

# Women's Perspectives on Poverty

Photos and stories by women on low-income in Calgary



Women and Fair Income Group- Calgary, Alberta, Canada  
October 2004

*"Every woman has a story. Too few have a safe place to tell it."*  
Lynda Laughlin

The report was written by Lynda Laughlin, Donna McPhee and Maggie Pompeo, with editing support from the members of the Women and a Fair Income Working Group and Photographers.

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Cover Photograph – Two weeks to go... by L. Laughlin

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## Tribute

When we started this project, we were 14 in number. Then we were 15. Then we were 12. Then, sadly, 12 became 11.

Life intervened. Liza moved to British Columbia. Pat had a baby boy. Work and meeting schedules conflicted. Kelly returned to school. Maggie started school. Kids got sick. People moved. Emergencies arose but through all these changes, the project moved ahead. The project moved ahead because of the enthusiasm, commitment and faith of the women. This was a way to be heard. A way to speak of our lives and to SHOW the realities.

One of our number who saw the potential and the value in what we were doing was Pam Parry. Pam was our resident editor and critic. Woe to those who made fast and loose with punctuation or spelling! She gave us her best and was taken before she could see the result of her labours. Pam passed away on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2004. She advocated for social justice. She believed in fairness and fair play. She acted with integrity and expected others to do the same. So, Pam, this is for you. Your words and your photos are a permanent record of that part of your life you chose to share with us and we honour your contribution to this project.

The report and photo display stand as a lasting tribute to each woman's courage, her creativity, her ingenuity and her strength. It is to honour all women everywhere who face the same struggles daily and yet they prevail and carry on in the best way they know how.

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." – Margaret Mead*

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## Introduction

In March of 2003, we first met as a small group to discuss the viability of doing a project to revisit the issues of low-income women in Calgary. Our starting point was a 1999 report written by Calgary Status of Women Action Committee called *Watering Down the Milk: Women Coping on Alberta's Minimum Wage*<sup>1</sup>. Prior to that document, in 1998, the Alberta government had legislated a graduated increase in the minimum wage to a maximum of \$5.90 per hour (this remains the lowest in Canada). In light of the Alberta government's gradual increase of the minimum wage and other changes to social assistance programs, we wanted to know if life had improved for low-income women in the intervening five years. The answer we heard was an unqualified 'No'. If anything, things were worse.

For our project, we decided to include women whose income sources varied from low wage employment to Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) to Supports for Independence (SFI – now known as Alberta Works) to student loans. The criteria for participation were women's personal experiences of surviving on a low-income and their ability to attend meetings.

At our second meeting, the idea of using Photovoice as the research tool was presented and accepted with enthusiasm. Members of the working group then went out into our communities to recruit women to participate in the project. Initially there were fourteen women, including the working group and photographers. This number changed, increasing and decreasing as life circumstances dictated. Participants came from diverse cultures and backgrounds but all faced the same problems of survival for themselves and their families on incomes too low to be viable.

The photos were taken from each woman's unique perspective and reflect her experiences of poverty. The captions accompanying the photos are in her words.

Naturally, each woman's life is unique, and yet there are common threads that run through those lives regardless of culture, nationality or age. Want is want. There is never enough of anything. Not enough money – not enough food – not enough security in any aspect of our lives.

Low-income women's lives are especially complex and can change in an instant. A job loss is catastrophic. A divorce or separation is a direct route to poverty. Any emergency – a sick child – domestic violence – a vehicle breakdown – a personal illness – is impossible to deal with without throwing every aspect of her life into chaos. Because there is little or no discretionary income and no savings for a "rainy day," the resources used to resolve the emergency are at the expense of other necessities in her life. She is usually an excellent bookkeeper and knows where every penny is. A difference of ten or twenty dollars can throw her budget completely off for the month. She lives her life in a constant state of stress, holding her breath waiting for the next crisis, and knowing she will not

have the means to deal with it when it comes. If it's a *small* crisis, it comes out of the grocery money. If it's a *big* crisis, the rent may not get paid.

Low-income women do not have the luxury of putting off the bills for a month and catching up next month. Once she falls behind it could take months to catch up, or it may be beyond her means to ever catch up. Because she may have to use the rent money for the emergency, she could be facing an eviction notice. So, the crisis that was solved has created a new one. This is her life on a daily basis and she spends that life *putting out fires* and waiting for the next problem to arise.

