



**Safety Changes Everything**

April 13, 2023

Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction  
PO Box 9058 Stn Prov Govt  
Victoria, BC V8W 9E2

Via email: [BCPovertyReduction@gov.bc.ca](mailto:BCPovertyReduction@gov.bc.ca)

---

We are writing on behalf of Battered Women's Support Services (BWSS).

Battered Women's Support Services provides education, advocacy, and support services to assist survivors experiencing gender-based violence. We work from a feminist perspective to eliminate gender-based violence and to promote gender equity. For over forty years, we have been working towards ending violence against women, girls, femmes, 2SLGBTQIA+, and non-binary survivors of violence. Our specialized services team provides crisis intervention, legal advocacy, counselling, and information and referral services. We also provide violence prevention and intervention services, as well as community education and training programs to end gender-based violence.

As a frontline anti-violence organization, every day we observe the detrimental impact of poverty on survivors of gender-based violence.

### **Feminization of Poverty and It's Impacts on Survivors**

We use the term "feminization of poverty" to highlight the unique, specific, and disproportionate ways in which poverty is gendered due to the intersection of cisheteropatriarchy, precarity, and impoverishment. As [researchers note](#), "the feminization of poverty refers to the process in which deep-seated and multidimensional cultural, social, and structural factors cause and exacerbate poverty among women and girls."

Some of the unique, systemic barriers that keep women and gender-diverse people locked into systemic cycles of gendered poverty include:

- [Economic abuse](#) in a relationship restricts a survivor's ability to acquire, use, and maintain economic resources. It is a form of coercive control that involves the control, exploitation,

and/or sabotage of a survivor's livelihood, preventing them from maintaining financial dependence. For over a decade, BWSS has been operating a project called "[Economic Empowerment Strategies for Women: Recognizing and Addressing the Effects of Financial Abuse](#)" and "[Advancing Women's Awareness Regarding Employment](#)" to assess and overcome the [serious](#) physical, social, emotional, and financial impacts of economic abuse, which includes ill-health, isolation, homelessness, and bankruptcy.

- Financial dependence is a significant contributor to gender-based violence. Financial insecurity forces many survivors into the position of choosing between staying with an abusive partner or facing poverty. For survivors with children, especially low-income single mothers, attempting to leave an abusive partner can lead to cascading harms, such as homelessness (often referred to as "[hidden homelessness](#)") or having one's children apprehended.
- Women, youth, and children fleeing domestic violence, intimate partner violence and/or family violence face huge barriers to safe and accessible housing. As noted in the BC Society of Transition Houses Census Survey of 2022, over a 24-hour period, at least [571 women, youth and children](#) across BC who are unsafe in their homes were unable to access life-saving Transition Housing Programs and PEACE Programs. Even for those who can access a transition house for the 30-day period, many end up returning to their abusive partners because of the lack of long-term, affordable housing options. This is especially urgent because [a shadow pandemic](#) is emerging with rates of domestic violence and [femicide](#) increasing across Canada and BC. The latest data shows that [184 women and girls](#) were violently killed, primarily by men, in Canada in 2022. This represents an alarming 27 percent increase when compared to 2019.
- Labour market discrimination, such as the gender pay gap, persists in BC and Canada. Even the [United Nations Human Rights Committee](#) has raised concerns about the high level of the pay gap in Canada and its disproportionate effect on low-income, racialized, and Indigenous women. In addition, systemic racial and gendered barriers to employment – namely, gendered [colonialism](#), [misogynoir](#), [precarious immigration status](#), and a lack of recognition of [immigrants' credentials](#) – means that Indigenous, Black, newcomer immigrant/refugee, and racialized women are most heavily concentrated in underpaid, minimum wage, temporary, and otherwise precarious jobs. Further, according to the Canadian Women's Foundation, [during the pandemic](#), women were more likely to lose their jobs than men and suffer through unemployment.
- Unpaid domestic work and caregiving responsibilities within the family, including but not limited to child rearing and caring for older dependents, disproportionately falls on women. This further impacts economic security and is a key contributor to the feminization of poverty. Just over [three-quarters](#) of those working part-time in Canada were women in 2015, and one-quarter of women working part-time said their reason for doing so was to care for children.

