatization has turned previously ‘good’ jobs in health care into another feminized ghetto of stressful, insecure, unrewarding, low-wage work.

‘Alternative service delivery’ has not been restricted to health care. Contracting out public sector jobs is central to goals of management flexibility embedded in neo-liberal ‘New Public Management’ strategies.¹⁰⁸ A recent study of contracting-out in two locations – shifting BC Hydro ‘back office’ work¹⁰⁹ to Accenture, and administration of the provincial Medical Services Plan and PharmaCare programs to Maximus – shows that ‘alternative service delivery’ brings lower wages, worse working conditions, more job insecurity, and demoralization. “Their main tools of ‘innovation’ are cost minimization, de-skilling, surveillance, increased hierarchical control, and a unilateral push by the employer to make people work harder”.¹¹⁰ Liberal decisions to contract-out tens of thousands of public sector jobs injure both workers and the public who need these services. Equally important, restructuring the public sector increases gender inequality in the BC labour market. Disturbingly, the women hurt most are those who attain the greatest benefit from the public sector ‘premium’ – those who are the most disadvantaged in the labour market because they are employed in occupations deemed less skilled or part-time or casual.¹¹¹

¹⁰² Stinson, J., Pollak, N., & Cohen, M. (2005). *The Pains of Privatization: How Contracting out hurts health support workers, their families and health care*. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

¹⁰³ Cohen, (2004).

¹⁰⁴ Sandborn, T. (2007, June 8). Campbell Government Violated Charter Rights: Supreme Court, *The Tyee*.

¹⁰⁵ Rud, J., & Kines, L. (2008, January 29). Victoria to pay out \$85 million to settle health care dispute. *The Vancouver Sun*.

¹⁰⁶ Stinson, Pollak & Cohen. (2005). *The Pains of Privatization*.

¹⁰⁷ Lee, M., & Cohen, M. (2005). *The Hidden Costs of Health Care Wage Cuts in BC*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

¹⁰⁸ Gurstein, P., & Murray, S. (2007). *From Public Servants to Corporate Employees: The BC Government’s Alternative Service Delivery Plan in Practice*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

¹⁰⁹ This includes BC Hydro’s customer services, IT services, human resources, financial systems, purchasing and building services. Gurstein, P. (2008, Winter). Privatization by another name: BC’s alternative service delivery plan. *BC Commentary: A review of provincial social and economic trends*, 11(1), 3.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*; Gurstein & Murray, (2007).

¹¹¹ Fuller, (2005).

Declining employment standards

Employment standards set the minimum terms for working conditions in British Columbia, covering everything from minimum wages that must be paid to maximum hours of work, overtime pay and holiday pay. In its first term the Liberal government made “substantive changes to nearly every aspect of employment standards law, its administration and enforcement”.¹¹² These substantive changes are designed to provide employers with increased flexibility; unfortunately their increased flexibility decreases protection for workers. Since minimum standards have the greatest impact on the most marginal sectors of the labour market – those working in minimum or low-wage jobs without the benefit of a union contract – the situation of the most vulnerable has once again worsened.

The BC government has also excluded unionized workers – a third of the provincial labour force - from minimum employment standards entirely.¹¹³ Unionized workers are no longer able to take employment standards legislation as the floor from which they can negotiate better terms and conditions; instead, time and energy must now go into negotiating even these minimal conditions. De-regulating unionized work has also paved the way for the emergence of “employer-accommodating unions” to negotiate agreements *below these minimum levels*, a process that further erodes basic standards of work.¹¹⁴ Others, including farmworkers, those working in oil and gas fields, and foster parents, have also been excluded.¹¹⁵

For the bulk of non-unionized workers still covered by employment standards, reduced standards decrease basic protections. Some changes are particularly problematic for women, who form the bulk of minimum-wage, part-time and casual workers, who have more frequent labour market absences for family reasons, and who often have to fit job schedules around childcare or other family responsibilities. Particularly detrimental changes include reductions in minimum shifts from four to two hours, the introduction of ‘overtime averaging’ that can result in a longer and less predictable work week, changes to statutory holiday pay that make it more difficult for part-time workers to qualify, an entry level minimum wage of \$6 an hour for the first 500 hours of employment, \$2 lower than the regular minimum wage of \$8 an hour that is already “at least \$4,000 below the poverty line for a single person” working full-time.¹¹⁶ These changes also disproportionately injure aboriginal workers and recent immigrants concentrated in low-wage and non-union work.¹¹⁷ Most disturbingly, and unlike any other jurisdiction in

¹¹² Fairey, E. (2006, Winter). The Erosion of Employment Standards. *BC Commentary: A Review of Provincial Social and Economic Trends*, 9(1), 1.

¹¹³ Fairey, D., & McCallum, S. (2007). *Negotiating Without a Floor: Unionized Worker Exclusion from BC Employment Standards*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Fairey, (2006).

¹¹⁶ Ibid.; Murray, S. (2007, Spring/Summer). Time to Raise BC’s Minimum Wage. *BC Commentary: A Review of Provincial Social and Economic Trends*, 10(2), 1.

¹¹⁷ Zaman, H. (2008, Winter). Workplace Rights for Recent Immigrants. *BC Commentary: a Review of Provincial Social and Economic Trends*, 11(1), 6.; Zaman, H., Diocson, C., & Scott, R. (2007). *Workplace Rights for Immigrants in BC: The Case of Filipino Workers*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Canada, changes to employment standards now allow children as young as 12 to work with the permission of one parent.¹¹⁸

BC “now has the dubious honour of having the lowest employment standards in Canada”.¹¹⁹ Liberal changes have also made it much more difficult to enforce these rules, a particularly difficult outcome for new immigrants who may be less familiar with local labour laws. Employers are no longer required to post notices of employment standards, thus playing no role in educating workers about their rights. Moreover, workers who find their rights violated are now required to confront employers in person using a ‘self-help kit’ that is only available in English.¹²⁰ As Habiba Zaman has argued, for new immigrants in particular, these “workplace rights have become ‘paper rights’ only” that are largely unenforceable.¹²¹

A study by Fiona MacPhail and Paul Bowles has shown that changes to employment standards, in conjunction with the government’s penchant for privatizing public sector jobs, have led to a structural change in the BC labour market: since 2001 there has been a significant increase in casual work, a trend more pronounced here than in any other province.¹²² Not only has the incidence of casual employment grown dramatically between 1997 and 2004, the increase has been twice as large for women as for men (50% compared to 25%). Using a narrow definition of casual work that only includes temporary jobs (on contract or less than 6 months) and permanent part-time work, more than one-quarter (26%) of all women in BC are now in casual employment, compared to 10% of men.¹²³ Hence the casualization of the labour force – and declining security of employment – is highly gendered. According to MacPhail and Bowles, it is also clearly “policy-induced”.¹²⁴ Once a hallmark of the private sector (especially construction and seasonal industries), casual labour now abounds in the public sector. In 2004, for example, one-quarter of all BC women in casual jobs worked in health care, a direct result of Liberal restructuring in the public sector.¹²⁵

Reduced Access to Childcare

One of the most marked changes in patterns of work over the last four decades has been the dramatic increase in the number of mothers with young children in the labour market. In 2006, three-quarters of all women living with children under 16 years of age were employed, nearly twice the rate 30 years earlier (39% in 1976); two-thirds of women with children under 3 were working for pay, more than twice the number in 1976 (28%).¹²⁶ Increases in labour force participation have numerous causes, including women’s increasing levels of higher education, wider access to professional careers,

¹¹⁸ Irwin, J., McBride, S., & Strubin, T. (2005). *Child and Youth Employment Standards: The Experience of Young Workers Under British Columbia’s New Policy Regime*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

¹¹⁹ Fairey, (2006).

¹²⁰ Ibid.; Zaman, (2006).

¹²¹ Zaman, (2008).

¹²² MacPhail, F., & Bowles, P. (2007). From Casual Work to Economic Security: The Case of British Columbia. *Social Indicators Research*.

¹²³ Ibid., Table 1.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., Table 3 and 4.

¹²⁶ Statistics Canada. (2006). *Women in Canada: Work Chapter Updates*.

lower fertility rates, higher incidences of divorce, and changes in standards/costs of living that make two-income earners the norm in two-parent households.

Although their employment patterns today resemble men's more than their mothers' or grandmothers', women continue to perform most caring work, both paid and unpaid. According to Statistics Canada data, nearly twice as many women (22%) as men (12.5%) in Vancouver in 2001 performed more than 15 hours of unpaid childcare each week; and three times as many women (9% versus 3%) performed more than 60 hours.¹²⁷ Similarly, women were much more likely to report more than ten hours of unpaid senior care each week (18% of women and 13% of men).¹²⁸ Finally, twice as many (41% versus 19%) performed more than 15 hours of unpaid housework each week.¹²⁹ This unpaid caring labour underpins the health of individuals, families, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and other social institutions, yet remains largely invisible and socially unvalued.

This uneven burden affects participation in the labour market, shaping when to seek or leave paid work, whether full-time, part-time or casual work can most readily be negotiated, and whether promotions, further training, or overtime can be sought or accepted. All these options in turn shape the gendered wage gap. With so many mothers of young children employed for pay, accessible childcare alternatives should become a government priority, simultaneously providing care for children of employed parents while enhancing early learning opportunities. Governments concerned with enhancing gender equality should see publicly-funded, affordable and accessible childcare as an obvious policy priority. In British Columbia, however, this has not happened. Given the uneven responsibilities for caring work, it is commonly mothers who must negotiate the childcare crisis in the first instance, even in two-parent households, and who bear the brunt of costs.