In Canada there is no *official* measure of poverty. Hence, governments can and do use a number of different definitions. In Alberta all social welfare programs are based on the recipient's ability to take part in the work force. People are categorized as ETW (Expected to Work) or NETW (Not Expected to Work) or Learner through the new Alberta Works welfare system introduced in 2004.

A much favoured mantra these days is: *People want a hand up not a hand out*. This is a meaningless phrase to someone who is hungry or homeless – a single mom who sent her children to school hungry – a disabled woman who cannot meet her basic nutritional needs – a woman working forty hours a week or more who cannot afford new shoes for her children or the fees for her child's class field trip.

Disabled women, Aboriginal women, single senior women, single mothers, immigrant women and low-wage working women are suffering a depth of poverty that is unprecedented in a province experiencing an embarrassment of riches such as Alberta has for several years. The debt is paid and the coffers are full. Low-income women, dependent on Alberta's social welfare programs, are trying to survive on benefits too low to address their basic needs.<sup>2</sup> Women on social assistance and women working for minimum or low wage (\$10 per hour or less) are being asked to support themselves and their families on incomes far below the poverty measures we do have - Low Income Cut Off<sup>3</sup> and the Market Basket Measure<sup>4</sup>. Each of these various groups of women is represented in this photovoice project.

## **Why Photovoice?**

To describe the project to others when we applied for funding or support, we explained:

Photovoice combines a participatory approach to photography with social action.<sup>5</sup> The goal of this project was to produce materials to advocate for women-centred policy alternatives to achieve fair income levels for all people in Calgary and Alberta. Women who participated in planning and implementing the project include university- and community-based researchers, many of whom were

women living on low-incomes. Over a three-month period, women took photographs to assist in developing and analyzing the impact of living on low income. Together, we reviewed the pictures that were taken, related the stories behind the images, analyzed their meaning and created a powerful advocacy tool.

Photography as a research tool was a very different approach than many of the group had previously used and it presented its own set of ethical and privacy issues. After the initial meetings to decide on the method we would use and recruitment of participants, focus groups were held to acquaint participants with the ethical issues and privacy concerns of both photographer and photographic subject. There evolved an agreed-upon set of parameters to protect the privacy and dignity of all parties involved.

After the photos were developed, meetings were held where the photographers each picked a number of their own photos to best express their particular circumstances and point of view. These meetings were recorded and transcribed. The caption that appear with each photo was taken from each woman's own words as she described her photos. Each woman has given approval for the picture and caption as it would appear in the display. Once the photos and captions were chosen, the group worked on the display and the accompanying report and organized venues.

We hope that this project will inform and enlighten and that it will stand as a lasting record of the creativity, ingenuity, strength and hope of women everywhere who struggle daily in an attempt to imbue their lives with dignity and value in a system that neither acknowledges that dignity nor places any value on their strengths and contributions.

*"... It's incredible how we each interpret things differently and yet it all means the same thing. I think this Photovoice is an awesome thing." - Maggie Pompeo*

## **Women's Perspectives on Poverty: Photographers, Photos and Stories**

*"I am just blown away by this. We are all poor and the public probably defines us all as pretty well the same and after looking at these pictures, I know that we're nothing the same. We all start from a place of poverty, but our different frames of reference ... Completely different perspective from one person to another." - Lynda Laughlin*

### **The Pictures We Didn't Take, The Stories We Didn't Tell**

*"It was like all of a sudden I started seeing things that were totally ... the empty fridge, the empty freezer didn't mean anything and things just stopped meaning - Maggie Pompeo*

We all have in our minds' eyes a picture that we didn't take. For many of us, the picture we wanted to take would have put someone at risk of embarrassment, harassment or loss of support. As Donna said, "I wasn't interested in creating the next poster child for poverty".

Poverty is stigmatized in rich Alberta. Poverty has been kept secret and hidden out of shame. We say it's time to come forward as people who live in our shared community and who deserve human rights and quality of life.

Some of us started to doubt that anyone would want to hear our stories and witness our experiences. We wondered if the poverty we were experiencing mattered next to the experiences of people who are homeless.

*"This project says: Take a look at us. We're here. This is our reality. You can't ignore us anymore." - Maggie Pompeo*

## Fran

I am 58 years old and have legal guardianship of three grandkids. My husband has been pensioned off since 1999 because of an injury. We are always looking for free outings because we cannot afford luxury. Shop at Value Village most of the time. Have a limit for Xmas presents and birthday gifts.