These structural barriers are magnified for Indigenous women, Black women, racialized women, newcomer immigrant/refugee women, women with disabilities, youth, and trans and two spirit people who are enduring the intersections of multiple forms of oppression and discrimination. Especially for Indigenous mothers and families, gendered colonialism and poverty has resulted in the ongoing overrepresentation of [Indigenous children in BC's child welfare systems](#) and intergenerational forced family separation.

## **Top Three Priorities for Ending the Feminization of Poverty**

Poverty is not an individual failure; it is a policy choice that is manufactured and maintained in our current capitalist, settler colonial, patriarchal, and oppressive system. Moreover, as British Columbia's Officer of the Human Rights Commissioner [has stated](#), "high rates of poverty in the province violate B.C.'s obligations to respect people's right to an adequate standard of living as enshrined in international law."

As a decolonial, anti-racist, and intersectional feminist organization with a vision of gender equity, BWSS has three top priorities to eliminate poverty and to prioritize the safety of all survivors in BC (regardless of their immigration or citizenship status).

### **1) B.C. must fund evidence-based, upstream, preventive measures that eliminate poverty as a key condition of vulnerability for gender-based violence.**

*"All the government systems work in concert with each other. Housing with income assistance with child welfare are working in concert to sustain the cycle of poverty. Housing providers limit the agency and autonomy and uphold white supremacy. The income review process is also getting more and more stringent with B.C. Housing and it is set up to keep women in poverty. If you spend \$10 on beer, your housing provider can scrutinize you, with all these occupancy standards, and never mind if you have a child or children. Women are judged, penalized, up to having their children removed. And housing providers assigning a primary tenant means that if she is Black and he is white, he has all the power. The things you have to do as a single Black woman with children! But if you have a job under the table to survive, then that extra money is now income and gets clawed back. These systems uphold white supremacy and the poverty cycle."*

– Worker of colour statement in our [Colour of Violence](#) report, 2022.

The [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) recognizes that, "Poverty and violence play a kind of toxic dance in women's lives. Poverty marginalizes women, increasing their risk of victimization, while violence also isolates women, as the mental and physical effects grind away at women's sense of well-being, limiting what is possible. The combined effects of poverty and violence create a formidable barrier to women's equality, well-being and full participation in society. Both reflect unequal relationships of power which result in the systemic discrimination of women."

Survivors deserve access to free, universal, accessible, and culturally safe housing, childcare, transportation, jobs, economic resources, and anti-violence supports for themselves and their families.

- B.C. must implement all the Calls to Action in the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Call to Action](#), and all the Calls for Justice in [Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#).
- A provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy must include all relevant elements of the [Roadmap for the National Action Plan for Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Violence](#). It must prioritize full, wrap-around, timely, reliable, and inclusive supports for survivors of gender-based violence in the form of full core funding (not simply program funding) for anti-violence services. Survivors experiencing

multiple forms of oppression require access to fully funded anti-violence services committed to intersectional service delivery.

- B.C. must ensure livable social assistance, disability, pension, Extended Family Program, Child in the Home of a Relative Program, and crisis grant rates that adjust for inflation for all survivors, especially for [seniors](#), [those with disabilities](#), and [Indigenous families](#). We support the [Raise the Rates campaign](#), calling attention to how assistance rates in BC remain below the poverty line.
- B.C. must guarantee that subsidized, quality, family housing is made available immediately throughout the province, including on-reserve, and upon need in survivors' communities of choice, near their support networks. We need a massive provincial funding investment into a provincial housing plan to reverse the current housing crisis. This includes permanent housing, as well as transition homes and second-stage housing.