A survey of childcare in the Cowichan Valley, for example, documented a "critical lack of licensed childcare spaces in the Cowichan Region with enough spaces to serve only 48% of the estimated 4,862 children under the age of 12 who need childcare".¹³⁰ The situation for children under three years of age is most critical; only 165 spaces exist, or 16% of the spaces needed.¹³¹ Such shortages appear in all regions. It is estimated that only 14% of childcare needs in Metro Vancouver were met in 2005; a figure that dropped to 6% for children under 3 years of age.¹³² Moreover, the cost of care, already prohibitive for many parents, is rising: between 2005 and 2007 costs rose 17% for children under 6, and 50% for 6 to 12 year olds.¹³³ These increases are not because childcare workers are well paid (low pay in the sector has resulted in significant difficulties recruiting and retaining staff)¹³⁴; rising costs are related to cuts in funding to centres and subsidies for parents. Statistics Canada reports that there were only 80,230 supervised daycare spaces in British Columbia in 2004; in contrast the province

¹²⁷ Vancouver Foundation. (2007). *Metro Vancouver's Vital Signs 2007*.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Social Planning Cowichan. (2007, October). *Child Care in the Cowichan Valley Region*.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Vancouver Foundation. (2008). *Vital Signs for Metro Vancouver*.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ B.C. CEDAW Group, Inaction and Non-compliance.

of Quebec, with nearly twice the population, has four times that number of spaces.¹³⁵ For more than a decade different Quebec governments have prioritized affordable universal childcare; British Columbia has not.

Girls and boys from low-income families are those whom the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth indicated have the fewest formal childcare opportunities and thus curtailed futures. As one rare substantial report from the BC Progress Board, observed, “It is doubtful that BC has made substantial progress “since“ funding for the Childcare Subsidy Program, which in 2005/06 helped 22,600 children from low- and moderate-income families, has remained relatively stagnant. Indeed...the provincial contribution to the program has declined during the current decade.”¹³⁶ One 2007 survey of parents and caregivers from the West Kootenays demonstrated the continuing shortfall. Respondents from Trail to Kaslo, Nelson, and other small communities in the province’s ‘heartland’ described long waiting lists, poor accommodation and hours of operation, and over-stressed and inadequate numbers of staff, even as they also testified to the dedication and support children received in good daycare arrangements that allowed parents to earn a living without worry. As the survey further revealed, reductions, freezes or caps in funds for provincial childcare operations, the Childcare Resource and Referral Programs, and major childcare capital expenses, plus a problematic subsidy application process (through 1-800 lines) has ensured closures and longer waiting lists.¹³⁷

Lack of spaces is directly related to inadequate funding of childcare services and programs. The Liberals cut \$24 million from the daycare system in their first term in office; families lost all or part of their monthly subsidies, wage top-ups for staff were eliminated, and a \$7 a day cap on before and after school care was abolished.¹³⁸ With a new federal commitment to universal daycare in 2005, the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Agreement was signed between BC and Ottawa in September. The ELCC was to funnel \$633 million into childcare spaces over five years.¹³⁹ “In spite of a growing crisis in BC’s childcare system, BC spent [on childcare] only \$55 million of the \$92 million it received from the federal government” in the first year of the agreement.¹⁴⁰ Although the entire allotment did not find its way into the BC childcare system, some badly needed funding became available to serve the long waiting lists common around the province.

When a new government under Stephen Harper assumed office, however, the ELCC was cancelled, ending further federal contributions. In response, BC Liberals announced new cuts, oddly couched as “increases in childcare funding rates”; Childcare Operating Fund rates for all children under 6 were reduced, leaving many childcare

¹³⁵ Statistics Canada. (2006, June). From She to She: Changing Patterns of Women in the Canadian Labour Force, *Canadian Economic Observer*.

¹³⁶ Banting, K. (2006). *The Social Condition in British Columbia*, BC Progress Board; See also Prince, M.J., (2006, Spring/Summer). Measuring Whose Progress? The BC Progress Board and the Politics of Social Indicators. *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, 56, 111.

¹³⁷ K. Adamson, Childcare in the West Kootenay Child Care Children First 2007 and J. Morley, *Report on Children and Youth Officer’s Asking Questions Project* (4 October 2005): 5.

¹³⁸ Fuller & Stephens, (2004).

¹³⁹ BC Federation of Labour. (2006, May). *The Economic Inequality of Women in BC: Recommendations for Action*.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

centres in dire straits.¹⁴¹ Six months later, the result in the Greater Victoria area included the loss of 150 licensed childcare spaces, including losing 23% of all Group Day Care spaces for infants and toddlers, and the closure of 14 licensed centres.¹⁴² Far from providing a solution to the childcare crisis, the Liberals ignored both the future of the province's children and the equality rights of employed women.

Part 3: While education is the key to the future...

Modern liberal democracies commonly hail educational opportunity as the appropriate response to substantial income disparities, otherwise justified by reference to supposed industry and talent rather than inherited privilege. Access to education, regardless of students' income or origin, stands symbolically as the ultimate guarantee of meritocracy. This has certainly been the regular promise of BC Liberals whose premier declared literacy his "number one goal" in 2005.¹⁴³

The 2008 Throne Speech promised a few educationally-oriented initiatives: additional StrongStart BC centres for preschoolers, the creation of a new Early Childhood Learning Agency, kindergarten feasibility studies, a Centre for Autism Education and Research, and new "Walking School Bus" and "Bicycle Train" programs to encourage children to walk or bicycle to school with adult supervision.¹⁴⁴ While not entirely inconsequential, these promises, which have not been fully realized, do not come close to adequately addressing pervasive educational disadvantage. Nor is commitment to equality in education a feature of the 2009 Throne Speech.

What has been the provincial record since 2001? Any review of early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling, and post-secondary and adult education and training suggests that no area of public education has recovered from the budget cuts, tuition increases, and disconnection from social justice goals that typified government initiatives after 2001. Small retreats from the draconian days of 2002-2004 merely confirm the seriousness of losses and the need for a government truly attentive to the needs of the many rather than of the privileged few.

Early Childhood Education

Investment in pre-schoolers stands near the heart of most modern campaigns for greater social equality. Kids lacking a good start in life are hard put to catch up with peers whose parents and communities can offer the security and stimulation that spring from good employment and wages. 2006 data on North Vancouver neighbourhoods reveal recurring disadvantage. In upper Capilano, for example, 12.9% of children have been judged vulnerable; in Deep Cove 23.0%; and in lower Lonsdale 43.1%. Yet these

¹⁴¹ Child Care Advocacy Forum. (2007). *Provincial Child Care Funding Rates are Still Going Down*. Retrieved February 6, 2008, from Setting the Record Straight Web site: <http://www.advocacyforum.bc.ca/srs/srs1.html>

¹⁴² Partnership in Learning and Advocacy for Young Children (2008, January 31). Child Care Information Action Project Update: Greater Victoria.

¹⁴³ Premier's Advisory Panel on Literacy. (2005, February 21).

¹⁴⁴ News Release, Office of the Premier. (2008). *Throne Speech Lays Groundwork for Next Generations*. Retrieved February 12, 2008, from Web site: http://www2.news.gov.bc.ca/news_releases_2005-2009/2008OTP0031-000196.htm

sites are not the province's poverty hotspots.¹⁴⁵ As BC Campaign 2000 reported in 2008, 21.9% of all the province's children lived in poverty in 2006, significantly higher than the national average of 15.8%, but a figure that paled before the rate of 40% in 2005 for aboriginal youngsters under 6 living off reserve.¹⁴⁶

Liberal response to conditions prior to and created by the government's disinvestment in early learning since 2001 lies largely in promises of future relief. New commitments have so far taken three forms. On the one hand, the government hopes to attract more staff, overwhelming female, into the low-wage employment of Early Childhood Education with offers of a new student loan assistance program and incentives to return to work. In December 2007, the province's Minister of State for Childcare announced that up to \$2,500 would be available toward BC student loans for graduates in 2007 and 2008 who completed one and two years of employment in the licensed childcare sector. In January 2008, the Early Childhood Educator Incentive Grants Program promised financial rewards to as many as 100 early childhood educators who returned to the licensed childcare sector.¹⁴⁷

Another provincial promise involved the much-heralded StrongStart program that began in sites in BC schools in 2007, even as the province's Childcare and Referral Resource Groups, leading advocates for early childhood education, faced massive cuts in state funding. The 2008 Throne Speech foresaw adding another 316 StrongStart centres by 2010 to the first 84. Early assessment indicates its enthusiastic reception by many care providers and school staff. Most principals, teachers, and librarians in public school sites were very supportive despite the absence of provincial funding to cover additional costs. Opportunities for ending isolation, contacting dental and medical resources, networking among mothers, and developing literacy and social skills were much valued. The shortcomings with StrongStart's free and less than three-hour programs also stood out. They are best characterized as a 'family drop-in program', a phrase that captures the unpredictability of many operations, including lack of replacement staff when the ECE facilitator is ill and facilities frequently unsuitable for the range of users. While they offered substantially better wages (initially reported at \$25 hour but sometimes only \$18), than the average in the childcare sector and could attract well-qualified staff, StrongStart probably contributes to the staffing woes of full-time childcare operations that cannot match the hourly rate. Ultimately, however, staff numbers are few, commonly a single individual. The result is generally poor adult-to-child ratios and significant difficulties with overcrowding. Nor are part-time employees with temporary contracts readily able to problem-solve or advocate. Ultimately, StrongStart appears reminiscent of various 20th century community drop-in arrangements, far from the stable, affordable assistance during hours of parental employment that most mothers require.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps 'BareStart' is a better epigram.