### I'm a good soupmaker...

That picture is my cupboard about a week and a half before we get paid. We get paid once a month. So I have to make LOTS of soup. I'm a good soup maker. I look for deals and when I can get a case, if they're bruised a little bit, take the bruise out and can them.... I make lots of porridge....



### Nobody of our ilk.

There's a guy lying there. He's lying down on the ground. I walked for three hours and I could have taken WAY more than that. People lying everywhere. You know it gets me because we don't have.... There's no reason for this. No, we don't have a good excuse.

Donna: Nobody of our ilk is allowed here.



**It's his home.**

This is on my street. You see that white van there? Well, he lives in that all year. He lives in that because he can't afford.... It's his home. Nobody complained. We always said hi to him and, you know, the guy was working 'cause we could see him leave for work every morning and come back...now he's not there.



**There's no reason.**

People are sleeping in parks, they have all of their possessions in a cart. It should not be like this. There's no reason.

## Beryl

I have been on AISH for 17 years. I have young adult children. Women make so little. How can you make enough for rent, food and everything else you need in the city?



### Run down formula

My little grandson was apprehended 2 months ago because they made a home visit with her. The social worker said that she was feeding the baby run down formula (pause), which means she never did have enough money to feed the baby.... She lost her baby because she wasn't giving him proper formula.

I was so ashamed when I read that on the child welfare papers. But then I read this report ("Watering Down the Milk") and realized that we're not the only ones.... If they'd just give her enough money to feed the baby....



### She's not giving up

She's saving up to make sure she sets up a good home for the baby and a good income. It's her at the bus stop. She's going to Chinook College taking upgrade in math and computer training.... She's taking parenting courses 'cause that's her first baby.



### **I can't move**

This one is me. I'm poor and I'm living in a run-down place and I can't move.... I just can't seem to get ahead to move out of my run-down place. Broken cupboards, no cupboard doors and the landlord won't fix it.

I sit on the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness, a subcommittee of the Calgary Homeless Foundation. See the problem is, they're building new family housing. I mean they're building new AFFORDABLE units, but they're all-I-I-I one bedroom. I'm looking after my son.... He's diagnosed with schizophrenia. I need more than one room. Hopefully this year they'll make...some new units someplace else.

It's so hard to find a landlord that would accept \$229 (the rent subsidy).

Lynda: This is how desperate the situation is if you're living in a Calgary Housing unit and you don't want to be there anymore.... Ah, first of all you have to move for medical reasons. You have to get a certificate from your doctor that says that where you're living is hurting your health and barring that, ummm, let's say your landlord decides he doesn't want to do the Calgary Housing thing anymore, they will show you ONE unit and if you don't like it, you're on your own. You were on the program and if you don't like what they show you, and you're not going to move into it, your landlord is gonna stop with the subsidies. You pay full rent.



### **My friends.**

These are my friends. Even if it rains and the wind blows, they will sleep there with sleeping bags. Where the riverbank, they say they get all soaked when they sleep outside. They're trying to save for a down payment...

### **Text on box:**

- 1) Big Brother is watching and the Sheep are Blind. The propaganda is Everywhere and the Conditioning is Deep. How to De-program the sheep?
- 2) No person should ever be placed or allow themselves to be placed on a pedestal so high that they cannot see the tears or hear the cries of those who place them there.

©Author's name withheld '03

## Lynda

My name is Lynda. I am unemployable because of a chronic illness. My savings are gone and any financial security I may have had has been used to survive. I now live on welfare (AISH) which works out to less than minimum wage per month. There is always more month than money. Never having enough money or enough of anything to meet basic needs has taken a toll on my health, on my self-esteem and on my idea of who I am and where I fit in this world. Living close to the edge of disaster on a daily basis eats away at your soul and destroys you from the inside out.



### Tough decisions

I made a bed out of a cardboard box and some material that I had left over. I thought it was kind 'o cool myself. I have three cats and they each have a bed. They're MATCHING beds. And ah, that's Ghizmo. That's the boy with the HAIR!

I have to get rid of those animals... I don't know how far I'm going to get with this.... Somebody say something...I can't afford to keep these animals and so, that's why I took pictures of them. It's sort of a choice of they eat or I eat. So-o-o...you know.... I think it's a cruel, lousy system that makes you make choices like that....It's too nerve racking when one of them becomes ill. They are getting older. It's too nerve racking for me. I want them to be taken care of. I want them to be someplace where they're loved and cared for and I know they are safe and sound. Which may sound silly to some folks who are struggling to feed their kids – like who cares about my cats but I've just had them for so long....