**The intersection of poverty, gendered violence, and lack of affordable housing is a key and urgent site of intervention in the struggle for gender equity.**

*"It's been horrible. The ways it's been horrible is financially, the rent increase, the lack of safe houses, the fact that my kids have disabilities has also been a setback. Moving into the place I lived in before was super small and crowded. Now the place we live in is big but overpriced. There's no way of being able to do any of it. It was already short before, I tried to flee the relationship more than once in many years and before COVID it was almost easier.*

*- Indigenous survivor of intimate partner violence statement in our [Road to Safety report](#), 2022.*

- B.C. must fund free public transit in all regions, as well as free, on-demand emergency transportation for women, 2SLGBTQIA+, and non-binary survivors fleeing intimate partner, domestic, sexualized, or gender-based violence. This transportation system needs to be fully funded across the province and available 24/7 upon immediate request and provided for short and long distances.
- Publicly funded, publicly provided universal basic services that are trauma-informed and anti-oppressive in their delivery models. This includes free and universal services such as childcare, healthcare, dental care, mental health supports, internet access, public transit, healthy school food program in the K-12 school system, employment programs.

## **2) B.C. must prioritize ongoing, annual funding for legal aid services for family law and child protection matters.**

BWSS was shocked and disappointed that the [BC Budget 2023](#) made no commitments to vital, life-saving services such as legal aid or family law access. Currently, [three out of every five applications for family law legal aid representation are denied](#). For survivors of gender-based violence, especially low-income racialized mothers, these ongoing gaps in legal aid service delivery for family law and child protection matters create serious barriers to accessing justice, while forcing them further into a cycle of poverty.

No survivor in B.C should sacrifice their safety, the best interests of their children, or their financial security to flee and separate from an abusive partner. It is for this reason that BWSS strongly

recommends that an updated Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy urgently prioritize fully funding legal aid representative services for family law and child protection issues. We emphasize that funding of non-profit legal services does not replace the need for full, individualized, and direct legal aid representation for family law matters. When fleeing violence, the complexities and stresses of navigating a legal system without legal counsel is an intimidating and traumatic burden, and becomes a significant barrier to seeking safety, to accessing justice, and to securing financial independence.

Specifically, an updated Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy should increase funding for family law legal aid, raise the financial eligibility cut-off for legal aid, and increase the number of legal aid hours that are available. Further, access to legal aid representation must be timely. As [West Coast LEAF notes](#), the longer family law matters go on without resolution, the greater the risk of serious family violence. For Indigenous mothers, the risk of child apprehension is always looming in family law matters. Access to fully-funded, timely, accessible, culturally-safe legal aid services would mitigate against the injustice of the colonial child welfare system, which the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\) explains](#) "continues the assimilation that the residential school system started."

### 3) **B.C. needs intersectional pay equity legislation**

Women, trans, and two spirit people are systematically underpaid for work of equal value, compared to the wages their male counterparts earn. Indigenous women, Black women, racialized women, newcomer immigrant/refugee women, women with disabilities, and trans and two spirit people face compounding discrimination in employment, and the greatest barriers to pay equity. For example, racialized women make approximately [59.3 percent](#) of what white men make in the workforce. This cements a lifetime, and often a generational cycle, of both the feminization and racialization of poverty.

BC remains as one of four provinces that does not have pay transparency or pay equity laws. Last year, the BC government began the process of developing pay transparency legislation. However, pay transparency legislation is distinct from pay equity legislation. Without pay equity legislation to ensure that employers actually change their pay practices and provide equal pay for work of equal value, pay transparency is limited. This is why we reiterate our call, along with 100 other organizations and individuals, that BC must enact [intersectional pay equity legislation](#) that enshrines in law the responsibility of all employers to identify and close gaps in pay for work of equal value.

In addition to intersectional pay equity legislation, the province needs a whole-of-government approach to end the feminization poverty, especially in the labour market. This includes government interventions to end systemic racial and gendered labour market discrimination – such as employer harassment, wage theft, deskilling, and contract flipping – especially for Indigenous, Black, and newcomer immigrant/refugee women in the workforce. It also includes reversing a long trend of economic restructuring towards austerity that continues to disproportionately impact racialized and/or disabled women and single mothers, forcing them into precarious, underpaid, and/or part-time work.

[BC has committed to](#) “develop an action plan to help prevent, address and respond to gender-based violence.” In our work on the frontlines of supporting survivors, we know that safety changes everything. **We urge the province to adopt a provincial poverty reduction strategy that incorporates an [intersectional GBA+ analysis](#), and, further, to adopt a provincial GBV plan that incorporates upstream, anti-poverty solutions to prioritize the safety, wellbeing, and economic security of survivors.**