¹⁴⁵ Buote, D. (2007). *Today's Children, Tomorrow's Leaders: Child Care Needs on the North Shore*. Retrieved February 10, 2008, from CCABC Web site: http://www.cccabc.bc.ca/res/pdf/ns_report_aug07.pdf

¹⁴⁶ BC Campaign 2000. (2000). Retrieved February 15, 2008, from Web site: http://www.campaign2000.ca/rc/rc08/BC_ReportCard08-colour.pdf

¹⁴⁷ Press Release, *New Incentive Programs for Early Childhood Educators*. (2007, December 21). Ministry of Children and Family Development & Ministry of Advanced Education.

¹⁴⁸ See Human Early Learning Partnership. (2008, October 15). *StrongStart BC: A Family Drop-In Program, Evaluation Report*.

The third promise found in the 2008 Throne Speech returned to a BC political chestnut, public kindergartens.¹⁴⁹ The proposal to establish a new Early Childhood Learning Agency, ultimately established July 2008, to “assess the feasibility and costs of full school day kindergarten for five-year-olds” and to “undertake a feasibility study of providing parents with the choice of day-long kindergarten for four-year-olds by 2010, and for three-year-olds by 2012”¹⁵⁰ proffered a future glimpsed many times before. Unfortunately, although there was yet another provision for consultation (summer 2008), the new Agency failed to report on proposals by the end of 2008. In the meantime in June 2007, the province was left with the reminder that “one in four BC children, or nearly 9,000 students, will begin kindergarten in September without the *skills* they needed to succeed.”¹⁵¹ The current financial crisis will likely provide one more excuse not to mobilize provincial resources in one of the greatest area of benefit and need.

Primary and Secondary Public Education

In BC, the publicly funded K-12 system has also been in trouble as the January 2009 report, “When More is Less”, once again confirms.¹⁵² Before considering vulnerable populations, it is instructive to remember that some parents can choose to opt out of or to supplement public institutions. The province’s 360 independent, or private, schools, enrol about 10% of BC’s K-12 students, the highest private school enrolment of all Canadian provinces.¹⁵³ Thanks to the Liberal Party, “the first political party on record in British Columbia supporting the claims of independent schools to recognition and financial support,” most such institutions receive 35-50% of school districts’ per student operating grant.¹⁵⁴ The December 2008 observation of the BC Progress Board, that data from independent schools would improve the dismal provincial ranking of 8th (2006) in terms of secondary school graduation endeavours, reaffirms the fact that many better-off parents have disinvested from public schooling. Except when external authorities point to dreadful results, the government finds it easy to ignore conditions for the majority.¹⁵⁵ The growth of independent schools pales, however, in significance compared to the proliferation of private tutoring services, especially in urban centres, designed to guarantee academic rewards to those who are able to pay.¹⁵⁶ Advantaged girls and boys need never fall behind.

¹⁴⁹ See inter alia, Weiss, G. (1980). An Essential year for the Child: The Kindergarten in British Columbia. In J. D. Wilson & D.C. Jones (Eds.), *Schooling and Society in Twentieth Century British Columbia*. Calgary: Detselig; and How, C. N. & Prochner, L. W. (2000). *Early Childhood Care and Education in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

¹⁵⁰ B.C. Throne Speech. (2008) Web site: <http://www.leg.bc.ca/38th4th/4-8-38-4.htm>

¹⁵¹ Bond, S., Minister of Education, British Columbia. Web site: <http://www.leg.bc.ca/38th4th/4-8-38-4.htm>

¹⁵² Beresford, C., & Fussell, H. (2009). *When More is Less: Education Funding in BC*. Retrieved February 19, 2009, from Vancouver: Centre for Civic Governance, Columbia Institute Web Site: <http://www.civicgovernance.ca/files/uploads/WhenMoreisLess.pdf>

¹⁵³ BC Ministry of Education. (2008). *Overview of Independent Schools in British Columbia*. Retrieved February 17, 2008 from Office of the Inspector of Independent Schools Web site: <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/independentschools/geninfo.pdf>; Boerema, A. J. (2005) *Examining Differences Among Private Schools in British Columbia*, PhD diss. Retrieved February 15, 2008 from Vanderbilt University Web site: http://etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/ETD-db/available/etd-07122005-132741/unrestricted/Boerema_Dissertation.pdf

¹⁵⁴ Federation of Independent School Associations. (2007). *History*. Retrieved February 15, 2007 from FISABC Web site: <http://www.fisabc.ca/About-FISA/History>

¹⁵⁵ BC Progress Board. (2008). *8th Annual Benchmark Report*. Retrieved February 15, 2009 from BC Progress Board Web site: http://www.bcprogressboard.com/pdfs/Bench_12_12_2008_S.pdf

¹⁵⁶ See Aurini, J., & Davies, S. (2004, Summer). The Transformation of Private Tutoring: Education in a Franchise Form. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 29(3), 419-438; Aurini, J., (2004). Educational Entrepreneurialism in the Private Tutoring Industry: Balancing Profitability with the Humanistic Face of Schooling. *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 4, 475-91; Davies, S., (2004). School Choice by Default? Understanding the Demand for Private Tutoring in Canada. *American Journal of Education*, 110(3), 233-255; Goddard, T. (2000, December 30). The Flight of the Middle Class from Public Schools: A Canadian Mirage. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 18.

While marketplace offerings have much to celebrate, good news is much less frequent for BC's most vulnerable students. The Victoria Foundation discovered in 2003-05 that 28% of 18 year-olds did not graduate from local high schools. The overall provincial drop-out rate was only slightly better at 24%.¹⁵⁷ Dismal graduation rates, while somewhat offset by later return to school, are not dispersed evenly. The most recent data (2005-6) on completion rates in the K-12 system put aboriginal students at 47% and non-aboriginal at 82%.¹⁵⁸

Youngsters with different learning needs have an especially difficult time. 'Special education' is commonly recognized as in 'crisis.' Classrooms and teachers, facing high caseloads and proliferating paperwork, regularly lack 'the necessary conditions for success.' The government's elimination of targeted funding for high-incidence special needs such as learning disabilities' compromises outcomes.¹⁵⁹ A recent McCreary study on alternative education for youth at risk concluded that programs unattached to a mainstream school, such as the Kaien Island Alternative School Friendship House on the North Coast, were often forced to fundraise, in this instance to feed students, a particularly urgent necessity given that hunger haunts many of their families.¹⁶⁰ When schools are inadequately funded to assist our most vulnerable youngsters, parents must draw on their own limited resources to fill in the gaps. More often than not mothers step in to add tutoring to their already full caring roles, while those who are financially able buy additional support for their children.

The plight of children-in-care, a population with a high level of learning disabilities, is especially shocking. A May 2007 report from the Representative for Children and Youth and the Provincial Health Officer makes grim reading: "more than half of elementary-school children in care fail to meet provincial standards in reading and math, while just 20% manage to graduate from high school, compared with 80% of non-care students."¹⁶¹ While the cancellation of the Kelowna Accord by the federal Harper Conservatives is partly responsible for the educational difficulties of the large number of aboriginal kids in foster care, Victoria's response, even in years with budget surpluses, has been far from adequate as reports from BC's Representative for Children and Youth, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, describe in painful detail.

Provincial refusal to address the desperate situation, educational and otherwise, of youngsters who 'age' out of the foster care system at 19 readily ensures the continuation of disadvantage into adulthood. Unlike the majority of the province's 19 year-olds, who like those elsewhere in Canada, are likely to cope with soaring housing and education costs by staying at home and borrowing from families, former foster kids are normally on their own. Because of their lower wages and greater vulnerability than

¹⁵⁷ Rutman, D., Hubberstey, C., & Feduniw, A., with assistance from Brown, E. (2007). *When Youth Age Out of Care—Where to from There? Final Report Based on a Three Year Longitudinal Study* Retrieved February 15, 2008, from School of Social Work, University of Victoria Web site: <http://socialwork.uvic.ca/docs/research/whenyouthage.pdf>

¹⁵⁸ Aman, C., & Ungerleider, C. (2008, March). Aboriginal Students and K-12 School Change in British Columbia. *Horizons*, 10(1), 31.

¹⁵⁹ BC Teachers' Federation, (2007, October). *Education Funding: A Brief to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services*.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, A., Peled, M., Albert, M., MacKay, L., Stewart, D., Saewyc, E. & the McCreary Centre Society. (2007). *Making the Grade: A Review of Alternative Education Programs in British Columbia*. Vancouver: McCreary Centre Society.