The furniture and all that stuff is my past life... left over from the gravy days... a lot of women march into poverty with the goods they had before.

*"Even the strongest, most intelligent, uppity woman can be beaten to a pulp spiritually, emotionally and psychologically if the circumstances of her life do not nourish her gifts." – Lynda Laughlin*



### **Two weeks to go...**

That's my fridge. I just have jars and jars and jars of STUFF.... Right up front, that is a turnip that I'm saving 'til the last minute. That's, I think, about 2 ½ weeks into the month. Usually after 2 weeks any fresh food is gone. In the crisper there are onions and carrots. Any kind of root vegetable keeps. I've got jars and jars. If you could just make a meal out of what's in those jars....

And then, you learn how to make soup. You open the fridge and there's nothing in it and you learn how to make a pot of soup out of that. I think poor people are really, really creative.

## Donna

I am of mixed heritage, Blackfoot, Cree and Scottish. Sometimes I forget about the Scottish part because I have never had to defend that part of my heritage, while the Aboriginal part has to be defended daily! Being in Calgary since 1958, I have seen two different worlds. The ones that have money and the ones that don't. If you are economically challenged, life in Calgary has an ironic twist – all this is the good life and you don't have the entrance fee.



### **I don't have a health care card.**

Donna: I go to CUPS because I don't have a health care card. And I go to CUPS a lot. That's the meeting place of my community and they're an intricate part of my reality for the last long time.

A lot of people can't pay medical premiums. Let's say you can't pay (you medical premiums). They sell you to a bill collector; the bill collector makes your life miserable. So you can't go to a doctor. They won't see you without a health care number. That's why I went to CUPS, because I don't have a health care card.

“Where's your health care card? You want and X-ray? Where's your health care card”

You have to give a VISA card to cover the costs they think you might incur.

Maggie: Imagine if CUPS closed. Every time I go by there, maybe five times a week, at eight in the morning, it's packed.

*Calgary Urban Project Society (CUPS) provides health care, social services and educational services to people who struggle with issues of poverty and who are marginalized in society.*



### **Little sucker.**

During Stampede week, you'll see a prominent figure of an Aboriginal Mountie on the (Stephen Avenue) Mall.... He is really derogatory and I can't stand the little sucker...it reminds me of Canada's attitude toward the Aboriginal community.



### **They never asked**

This is a picture of my auntie who got a medal from King George for staying at her post during the air raids in Britain in World War II.

They used to have a picture of my mother too. They never asked her if they could put her picture up.

When my mother died, I gave them shit and told them to take them down. I said my mother's gone, and she never gave you permission, and I don't.

It was them using us again.



**It affects everything.**

I was taking a picture of the clouds. The storm stoppers have been stopping the storms all summer and that's the insurance companies. And they're stopping hail but in reality they're stopping rain in this area. I'm a heavy duty environmentalist and this is one thing that is really bothering me.

That affects everything. The food supply, it affects prices in the grocery store...this issue is related to poverty!



**Big Metal Horse**

Donna: If you're dealing in poverty and homelessness the police are a big part of your reality. My dealings with the police, they have been big, scary and they remind me of that big metal horse.

Lillian: The big metal horse represents the power and we are the powerless.

## Lillian

I am a 48 year old grandmother, raising two grandsons whom my husband and I have had custody of for six years. Because our income is low, we are always looking for free or cheap outings to keep our grandsons busy. I became involved with this project after a friend told me about it.



### **Not very good for you**

This is after the Food Bank box came and there isn't much in it...stuff that's not very good for you.

And now it's only three times a year and you have to go downtown to get a referral. You can get six but you have to work for three.... If you don't have money for food, how do you have money to go downtown?



### **“Free” entertainment**

It's a free venue, if you can afford the bus fare to take your children. You can get fee assistance from the city for the pools and the zoo and the Science Centre but not many people use them because they can't afford the bus fare to get there.... It's really great to have those programs, but....



**It's his life.**

He's pushing a buggy with a whole bunch of stuff in it – it's his household – it's his life. I find that the saddest about poverty. There's no excuse for people to have to live on the street. Even if they just get a little room that they can call their own....

Welfare says they give enough for basic needs. No, they're not. Welfare rates need to be raised because you take out of food to pay the utility bill, and you take money out of the utility bill to pay for food and you have to beg them to cover it



**Until she got on her feet.**

If she got enough money from welfare for her necessities, she wouldn't be crowded in like that.

And then you get the child welfare police asking how many people live here...saying, "Why doesn't your kid have their own room?"



### **Shelter from the storm.**

A lady came in and sat down beside us at Sunrise Community Links. She asked if it was ok to have a coffee because one of the workers there was trying to find her housing. She said that she had just gotten out of the hospital the week before because she had a heart attack. While in hospital her roommate brought her clothes to her, put her dog in the pound and told her she needed to find somewhere else to live. She didn't tell them at the hospital she had no home to go to when she was discharged because she was too embarrassed. She tried to go back to work at Wal-mart and was laid off because she was told that she wouldn't be able to do the work because of the heart attack. She had already been on the street for a week when we ran into her and was not eating because she had no money to buy food and no way to cook any if she had any. Because she had no address she couldn't even go to welfare to get her prescriptions filled (she had \$160.00 worth of heart medication she couldn't get filled) or to ask for a cheque. The two nights that it snowed she slept in a port-a-potty, to get out of the snow and wind. She joked and said it wasn't bad because at least she had a bathroom but no light to read her book. She tried sitting at a bus stop under a streetlight to read but was told by police that she had to move because the bench wasn't her living room. She needed a rent report for welfare that has to be filled out by the homeowner or rental manager. Even if she is rooming with someone who themselves are renting , they can't fill it out, it has to be the landlord. Anyway because I couldn't let her go out the door and back on the street I brought her home and voila she had an address. Maggie called welfare and made arrangements to get her prescriptions filled. She said that she had always assumed that homeless people were on the street because they wanted to be there, that she never dreamed that it could happen to her or just how fast someone could find themselves homeless, that she now had a new perspective on homelessness. This lady is for sure not your typical homeless person, but believe me it can happen fast and with no warning.

## Pam

My name is Pam Perry. I'm 63 years old and an AISH recipient because of health problems. I've been involved in social justice issues for a long time and personally experienced many of the issues in my own life. I'm hoping that this project will open people's eyes to the realities of low income women's lives.



### The cost of eyesight.

I tried to tell a little story. It turns out I've got an eye infection and the eye infection, believe it or not, is caused by malnutrition.

So, my doctor gave me these orders that I have to take all these vitamins and minerals.... With a prescription you don't have to pay the GST but it's still expensive.

This one is a shot of all the vitamins and minerals I have to take. And let me tell you now it's a vicious circle, because if you can't afford to buy fresh fruits and veggies...you sure can't afford to buy all these supplements.

If you can't afford the food, the vitamins, the minerals...you have a permanent eye infection.



### But even if you can afford the grapes...

If you can buy grapes at \$2.99 a pound, you're a lucky person.

But even if you can afford the grapes, you're probably still not getting the nutrition you think you are getting because of irradiation and what they're doing to food these days.



### **Good Food Box.**

I am also a depot for an organization called the “Good Food Box.” You get lots of fresh food – fruits and vegetables – for a very small sum and so once a month these two guys...they descend on me with all these great big boxes of food in my little kitchen.



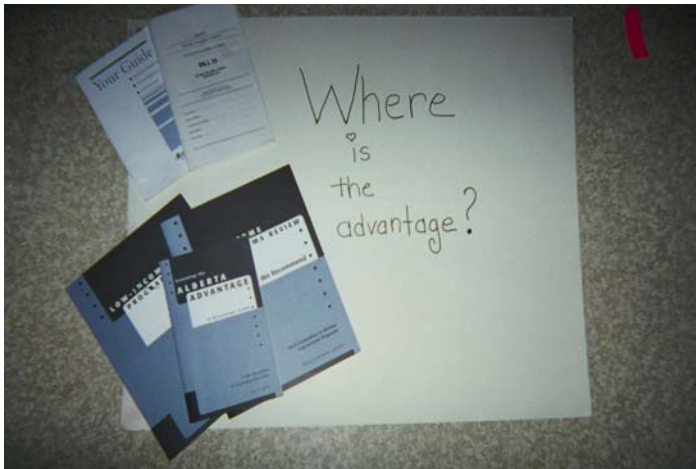
### **Problem solving skills.**

I live in a tiny little apartment but I have this little patio place outside, so that’s my tomato plant and it’s OK. So we’re getting there, I thought.