¹⁶¹ Mickleburgh, R. (2007, May). Children in Province's Care Failing to Meet Education Standards, Report Warns. *The Globe and Mail*.

boys, girls may well find themselves trading sex for housing. Not surprisingly, premature pregnancies often compromise hopes for further schooling.¹⁶²

In 2007, a McCreary Centre Society study, *Against the Odds: A profile of marginalized and street-involved youth in BC*, focused on an especially vulnerable group. In face of parental poverty and, sometimes, violence, insecure housing, and learning disabilities, girls and boys could rarely sustain efforts to remain in school. By the completion of the survey, three quarters of those interviewed had dropped out. Early pregnancy surfaced as a recurring reflection of girls' low self-esteem. They were also more likely than boys "to have been charged or convicted of a crime" (55% versus 38%). Their future in education, or indeed in anything, didn't look very good. The predicament of aboriginal youngsters, who remained over-represented among non-school attendees, also suggested that "schools and communities may not be providing enough culturally appropriate support."¹⁶³ The McCreary study on alternative schools also points out that some one-third of pupils were also holding down legal jobs, with 60% of this group employed 20 hours or more a week, a testament to vulnerability as well as determination.¹⁶⁴

Post-Secondary and Adult Education

With high school completion challenging many BCers, college, university, and adult education programs often prove still more daunting. Even when youngsters qualify for admission, significant obstacles exist. Higher tuition fees (deregulated 2001; regulated 2005; no subsequent reductions) and living costs have meant that many colleges and universities have recently had trouble filling additional spaces funded (on the basis of less allotment per individual student) by Victoria. Families outside the province's major metropolitan areas have been especially hard hit.¹⁶⁵ From 1999 to 2005, undergraduate university fees rose 84.4%, the steepest rise during this period in any province. From 2001 to 2007, BC went from the lowest (\$2,527) postsecondary tuition rates to the highest (\$4,855) in the country.¹⁶⁶ Increased costs for students coincided with worsening conditions in the province's colleges and universities where provincial funding has not kept pace with rising enrolment and increased costs. By 2009, the dramatic fall in investment income, that had particularly sheltered some favoured institutions and programs, promised a still worse fit between demand and the supply and quality of services.

For all such disincentives, together with the lower wages and greater family responsibilities they commonly face, women remain the majority in the province's colleges and universities. Aboriginal girls and women also enrol in greater numbers

¹⁶² For this stark portrait see Rutman, D., Hubberstey, C., & Feduniw, A., with assistance from Brown, E. (2007). *When Youth Age Out of Care—Where to from There? Final Report Based on a Three Year Longitudinal Study*. Victoria: School of Social Work, University of Victoria; and Hallgrimsdottir, H. K., Benoit, C., Phillips, R. (2006). Fallen Women and Rescued Girls: Social Stigma and Media Narratives of the Sex Industry in Victoria, B.C., from 1980 to 2005. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 43(3), 265. For a broader picture see Foster, L. T., & Wharf, E. (Eds.), (2007). *People, Politics, and Child Welfare in British Columbia*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

¹⁶³ See Smith, A., Saewyc, E., Albert, M., MacKay, L., Northcott, M., & The McCreary Centre Society. (2007). *Against the Odds: A profile of marginalized and street-involved youth in BC*. Vancouver: The McCreary Centre Society.

¹⁶⁴ Smith et al., (2007). *Making the Grade: A Review of Alternative Education Programs in British Columbia*.

¹⁶⁵ Wieland, N., president, (2005, June 2). CUFA/BC, *Election 2005 – Looking Back and Looking Forward*, CUFA/BC Wire.

¹⁶⁶ Dehaas, J. (2008). B.C. *Premier grilled on gutted grant system*. Retrieved February 7, 2009, from Macleans.ca on campus Web site: <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2008/11/04/bc-premier-grilled-on-gutted-grant-system/>

than their brothers, though far less than their proportion of the population would justify. Unlike boys and men tempted by higher wages in a booming economy before the 2008 collapse, girls and women had good cause to know that opportunities depend on education, even if this rarely brings employment or wage equity in this province.

Women enrol in diverse educational programs, many of which prepare graduates for just the public sector jobs that neo-liberalism has targeted for downsizing. For many, money is extremely tight: 60% of provincial student loans go to female full-time students.¹⁶⁷ One dramatic case illustrates frequent vulnerability. The young women, overwhelmingly aboriginal, murdered along the 'Highway of Tears' between Prince George and Prince Rupert over the last decade and more, have mostly been students forced to hitchhike by limited budgets. Northern aboriginal agencies and communities have highlighted the educational connection: "Many College and University students are required to live on extremely tight budgets. The cost for tuition, textbooks and supplies, and rental accommodations is high. Their ability to generate income is limited by full-time course studies throughout the school year, and vehicles are also considered a luxury item that many of these students cannot afford."¹⁶⁸

In supposedly 'good' times, female students increased their debt: "across most groups, the median amount of student loans is higher for women."¹⁶⁹ The contribution of class to their predicament is effectively summed up by the discovery that:

[The nearly] two-thirds of women university graduates coming from less privileged families (64%) also reported that financial barriers stood in the way of their post-secondary education. In contrast, financial barriers were acknowledged by only 36% of men with similar family backgrounds, and by 49% (female) and 51% (male) of graduates with university educated parents.¹⁷⁰

In 2004, Victoria replaced a grant with a loan reduction program for needy students; four years later the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation "revealed that non-repayable grants now make up just 12 percent of British Columbia's aid, down from 27 percent in 2004 and the lowest proportion in the country."¹⁷¹ Other evidence suggests that female students are also more likely to work part-time during the academic year, a choice reflecting their lower wages. When they have to repay loans, they also face a provincial labour market where commitment to employment equity has largely disappeared.

BC's inauguration of an Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Strategy in 2007/8 has promised to address the longstanding gulf in opportunity and access but, like so many other initiatives, it largely ignores systemic disadvantage. Not surprisingly, a comparison of Dogwood Completion Rates (essentially high school graduation) of

¹⁶⁷ *Key Facts about Women in B.C.*, Web site: http://www.mediaroom.gov.bc.ca/For_the_Record/key_facts_about_women_in_BC.htm

¹⁶⁸ Lheidli t'enneh First Nations, Carrier Sekani Family Services, Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, Prince George Native Friendship Center, and Prince George Nechako Aboriginal Employment & Training Association, (2006, July 16). *Highway of Tears Symposium Recommendation Report*.

¹⁶⁹ Andres and Adamuti-Trache, University Attainment, Student Loans, and Adult Course Activities.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Dehaas, J. (2008). B.C. *Premier grilled on gutted grant system*. Retrieved February 17, 2009, from Macleans.ca on campus Web site: <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2008/11/04/bc-premier-grilled-on-gutted-grant-system/>

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Students between 2002/3 and 2006/07 shows minimal change - 47% and 49% and 82% and 83% respectively. Although their numbers have significantly increased in post-secondary education, aboriginal students have made far fewer gains than equity requires: in 2004-2005 they were 4.4% of BC's post-secondary students and in 2006/07 4.5%. In the latter period, in a reflection of their situation in the province's institutional hierarchy, they made up only 2.2% of students in so-called 'research universities.'¹⁷²

If many women and other disadvantaged groups have found post-secondary studies uninviting, the picture of 'Adult Basic Education', a program of upgrading for adults lacking high school completion and often basic literacy and numeracy skills, has been still more dispiriting. As a 2006 study confirmed the loss of tuition-free upgrading and targeted post-secondary funding, together with welfare regulations that deny recipients upgrading, literacy and ESL programs, have devastated access and retention.¹⁷³

Student debt has risen. Where previously college and institute staff were indispensable trouble-shooters, serving "as advocates, making referrals, negotiating access to programs, directing students to other sources of aid" and making critical employment connections, they are more likely to be absent or side-lined. Most students in financial difficulty have only the Adult Basic Education Student Assistance Plan which is limited to tuition. Single mothers were predictably "noticeably absent." Much more visible are "students with mental health issues," but no funding addresses their specific needs.¹⁷⁴

In response to strenuous lobbying and increased recognition of its negative impact on enrolment, the province back-pedalled, ending tuition for Adult Basic Education in 2007-8. It would take some time, however, to repair the damage to institutions and to students and other expenses, such as books and childcare, remain unaddressed. The consequences of limited upgrading opportunities carry readily into employment. To take only one example, English-only 'self-help kits,' the only way to report violations of the **Employments Standards Act**, will not be readily negotiated by workers hard-put to improve language skills.¹⁷⁵

The Educational Challenge Remains

While progressive think tanks, academics, civil servants, and community activists have led in identifying the baleful outcomes of two Liberal terms, they are not alone. In 2007, a major report on BC education authored by a leading Canadian public-policy scholar and prepared for the BC Progress Board, a small group of businessmen and senior academic administrators who report to the premier, was equally damning. Dr. Keith Banting, who holds a Research Chair in the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University, put it simply enough: "It is time to re-invest ... BC can do better." He judged the province as failing citizens from birth through maturity and action to be imperative "at all levels of the learning ladder: early childhood, primary and secondary, post-

¹⁷² Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development. (2008). *Aboriginal Report:-Charting Our Path Public post-secondary system*. Retrieved February 17, 2009, from AVED Web site: http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/aboriginal/documents/Aboriginal_Indicator_Report-Oct2008.pdf

¹⁷³ Butterwick, S., & White, C. (2006). *A Path Out of Poverty: Helping BC Income Assistance Recipients Upgrade their Education*. CCPA.

¹⁷⁴ Butterwick & White, (2006); See also Cohen, M. (2003). *Training the Excluded for Work—Access and Equality for Women, Immigrants, First Nations, Youth, and People with Low Income*. Vancouver: UBC Press; and Thompson, D. M. (2002). *A Tunnel of Hope: The Experiences of Student-Mothers in a Community College Based Development Studies Program*, PhD diss. Vancouver: UBC.

¹⁷⁵ Zaman, H., Diocson C., & Scott, R. (2007, Decemeber). *Workplace Rights for Immigrants in BC: The Case of Filipino Workers*. CCPA.

secondary schooling, and adult training.” While Banting admitted that “we cannot expect our post-secondary institutions to reverse the cumulative effects of socio-economic disadvantage among young people our system of post-secondary financing should not create additional barriers”.¹⁷⁶ In BC today, however, creating additional barriers for women, aboriginal students, those with special educational needs, and anyone living in poverty is indeed the path chosen by the Liberal government. It is notable that the 2008 report of the BC Progress Board clutched for straws as it studiously ignored all serious scholarly calculation of benefits. The earlier exercise of consulting with a leading international scholar in public policy has not been repeated.