I thought I was using some really good problem solving skills here because I got the Good Food Box, I put in my tomatoes.... But then I realized when I got to this stage that, those vitamins and minerals are extremely expensive when you take them every day...but it’s also not an answer to the problem. It should have a beginning, middle and end, like problem solved, but that problem is not going to be solved.

## Maggie

My name is Maggie Pompeo. I'm 45 years old and have just recently returned to school full-time. I am hoping by doing this I can make a better life for my children and I and maybe have a future, finally!



### **Where is the advantage?**

So I started off with going through a little bit of what I'm personally going through right now which is sitting reading wonderful books that the government has produced. So, I decided to take a picture of it and ask them, "Where is the advantage?"



### **It's somebody's home.**

I looked and I go, what the heck is that? So, I got off the bus...and I walked back and I found somebody's house. So I came as close as I could possibly get because they were set up like a house with jackets hanging and I felt like I was violating... the closer I was walking, the more I felt like I was violating somebody's house.

They were set up like a house with jackets hanging. It was so well concealed.... it's just an incredible thing. It's somebody's home.



### **Powerlessness**

I sat in the dark for like 2 weeks, so we took the disconnection notice and the whole 99 yards and we wrote another sign saying "deregulation left me powerless."

*In mid-May of 2003, ENMAX disconnected the power at the home of Maggie and her three children. Maggie had not been able to pay the rising costs of electricity from her welfare rate of just over \$700 a month and welfare would not cover the rising fees. Maggie fought back and it took two weeks for the government to agree to pay the outstanding balance so her power could be restored.*



### **Welcome to Canada**

I came to this little memorial – There's a Canadian flag and it's in the water and as you walk down along, before you get to Fort Calgary, you could see this and it says, "If you want to struggle for a decent life. Welcome to Canada."

## Pascal

I am married and have four children. We came to Canada seven years ago. My husband and I have been working hard to support our family but we are still struggling. I hope that someone out there will hear our voices and respond to it.



### My beloved car.

Pascal: This is my car. My beloved car (laughs).... Yes, it's still alive but it's just giving me heart attack. We've had this car since '98 but it has become very, very, very old. And we just can't afford to buy any one and we can't give up on it. Like each time we have to take it to mechanic - \$200 - \$100 - \$150 you know.

Julie: I know it's silly to ask but why is your car so important?

Pascal: My husband goes to school. He's a student. Goes to school. I have to go to work and the nature of my work (Personal Care Attendant), like they give me a call and they give me an address and I have to go and look for it. So, it's just kind of difficult, I can't take the bus to some places.... I wish it was one place I can go every time.... And I don't know if I can make it this winter because the car is....



### **Maybe it is stress...**

I came from the hospital on September 5th because I had a surgery. I came home...and on Sunday, 2AM I had a heart attack. I don't know why. I was just thinking because the doctor asked me to stay home for 6 weeks. Not to lift anything more than 10 pounds and the nature of my work is lifting, like lifting people from wheelchair to bed and all these things and I was just thinking about it. How I'm going to stay home for 6 weeks without pay? And I got a job 2 months ago so they can't pay for me [sick leave]. So that was Saturday all night and then I went to bed. I woke up like somebody was stabbing me on my neck – my heart. I had to call the ambulance and they took me. They put oxygen. I didn't know what was happening. They did all the tests. When they did ECG they said that



### **Very, Very Small.**

I have a 3-bedroom apartment. This room is very, very, very small. My husband is a student. So with my job, like I have to work hard. Before when I was taking high school courses, upgrading, I couldn't get any job because of my schooling and the kids. So, after I finish high school I did a nursing course, the PCA (Personal Care Attendant) course. I got a job but it's kind of casual. Like sometimes they'll call me. So, I'm renting, it is \$775. A family of six members, four kids and two adults is.... I just don't feel that this money is enough for this.



**We will be okay.**

This is my daughter and then my youngest son and my older daughter and my older son (laughs). As you can see from the room, you know like, I don't have enough money to offer what they wish for. Sometimes they ask me for extra toy or some other stuff. I can't offer to buy it for them because of the situation... School costs money. They need money for field trips, they need some other stuff, they need to dress. All this kind of stuff is just.... But I'm telling them that one day...we will be okay. Yeah.