Part 4: While healthy living is promoted for some...

British Columbians have unequal opportunities for good health. While medical technologies promise new remedies and governments endorse private-public partnerships and allow private clinics and off-shore medical solutions to proliferate,¹⁷⁷ the well-being of most citizens is compromised. The two phenomena are connected and they presage, unless BCers are vigilant, the entrenchment of a two-tier health care system. BC’s descent into private services ignores authorities, such as Dr. Robert Evans, Canada’s leading health policy economist, who concludes that “allegations that Canada’s public programs to finance health are fiscally ‘unsustainable’ ... are false.”¹⁷⁸ Why then are BCers forced to deal with substantially increased Medical Service Plan (MSP) premiums, the end of coverage for some services (eye examinations, physiotherapy, chiropractic care, massage therapy, podiatry, and visits to naturopaths), and lower deductibles for seniors? Evan’s assessment is telling: “Relative to universal, fully tax-financed public insurance, an expansion of private payment would enable the wealthy to pay less (in charges, private premiums and taxes) and get more (in volume, quality, or timeliness). And the reverse would be true for those with lower incomes.”¹⁷⁹ As of January 1, 2009, BC is the only province to require residents “to pay a flat-rate health care premium,” a tithe of special advantage to the better-off.¹⁸⁰ The province’s health care system is responding to political masters who have “become increasingly sensitive to the priorities of the wealthy.”¹⁸¹ That agenda raises questions about the 2008 Throne Speech promises of enhanced efforts in child protection, against violence against women, for adults and children with developmental disabilities and special needs.¹⁸²

Monitoring well-being

As the February 2009 report from Statistics Canada once again confirms, women are more vulnerable to a wide variety of health problems than men because of the double

¹⁷⁶ Banting. (2006). *The Social Condition in British Columbia*.

¹⁷⁷ See Fuller C., & Murray, S. (2007, May 18). *Government Not Enforcing Health Laws*. CCPA.

¹⁷⁸ Evans, R. G. (2007, July). *Economic Myths and Political Realities: The Inequality Agenda and the Sustainability of Medicare*. Vancouver: UBC Centre for Health Services and Policy Research; See McGrail, K. M., McGregor, M. J., Cohen, M., Tate, R. B., Ronald, L. B. (2007). For-Profit Versus Not-for-profit Delivery of Long-Term Care. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 176(1), 57.

¹⁷⁹ Evans, (2007).

¹⁸⁰ B.C. CEDAW Group. (2008, September). *Inaction and Non-compliances: British Columbia’s Approach to Women’s Inequality*.

¹⁸¹ Evans, (2007).

¹⁸² Office of the Premier. (2008). *Press Release: Throne Speech Lays Groundwork for Next Generations*. Web site: http://www2.news.gov.bc.ca/news_releases_2005-2009/2008OTP0031-000196.htm

and triple day of duties they are more likely to shoulder.¹⁸³ The elimination of the provincial Women's Health Bureau and the Advisory Council on Women's Health in 2001 and the loss of funding for Sexual Assault/Women Assault Centres and local rape crisis lines confirm that Liberals are deaf to the repeated message from healthcare experts. The Ministry of Health's 2006/07-2008/09 *Service Plan* notably fails to address "women's particular health needs or issues and does not disaggregate the data it presents by gender."¹⁸⁴ Exercises in supposed public consultation such as BC's Conversation on Health (2007), at a cost of \$10 million, appear equally indifferent. The Women's Health Community Advisory Committee coalition, comprised of the Vancouver Women's Health Collective, Women Against Violence Against Women, the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, the Pacific Association of First Nations Women and the Pacific Immigrant Resources Society, has emphasized the cost of present policy directions. What is needed is investment in social housing and women-only shelters, a substantial increase in minimum wage and income assistance rates, better support for home care, and restored funding for eye exams, physiotherapy, chiropractic, podiatry, massage therapy and naturopathy.¹⁸⁵ Attention to the social determinants of health recognizes special challenges and the necessity of collective remedy. The alternative, as scholars repeatedly document, is increasing "social suffering."¹⁸⁶

The lack-lustre reporting of BC's Ministry of Health combines with the disappearance of important advocates, such the BC Institute on Family Violence, to make the full impact of gender hard to trace. No provincial information clearinghouse on sexual violence exists nor is there any up-to-date compilation and analysis of statistics. Indeed, everything to do with women's health has largely disappeared from the public policy radar. Only the beginning of an assessment can be attempted here, first in pointing to the special health problems of children and youth who are Lesbian and Bisexual, First Nations, and in foster care; second in considering pervasive violence against women, third in noting the failings of home care and fourth in assessing key issues in pre-peri- and post-natal care. In each instance, gender matters to well-being.

Vulnerable Children and Youth

BC's Adolescent Health Survey, involving some 30,000 youth from grade 7 to 12, uncovered significant sexual and physical abuse among bisexual female, lesbian, and heterosexual youth.

¹⁸³ See Orpana, H. M., Ross, N., Feeny, D., McFarland, B., Bernier, J., & Kaplan, M. (2009, February). *The Natural History of Health-related Quality of Life: A 10-Year Cohort Study*. Retrieved February 19, 2009, from Statistics Canada Web site: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/82-003-x2009001-eng.htm>

¹⁸⁴ Teghtsoonian, K. & Chappell, L. (2008). The Rise and Decline of Women's Policy Machinery in British Columbia and New South Wales: A Cautionary Tale. *International Political Science Review*, 29(1), 37.

¹⁸⁵ Vancouver Women's Health Collective. (2007, July). *Conversation on Women's Health*. Retrieved February 15, 2008, from Web site: <http://www.womenshealthcollective.ca/PDF/Conversations%20on%20women%27s%20health.pdf>

¹⁸⁶ Shumka, L. & Benoit, C. (2007). Social Suffering and Gaps in Alternative Health Care for Vulnerable Women Service Workers. In Kronenfeld, J. J. (Ed.), *Sociology of Health Care* 25 (pp. 253 – 75). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.

% of BC's Bisexual, Lesbian and Heterosexual Youth Experiencing Abuse ¹⁸⁷			
	Bisexual Females	Lesbian	Heterosexual
Sexual Abuse	36%	29%	11%
Forced to have sex	23%	15%	5%
Physically Abused	35%	45%	17%
Physically hurt by a boy/girlfriend	14%	24%	5%

Bisexual girls are five times more likely than heterosexual girls to consider suicide.¹⁸⁸ They report high levels of school-based abuse.

% of BC's Lesbian and Bisexual Youth Experiencing Victimization at School ¹⁸⁹		
	Rural	Urban
Verbal harassment	57%	55%
Purposeful exclusion	54%	48%
Physical assault	15%	20%

The same pattern of “higher levels of rejection, discrimination, and violence” occurs in their families and communities. While discrimination against gay teens may have dropped slightly, lesbians and bisexual females report “increasing stress and abuse” and “increased rates of suicide attempts, substance use, and other risks.” Investigators working with BC’s leading research centre on youth concluded that “we need to focus more of our efforts towards improving the support and opportunities for lesbian and bisexual females.”¹⁹⁰

While the province’s aboriginal girls, and boys, have recently demonstrated some health improvement, research again suggests special problems for girls and young women who are twice as likely to seriously consider suicide.¹⁹¹ The prevalence of aboriginal young people and adults among the province’s growing homeless population also makes them susceptible to higher rates of “substance abuse, sexually transmitted disease, mental health and viral disease.” While males account for most homeless

¹⁸⁷ Saewyc, E., Poon, C., Wang, N., Homma, Y., Smith A., & the McCreary Centre Society. (2007). *Not Yet Equal: The Health of Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Youth in BC*. Vancouver: McCreary Centre Society.

¹⁸⁸ Saewyc et al., *Not Yet Equal*.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Van der Woerd, K. A., Dixon, B. L., McDiarmid, T., Chittenden, M., Murphy, A., & The McCreary Centre Society. (2005). *Raven’s Children II: Aboriginal Youth Health in BC*. Vancouver: McCreary Centre Society.

youth, young women's numbers are growing.¹⁹² The connection to the criminal justice system is relentless for kids on the street. Aboriginal youngsters are over-represented in BC's youth custody centres; 96% of all girls in custody report previous physical and/or sexual abuse. They remain at high risk long after release.¹⁹³

Many children in state care (9,080 in October 2005; some 49% First Nations and the numbers and proportion have both increased since then) are vulnerable to poor health outcomes. Sixty-five percent in continuing care suffer mental disorders, some four times the rate of those never in care. Young women are four times as likely to get pregnant. All are more likely to be prescribed medicine and for longer periods. Kids-in-care are also "hospitalized 2 to 3.5 times more frequently, and generally for longer periods" than out-of-care counterparts. Still more worrying are "higher rates of death and intentional and unintentional injury", as well as depression and pregnancy.¹⁹⁴ The inadequate response to such tragedies is clear in the December 2008 report by the province's Representative for Children and Youth. Much like previous assessors, she concluded that many of the 2006 recommendations of the BC Children and Youth Review (Hughes Review) remain incomplete or unaddressed. Children, and their caregivers, commonly their mothers, are still waiting for help.¹⁹⁵

The situation for those aging out-of-care provides another wake-up call. One 2007 study found that 61% of such young women were parenting by the close of the investigation, and depression and anorexia were commonplace, hardly a healthy postscript to provincial oversight.¹⁹⁶ The situation for special needs youngsters poses on-going unmet challenges. In February 2008, BC's Representative for Children and Youth observed, as others had before her, that "Families and caregivers have difficulty understanding and navigating the complex, fragmented service delivery system."¹⁹⁷ Her update a year later, in the context of a recent transfer of services to youngsters with special needs to the Ministry of Children and Family Development with seemingly little preparation, was hardly more positive.¹⁹⁸ No wonder the province's parents have assessed the child protection system as filled with "broken promises."¹⁹⁹

Violence

The modern women's movement returned violence to the public agenda in the last quarter of the 20th Century. Although it is well-known that sexual assault has life-long consequences, stripping victims of security and well-being, newly elected Liberals

¹⁹² Youth Shelter Sub-Committee, Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee. (2007). *Fort McMurray Housing Needs Report*. Retrieved February 15, 2008, from Intraspec Web site: http://intraspec.ca/FtMcMurray_youth_shelter_report_2007.pdf

¹⁹³ Child and Youth Officer for BC: Issue Paper 5, *Aboriginal Youth and the Youth Criminal Justice System*.

¹⁹⁴ Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia. (2006). *Executive Summary. Joint Special Report. Health and Well-Being of Children in Care in British Columbia: Report 1 on Health Services Utilization and Mortality*. Victoria: Ministry of Health.

¹⁹⁵ 2008 Progress Report on the Implementation of the Recommendations of the BC Children and Youth Review ("Hughes Review"). (2008). Retrieved February 17, 2009, Web site: <http://www.rcybc.ca/Images/PDFs/Reports/Hughes%20Progress%20Dec%2008%20FINAL.pdf>

¹⁹⁶ Rutman, D., Hubberstey C., & Feduniw, A. with assistance from Brown, E. (2007, September). *When Youth Age Out of Care—Where to from There? Final Report Based on a Three Year Longitudinal Study*. Victoria: School of Social Work, University of Victoria.

¹⁹⁷ BC Representative for Children and Youth (2008). *Monitoring Brief. System of Services for Children and Youth with Special Needs*. Retrieved February 26, 2008, from Web site: <http://www.rcybc.ca/Content/MediaRoom/MediaReleases.asp>

¹⁹⁸ Update: *System of Services for Children and Youth with Special Needs*. (2008). Retrieved February 17, 2009, from Web site: <http://www.rcybc.ca/Images/PDFs/Reports/Special%20Needs%20Update08%20FINAL.pdf>

¹⁹⁹ Bennett, D., & Sadrehashemi, L. (2008). *Broken Promises: Parents Speak about B.C.'s Child Welfare System*. Retrieved February 15, 2009, from Pivot Legal Aid Web site: <http://www.pivotlegal.org/pdfs/BrokenPromises.pdf>

immediately attacked BC's violence against women movement and turned to patchwork remedies.²⁰⁰ Indeed, violence against women and children has largely disappeared from official reporting on provincial well-being, as with the *Annual Reports of the BC Progress Board*. In an extraordinary demonstration of misrepresentation, its December 2008 'Environment, Health & Society' indicators left unmentioned both violence and gender. While acknowledging correlations among "smoking, exposure to tobacco, obesity, poor eating habits, and physical inactivity, and cancer and heart disease", it happily sidestepped government abandonment of the vulnerable, concluding that "the onus is on individuals" to change health outcomes.²⁰¹

Today, as a result of such thinking, the surviving sexual assault and women's centres provide unfunded crisis line services and struggle with fundraising. The 2005 inauguration of Outreach Programs to counsel and assist women and dependent children and educate communities, like eight provincial Multicultural Outreach Programs and some enhanced support for Transition Houses, moved snail-like to redress past government cuts. Many gaps continue, however, as with the absence of specialized counselling services for teens despite the fact that in 2000, the majority (54%) of female victims of sexual assault were under age 18 (20% were under age 12 and 34% were from 12 to 17 years old).²⁰² Aboriginal women also receive far less help than their situation demands.²⁰³

Episodic and incomplete remedies recur despite the fact that "20% of ALL the criminal charges laid by Police Departments in BC are domestic violence related".²⁰⁴ A recent study of homelessness in the Victoria Census Metropolitan Area discovered that 34% of women, as compared to 7% of men, had fled domestic violence. Some 25% "identified themselves as aboriginal, First Nations, Métis, Inuit or Native."²⁰⁵ A 2008 report from the McCreary Centre continued the story with 58% of aboriginal girls and young women in its survey having been sexually abused as compared with 18% of their male counterparts.²⁰⁶ In northern BC, "the lack of career opportunities and limited resources in rural locations" compel many women "to stay in abusive relations" and unwanted and unprotected sex in turn left them "at risk to contagious infections."²⁰⁷ Not surprisingly, HIV/AIDS disproportionately marks aboriginal women.²⁰⁸

Lower-end accommodation, all that the social assistance housing allowance supports, only increases dangers to well-being.²⁰⁹ A woman from Vancouver's Downtown

²⁰⁰ On the broader problems see Morrow, M., Hankivsky, O., & Varcoe, C. (2004). Women and Violence: The Effects of Dismantling the Welfare State. *Critical Social Policy*, 24(2), 358-384.

²⁰¹ BC Progress Board. (2008). *8th Annual Benchmark Report*. Retrieved February 15, 2009, from BC Progress Board Web site: http://www.bcprogressboard.com/pdfs/Bench_12_12_2008_S.pdf

²⁰² Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada. (2001). *Canadian Crime Statistics 2000 - Catalogue no. 85-205*.

²⁰³ On evolving policies see *Building Strategies to Intervene Upon and End Sexual Violence in BC: Options Paper for Moving Forward* (2006, October). Vancouver: BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance & Counselling Programs.

²⁰⁴ Detective Wilson, T. (2009). *Police Response to Domestic Violence Files*. [Powerpoint presentation]. Retrieved February 20, 2009, from Web site: <http://www.bcyth.ca/pdf/resources/presentations/Police%20Response%20To%20Domestic%20Violence%20Files.pdf>

²⁰⁵ Capital Regional District of British Columbia. (2007). *A Pathway to Home. Housing First—Plus Supports*. Homeless Needs Survey 2007.

²⁰⁶ Saewyc, E., et al. (2008). *Moving Upstream: Aboriginal Marginalized and Street-Involved Youth in B.C.* Retrieved February 15, 2009, from the McCreary Centre Society Web site: http://www.mcs.bc.ca/pdf/Moving_Upstream_Websmall.pdf

²⁰⁷ Benoit, C., & Shumka, L. (2009). *Gendering the Health Determinants Framework: Why Girls' and Women's Health Matters*. Vancouver: Women's Health Research Network.

²⁰⁸ Varcoe, C., & Dick, S. (2008). The Intersecting Risks of Violence and HIV for Rural Aboriginal Women in Neo-colonial Canadian Context. *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, 4(1), 42-52.

²⁰⁹ Eby, Misura, et al., *Cracks in the Foundation*.

Eastside recounted a situation typical of many citizens in the province: “I am stressed out about money all of the time because there just isn’t enough to pay all the bills and feed the kids properly. I suffer depression as a result...my family’s physical, mental and spiritual health is definitely compromised and my 9 year old is always sad...”²¹⁰

A recent study from the BC Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health further concludes that “women with diagnoses of borderline personality disorder, women with co-existing substance use and mental illness, women in prison, women with developmental disabilities and aboriginal, immigrant and refugee populations” suffer additional trauma and mental disability as victims of abuse. Supports remain, however, minimal in cases of mental and psychological breakdown and distress: “The particular stigmatization and discrimination that accompanies mental illness makes it especially difficult for this group of women to receive appropriate care and support.”²¹¹

BC Liberals continue to act as if violence is an individual problem, with women largely responsible for solutions.²¹² Many official remedies focus narrowly on self-esteem and quick entry into the labour market and sidestep the causes. The connection between systemic male privilege and government indifference is nevertheless clear. A 2008 study draws the important conclusion that “male violence [and] male fertility unmatched by any adequate commitment to care precipitates entrance into the workfare system for numerous mothers...who are actively fulfilling a disproportionately large share of citizenship care responsibilities.”²¹³

While women fleeing abuse are supposed to receive an “Emergency Needs Assessment, and women in transition houses are not required to conduct the three-week work search and should be booked for the next available intake appointment for social assistance,” there is evidence of active discouragement of applications for welfare. One result is fewer women on social assistance in shelters, and greater likelihood of staying in abusive relationships.²¹⁴ A February 2008 report confirms once again that “women who have experienced domestic violence are poorly supported and at times re-victimized in the child protection system.”²¹⁵ The fact that “Crown charging policy in cases of violence against women in relationships has been relaxed” and “funding for victim services” remains un-restored from the earlier cuts confirms bad news.²¹⁶

²¹⁰ Brodsky et al., (2005).

²¹¹ *Canadian Women’s Health Network Magazine*, 7(2/3) (Summer/Fall 2004). See also Morrow, M. with Frischmuth, S., & Johnson, A. (2006, August). *Community-based Mental Health Services in BC: Changes to Income, Employment and Housing Supports*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; and Morrow, M., Hankivsky, O., & Varcoe, C. (2004). *Women and Violence*.”

²¹² See, for example, the Victoria agency, “Bridges for Women” at <http://www.bfwonline.ca/about.html>. Retrieved from its website February 15, 2008. It received \$400,000 for 3 years to pilot an on-line version of its ‘Employability Program’ for ‘women abuse survivors.’ It is ‘marketing’ services throughout the province. Most participants are on Income Assistance but all are expected to be ‘out of crisis,’ have a support system, safe living condition, children settled in school/daycare, support for ‘staying clean and sober throughout the program’ and ‘possess personal suitability’. This doesn’t sound like many women fleeing abuse.

²¹³ Kershaw, Pulkingham, & Fuller, *Expanding the Subject*.

²¹⁴ Wallace, et al., *Denied Assistance*.

²¹⁵ Bennett et al., (2008).

²¹⁶ B.C. CEDAW Group, (2008).

Home-based caregiving

'Home' and 'care' are highly charged words in any consideration of good health and well-being. In BC's past, vulnerable elderly and disabled citizens were persistently confined to substandard conditions in places such as Woodlands, Riverview, and institutions for the aged.²¹⁷ When they function as they should, homes and caregivers underpin best outcomes as Roy Romanow's *Building on Values: The Future of Health Care in Canada – Final Report* (2002) confirmed. A 2003 First Minister's Accord on Health Care Renewal anticipated a "core set of Home Care services" in place by 2006.²¹⁸ This did not happen. Between 2000/01 and 2004/05, the numbers of BCers with home support dropped 24% even as the number of seniors, a majority of whom are women, increased.²¹⁹ 'Conversations' on health and expensive health guides distributed free to provincial households mask these failures.

Women traditionally take up much paid and unpaid care-giving work. Low-pay regularly means that aging workers themselves find independent living difficult. As BCers live longer and more often with chronic conditions, they require more out-of-hospital supports that offer humane, cost-effective alternatives to institutionalization. One recent survey of Victoria's 'old-old', those over 75, and the 'poor-old', found great interest in supportive housing.²²⁰ Such a response is hardly surprising since "in 2003, 82% of home support clients over age 65 earned pre-tax incomes of \$15,000 or less, while only 53.9% of BC's seniors overall had incomes this low."²²¹ Many disabled citizens face similar difficulties.

The province committed itself to 5,000 new intermediate and long-term care-beds by 2006, but the BC Medical Association (BCMA) has reported a decrease of 533 between 2001 and 2007. New accommodation largely appeared in private-assisted living facilities which are largely unregulated. Out-of-pocket expenses and costs for medications and routine supplies trouble many seniors whose always vulnerable incomes are even more insufficient as the times turn darker. A comparison of the BC community care system with its international counterparts led the BCMA to offer a bleak conclusion: "BC does not measure up."²²²

²¹⁷ See, for example, Davies, M. J. (2003). *Into the House of Old: A History of Residential Care in British Columbia*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

²¹⁸ *Portraits of Home Care: A Picture of Progress and Innovation* (2003). Ottawa: Canadian Home Care Association; See also Hollander M. J., & Prince, M. J. (2008). Organizing Health Care Delivery Systems for Persons with Ongoing Care Needs and their families: A Best Practices Framework. *Healthcare Quarterly*, 11(1), 42-52.

²¹⁹ Vancouver Women's Health Collective. (2007). *Conversation on Women's Health*. Retrieved February 10, 2009, from Vancouver Women's Health Collective Web site: <http://www.womenshealthcollective.ca/PDF/Conversations%20on%20women%27s%20health.pdf>

²²⁰ Baker, P. M., & Prince, M. J. (1990). Supportive Housing Preferences Among the Elderly. In Pastalan, L. A. (Ed.), *Optimizing Housing for the Elderly: Homes Not Houses* (pp. 5 – 24). London: Haworth Press.

²²¹ Cohen, M., McLaren, A., Sharman, Z., Murray, S., Hughes, M., & Ostry, A. (2006, June). *From Support to Isolation: The High Cost of BC's Declining Home Support Services*, CCPA. See also Cohen, M., Murphy, J., Nutland, K., & Ostry, A. (2005). *Continuing Care: Renewal or Retreat*, CCPA; and P.D. Seaton, et al. (1991). *Closer to Home: The Report of the British Columbia Royal Commission on Health Care and Costs*. Victoria: Crown Publications.

²²² BC Medical Association. (2008). *Bridging the Islands: Re-Building BC's Home & Community Care System*. Retrieved February 17, 2009, from BC Medical Association Web site: http://www.bcma.org/files/HCC_paper.pdf; See also BC Government and Employees Union. (2008). *Submission to the Ombudsman on the Systemic Investigation of Seniors' Care in British Columbia*. Retrieved February 17, 2009 from BC Government and Employees Union Web site: http://www.bcgeu.bc.ca/reports_and_briefs

Provincial policies, with their ‘down drift in access’ and diminution of service, jeopardize caregivers and clients alike.²²³ As one scholarly assessment put it: “The fact that home support is income-tested rather than universal, and therefore serves a very low-income and marginalized population with little political clout, may partly explain why the dramatic cuts to this sector have received so little attention in the media and in the policy debates.”²²⁴ In short, recurring failures of provincial home support are effectively disenfranchising the elderly and those with disabilities.²²⁵

The Perils of Childbirth

A 2009 study from the Women’s Research Health Network has begun to outline the full consequences of years of neglecting the medical needs of women and girls. Once again we learn how women living in rural areas, with disabilities, of First Nations heritage, or from visible minority communities encounter substantial barriers to achieving good health and accessing resources supposedly available to all citizens. In particular, it notes that childbirth puts many women in special danger. “Since 2000, twenty hospitals in British Columbia’s most northern regions alone have stopped offering maternity services,” forcing residents to head for regional hospitals often many hours away. They have to cope not only with loneliness and isolation, but additional costs and hardships. Many try to postpone trips as long as possible, sometimes endangering themselves and their babies.²²⁶ While money is channelled to vote-rich urban centres, little is available to support rural aboriginal women wishing local midwives, nurse-practitioners, and physicians who speak their languages and understand their cultural practices. Provincial neglect goes further still. The decision in the summer of 2008 to prohibit inmates of the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, the province’s only jail for women, from keeping their newborns on site contradicts all research on successful parenting and rehabilitation. The BC Representative on Children and Youth was one of many to condemn that decision, but to no apparent avail²²⁷.

Part 5: While political power is the key to change...

Women and other vulnerable BCers have reason to wonder why systemic disadvantages are not targets of redress. Why do tax cuts and public expenditures disproportionately benefit the well-to-do? Why is government keen on divesting responsibilities and so shy of social justice and equity? Why do consultations such as the Government Non-Profit Initiative Summit (November 19, 2008) in Vancouver continually promise accountability to citizens and deliver only generalities that

²²³ Cohen et al., (2006).

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Hollander, M. J., Chappell, N. L., Prince, M. J., & Shapiro, E. (2007). Providing Care and Support for an Aging Population: Briefing Notes on Key Policy Issues. *Healthcare Quarterly*, 10(3), 34-45; See also Penning, M. J., Brackley, M. E., & Allan, D. E. (2006). Home Care and Health Reform: Changes in Home Care Utilization in One Canadian Province, 1990-2000. *Gerontologist*, 46, 744-58.

²²⁶ Benoit, C., & Shumka, L. (2009). *Gendering the Health Determinants Framework: Why Girls’ and Women’s Health Matters*. Vancouver: Women’s Health Research Network; See also Benoit, C., Carroll, D., & Westfall, R. (2007). Women’s Access to Maternity Services in Canada: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges. In Varcoe, C., Hankivsky, O., & Morrow, M. (Ed.), *Women’s Health in Canada: Critical Theory, Policy, and Practice* (pp. 507 – 27). Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Benoit, C., Westfall, R., Treloar, A., Philips, R., & Jansson, S. M. (2007). Social Factors Linked with Postpartum Depression: A Mixed-methods Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Mental Health*, 16(6), 719-730.

²²⁷ See Turpel-Lafond, M. E. (2008). Jail program’s end hurts mothers, babies. Retrieved February 17, 2009, from Web site: <http://www.rcybc.ca/Images/News%20and%20Backgrounders/Editorials/Jail%20program's%20end%20hurts%20mothers.%20babies.pdf>

conspicuously omit reference to gender inequalities in access and outcome? ²²⁸ Why are the Liberals so keen to fund a highway to the Whistler condo and hotel market (and the Olympics) and so little interested in pathways to greater social justice? Answers are complex. Many scholars and activists have pointed to a 'democratic deficit' that marginalizes most women and many others as well.²²⁹ Persisting under-representation at every level of government means that women's voices are muted or even silenced when key decisions are made.

As scholars have argued, women's political representation is invaluable to the healthy development of the welfare state and that clearly is one explanation for the failures of BC.²³⁰ How far we have to go in politics is suggested by the fact that, on the basis of membership in the House of Commons, Canada ranked 46th among 189 countries in November 2008.²³¹ On May 12, 2009, BCers have an opportunity to vote for the STV (Single Transferable Vote) recommended by the Citizens' Assembly. This won a majority of 58% votes in the 2005 election, but to pass it needed to meet the benchmark of 60%. While scholars are divided, the STV may present an unprecedented opportunity to revise women's representation upward. We should, however, remain cautious since, as political scientist Manon Tremblay asks, "how can democracy deliver its virtues when the cultural, socioeconomic and political contexts are hostile to the very basic principle of gender equality?"²³² The fact that the BC Liberal government is setting Canadian, even Commonwealth, records for the fewest days of operation for the provincial legislature offers a sobering reminder of how far we have to go.

Fortunately, champions of a 'fair deal' have not surrendered in the province. Efforts on the community front-line, in colleges and universities, in the civil service, and in formal politics continue to make a difference and to remind us why the condition of the most vulnerable should matter to us all.

The Higher the Fewer

Women make up some 52% of the Canadian population, but are under-represented in political office. They are best represented at the municipal level. The November 2008 municipal elections saw the election or acclamation of 34 women mayors in cities, towns, and villages, ranging from Delta and Surrey to Port Hardy, Stewart and Tahsis.²³³ BC, as it readies for a May 2009 election, offers only 17 women in a 79 member legislature. Five of twenty-two members of the Executive Council (Cabinet) are women, including one cabinet minister of Chinese descent. The remainder, with one exemption, are white men of a certain age. The Leader of the Opposition is a woman.

²²⁸ See the Government Non Profit Initiative Summit Report of Proceedings. (2008). Retrieved 15, 2009, from Government Non Profit Initiative Web site: <http://www.nonprofitinitiative.gov.bc.ca/docs/GNPISummitProceedings.pdf> for a typically unimpressive and familiar listing of ways to do partnerships better. Reference to concrete issues was conspicuously absent.

²²⁹ See Trimble, L., & Arcsott, J. (2003). *Still Counting: Women in Politics across Canada*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

²³⁰ See Boizendahl, C., & Brooks, C. (2007, June). Women's Political Representation and Welfare State Spending in 12 Capitalist Democracies. *Social Forces*, 85(4), 1509-1534.

²³¹ *Women in National Parliaments*. Retrieved February 17, 2009, from Women in National Parliaments Web site: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

²³² Tremblay, M. *Democracy, Representation and Women*. Retrieved February 17, 2009, from Women in National Parliaments Web site: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

²³³ See the Union of BC Municipalities. Retrieved February 17, 2009, from Web site: <http://www.civicnet.bc.ca/siteengine/activepage.asp?PageID=34>

In Ottawa, nine of 35 BC Members of Parliament are women, as are 21% of all Canadian MPs. The proportion that is non-European in origin is lower still. Some 92 years after most women were granted the provincial franchise in BC (1916) and 90 years after federal enfranchisement (1918) - although First Nations and those of Asian descent waited until after WWII - democracy clearly remains flawed. Formal political life still frequently goes on much as if women didn't matter.²³⁴

The paltry record of women in political office corresponds to the dim outlines of women and their needs in most policy and program initiatives. In 2008, Katherine Teghtsoonian and Louise Chappell described the near-disappearance of women on the BC agenda and this has deepened in 2009. Since 2001, gender has become nearly invisible on official websites and planning documents. The vital 'Gender Lens' appraisal that the former Ministry of Women's Equality tried to apply to public life has effectively gone, along with the Ministry itself. The elimination of the Minister's Advisory Council of Women's Health, the Women's Health Bureau, the Human Rights Commission, much Legal Aid, and the seniors' Advocate has devastated reporting and research on equality issues. Ministries and ministers are permitted to focus narrowly on labour force participation, sidestepping essentials like affordable childcare, educational upgrading, and good wages. As Teghtsoonian and Chappell demonstrate with respect to one policy area, but which is true of many, the overall Liberal "approach, then, has been to depoliticize and de-contextualize the presence of violence in women's lives and ... the services and supports necessary to end it."²³⁵ Cases such as the horrific murder of Sunny Park, her son, and parents by her estranged husband, who had made a previous attempt on her life, as she had informed police, in Victoria in September 2007, and the murder of three children of Darcie Clarke by her estranged husband in April 2008 in Merritt, never become necessary wake-up calls and appear scarcely to trouble those in power.²³⁶

Official retreat from equality goals has included withdrawal of support for community advocates, most notably Women's Centres. Many non-profits have been forced to eliminate advocacy positions even as the need has grown.²³⁷ The weakening of external monitoring helps Liberal priorities to escape public scrutiny. BC's rank as 8th among the provinces in per capita funding for the Auditor General, and 6th out of the eight with stand-alone Information and Privacy Offices, speaks to the lack of interest in public oversight or government accountability.²³⁸ It is increasingly difficult to discover exactly what is being planned and executed in Victoria, hardly good news for a strong democracy. While the Canadian Bar Association and the UN have repeatedly drawn attention to the contravention of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms resulting from provincial policies, such as the slashing of legal aid, the BC government remains stubbornly deaf to justice, insisting that "the courts had no right to impose legal responsibility on government to fund a legal aid scheme consistent with the *Charter*' and

²³⁴ See Gidengil, E., Blais, A., Neville, N., Nadeau, R. (2004). *Citizens*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

²³⁵ Teghtsoonian, K., & Chappell, L. (2008). The Rise and Decline of Women's Policy Machinery in British Columbia and New South Wales: A Cautionary Tales. *International Political Science Review*, 29(1), 36; See also Morrow, M., Hankivsky, O., & Varcoe, C. (2004). Women and Violence: The Effects of Dismantling the Welfare State. *Critical Social Policy*, 24(3), 358-84.

²³⁶ B.C. CEDAW Group, (2008, September). *Inaction and Non-compliances: British Columbia's Approach to Women's Inequality*.

²³⁷ Wallace, Klein, & Reitsma-Street, *Denied Assistance*.

²³⁸ Reynolds, K. (2007, September 27). *The Government's Approach to the Auditor General and Access to Information*, CCPA.

that “international Human Rights “are not enforceable in Canadian law.”²³⁹

BC’s continuing social justice shortfall has been aggravated by Ottawa’s hostility to equity. Stephen Harper’s Conservatives built on preceding Liberal cutbacks to slash Status of Women Canada [SWC] and remove the goal ‘equality’ from its formal mandate. The agency cannot fund groups that advocate, lobby, or under-take gender-based research. Alice West, the octogenarian chair of BC’s Women Elders in Action (WE ACT), has described the consequences for WE ACT:

They [SWC] were sponsoring our study into the pension program, but they have told us that they will not fund us anymore. They say we can’t advocate, can’t make noise about things that are wrong, can’t criticize the government. If they’re not going to fund us on that basis then what will they fund us for?²⁴⁰

In November 2008, the direct attack on pay equity in the federal Throne speech and the almost deafening silence that followed as pay equity was the only cut retained in the subsequent January Budget, made it very clear how far women’s rights have receded in Canada in the last decade. Charting public policy shifts in BC and Canada since 2001 shows that movement towards equality has not just stalled, it has been deliberately eroded. When damage to so many lives goes publicly unacknowledged, it is easy to believe that many of our elected officials, and the interest groups who have their ear, do not believe they matter. It’s enough to make those working for a more equitable future cry. The evident anguish of Governor General Michaëlle Jean, a long time community activist, as she listened to some tragic truths from the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre in January 2008 is the appropriate response.

Moving from the Good of the Few to the Good of the Many

In her visit to Vancouver, Michaëlle Jean caught only a glimpse of the consequences of BC’s growing equality deficit. *Still Waiting for Justice* points to more than the Liberal government’s persisting indifference to the well-being of the majority of citizens. In many cases, public policies have intentionally undermined the basic security of our most vulnerable citizens while eliminating the need to record these outcomes. In spite of the ‘disappearance’ of accountability to the public, trends are nevertheless quite clear. Changes in taxation policies, employment policies, and social services have helped ensure that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer, all around BC. For many women, especially those who are single mothers, aboriginal, recent immigrants, low-wage workers, differently-abled, or former foster kids, education and healthcare policies offer little hope for better times.

Yet, for all the dismal Throne speeches that leave the majority forgotten, champions of a better deal --from the vice-regal to the modest--exist everywhere. Unions, women’s centres, service organizations, community activists, non-profits, progressive scholars and politicians, and individual women and men are documenting public policy failures and, still more importantly, offering alternatives. The 2008 *Report of BC, CEDAW*

²³⁹ B.C. CEDAW Group, (2008, September).

²⁴⁰ 411 Seniors Centre Society. Retrieved February 15, 2008, from Web site: http://www.vcn.bc.ca/411/Contentpages/we_act.htm

Group to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women offers a rallying point to help force BC to live up to our international obligations on gender equality; as does the 'Poverty Olympics', whose organizers and supporters point out that Vancouver's poorest neighbourhood, the Downtown Eastside, has an HIV rate the same as Botswana's.²⁴¹ The outspokenness of Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, the province's Representative for Children and Youth, supplies another model of engaged citizenship, and an all-too-rare example of someone in authority who is clearly determined to make disadvantage visible and to demand solutions from indifferent governments.

Hope for social justice lies ultimately in government commitment to a range of policies that aim to ameliorate longstanding inequities. Rather than continuing the current path, the BC government should adopt policies that will promote women's equality and thus the well-being of the province as a whole. These policies should include progressive taxation, a minimum wage that actually reflects the cost of living, social housing and an end to homelessness, employment standards that protect workers, stopping the drift to privatization of public sector work, the institution of pay equity and employment equity policies, accessible and affordable childcare, increased benefits for those on social assistance and with disabilities to live in dignity, truly equal educational opportunities, reinvestment in single-tier public healthcare, including homecare, reinstated funding for Women's Centres, sexual assault centres and transition houses, and re-institution of a Ministry for Women's Equality and the application of a 'gender-lens' to all public policy initiatives. Only such recognition will promote gender equality. In 2009, the global economic recession provides an opportunity to recognize the human costs of failed economic policies and to abandon the neo-liberal orthodoxy that has turned back the clock on equality. The citizens of British Columbia should demand no less.

LJS/sm
1670-09br-Still Waiting for Justice-2009



²⁴¹ B.C. CEDAW Group. (2008, September); and Poverty Olympics. *End Poverty—It's Not a Game*. Retrieved February 17, 2009, from Poverty Olympics Web site: <http://povertyolympics.ca/>