**Did you ever try.**

Pascal: This is my boy. He's going to be nine in November. Yeah, he's very tall. He likes his sports. Like he wants to play soccer and basketball but you have to pay for this and those sports and I can't afford. Even the teacher in the school they are asking me if I can register him but I'm telling him that I don't have money. To register them we need to pay money, like \$80 for one child. Like I just can't, I can't do it

Fran: Did you ever try to put him in Boy's and Girl's Club?

Pascal: No. They have to pay too.

Fran: Well, \$55 for a year for the whole family.

Pascal: Oh, really?

## **Conclusion: Where is the Alberta Advantage?**

The impact of survival on low income is devastating and cannot be truly demonstrated with a statistical study. The heartache of a mother who cannot provide the basic necessities, not to mention the 'extras' for her children – the lost potential of those children whose skills and talents cannot be encouraged or nurtured because it isn't in the budget – the looks of disdain from those who don't understand the struggle – the missed opportunities and the chances forgone. The fear and the stress take a terrible toll both physically and emotionally.<sup>6</sup> Low-income women, especially those on the social welfare system, are often marginalized and pushed to the fringes of their communities because of their poverty. Their exclusion results in feelings of isolation and alienation. Aboriginal and immigrant women face obstacles others do not. Racism is alive and well and shows its ugly face by relegating many immigrant and Aboriginal women to low-wage dead-end employment, often despite their qualifications.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of observations and information gathered during this project, we are compelled to conclude that given even a cursory examination of the impact of poverty in Alberta and particularly in the City of Calgary, a very real problem exists for numerous women. The lowest minimum wage in Canada – welfare rates stalled at unacceptably low levels – difficulty accessing services – a social welfare system constructed in ways that are obstructionist rather than helpful. Alberta's government appears to function within a philosophic and ideological framework that results in disdain for our most vulnerable citizens.

### ***Welfare and AISH***

Numerous studies and reports verify what we observed first hand in our project. Immigrant, Aboriginal, disabled, senior and single head of household women tend to be poor, and are the *poorest* of the poor. Although there are now fewer people on welfare than in 1993 due to drastic changes to eligibility, down from 196,000 people in March 1993 to 53,800 people in March 2003<sup>8</sup>, *the depth* of poverty has worsened. A single employable person on welfare in Alberta received income worth 51 percent of the poverty line in 1986, 36 percent in 1993 and 25 percent in 2003<sup>9</sup>. For example:

- In Alberta, a single employable person requiring social assistance and related benefits in 2002 received \$5,034 a year, only 26% of the Low Income Cut Off (LICO) rate (fact sheet);<sup>2</sup>
- In 2002, a single person with a disability received only \$7,601 a year, or 39% of the LICO;<sup>2</sup>
- For a single parent with one child, Alberta ranked lowest in the country for welfare income as a percentage of LICO (\$11,634 or 45% of the LICO);<sup>2</sup>
- In 2002, a couple with two children received \$18,412 or 51% of the LICO;<sup>1</sup> and,

- In 2003, a person on AISH (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped) received \$850 per month, or \$10,200 per year.<sup>10</sup>

## ***Women and Work***

A Statistics Canada study looking at the fate of people who “left” welfare in the 1990s showed that despite favourable economic conditions in Alberta during that decade, the income of one-third of welfare leavers dropped substantially and the income of another one-third barely rose above what they had received while on welfare.<sup>8</sup> Welfare rates and rules are tied to minimum wage levels; a low minimum wage serves to pull *all* wages to the low end of the scale and ensures a pool of low-wage workers. Women still carry an excessive share of this burden.

Women constitute the majority of minimum and low wage workers, heavily weighted in service sector jobs with no benefits. Opportunities for low skill work in Canada have been shrinking as globalizing markets have encouraged industries to shift low skill jobs to low wage countries.<sup>3</sup>

For example:

- In Alberta, women constitute 60.2% of minimum-wage workers<sup>11</sup> and the majority of low-wage workers, heavily weighted in the service sector jobs with no benefits;
- The minimum wage has decreased by 20 to 30 percent in real terms since 1980;<sup>3</sup>
- Income disparities between men and women persist. Women’s income from full-year, full-time work is 73% of men’s;<sup>12</sup>
- In 1998, poverty among recent immigrants stood at 27%, double the 13% rate among the rest of the Canadian population; their annual wages and salaries were one-third less than those of other Canadians;<sup>13</sup>
- The high poverty rate among Aboriginal people is due to a number of factors, including the significant barriers that many Aboriginal people face in getting and keeping a good job in urban centres. As a report for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples stated, they are not favoured in today’s labour market: “Aboriginal people face discrimination in hiring and employment. They earn about one-third less in wages. They are less likely to hold down fulltime, year-round jobs. They are much more likely to be employed in manual trades such as construction than in white collar jobs as professionals, administrators, managers or clerks.”;<sup>14</sup> and,
- In Calgary in 2000, the lowest 10% of the population had an average income of \$13, 000 while those in the top 10% averaged \$248,600 or one dollar to every \$19.10.<sup>15</sup>

The literature and the perspectives gathered from the women during our photovoice project support the fact that women earn less than their male counterparts and are often relegated to caretaking, clerical and service sector jobs. When that woman is the sole support of her family, life can become very difficult.

## ***Food Insecurity***

A recurring theme in the lives of women in our project was the issue of food insecurity. Very often in the life of a low-income woman, the only *disposable* income is in the food budget. Whether on social assistance or minimum wage, providing proper nutrition for yourself and your children is a daunting task. In two cases within our group, malnutrition resulted from the lack of financial resources to purchase nutritious food. In most other cases, being *under-nourished* was the norm. We found that just filling our bellies and our children's bellies was the goal. By the second or third week of the month, what was on hand couldn't possibly constitute a nutritious meal. Food banks, community kitchens, cut-rate sources of fresh produce are all helpful if you can access them, but they are usually limited to the number of times in one year you are permitted to use them (food banks), or you may have access only once a month, as in the case of purchasing fresh produce. Often there is no choice in what you will receive, so if there are allergies or food sensitivities, that food will be of no use to the person receiving it.

- 48,743 people used a food bank in 2003 in Alberta <sup>16</sup>
- Almost 40% of hampers distributed to individuals and families from the Calgary Inter-Faith Food Bank in 2003 went to people whose income source was wages <sup>1</sup>

The impact of food insecurity on the health of an individual is another component of low-income women's lives.

## ***Health***

*"In the case of poverty, unemployment, stress, and violence, the influence on health is direct, negative and often shocking for a country as wealthy and as highly regarded as Canada."* <sup>17</sup>

The inability to provide nourishing food for ourselves and our children obviously has direct impact on health. Food insecurity looms large in every low income woman's life and we can safely extrapolate from the resulting poor nutrition to poor health. Children who experience poor nutrition cannot become healthy teenagers or healthy adults.

There were three women in our group suffering from disabilities. Each one expressed that her health had further deteriorated since coming into the welfare system. For all involved it went beyond a simple explanation of food insecurity. The stress of trying to manage on too little was a prevalent factor. Exclusion from community because of financial constraints resulted in feelings of isolation and loneliness, again, another stress factor. Even when other risk factors are taken into account, people struggling in poverty have a shorter life span than those not living in poverty.<sup>18</sup>

The incidence of heart disease, diabetes and all other stress related illnesses including mental health issues are more prevalent in low income populations than in higher income groups.<sup>6, 19</sup> These stressors placed on the poor by their circumstances have serious implications for our health care system to say nothing of the lost potential to our society as a whole. As was mentioned many times in our group – managing poverty requires a great deal of energy, both mental and physical. Nothing is simple. Getting food, health care, transportation, child care – things that wealthier people may be able to take for granted – wear a person down over time and often result in illness.

*“It is one of the greatest of contemporary social injustices that people who live in the most disadvantaged circumstances have more illnesses, more disability and shorter lives than those who are more affluent.”<sup>18</sup> (p. xxi)*

## Summation

Agencies and institutions in Alberta that have been functioning on severely reduced funding for years are being called upon to do even more with even less in real dollars – funding dollars are not immune to inflation. The bill is coming due for this neglect and has very serious implications for the future.

Because of the suffering being experienced by so many – single parents – disabled people – low-wage workers – immigrant and Aboriginal women, Alberta will need more and not fewer social services. We will need more institutions and agencies to handle the collateral damage caused by the draconian cut-backs and reduction of services in the 1990's.

At this time, things do not look hopeful for low-income Alberta women as there will be no increase to welfare benefits or the minimum wage in the foreseeable future. There can be no reasonable rationale for delaying help to those in need in a province flush with money and resources. It would, in fact, make good fiscal sense to spend now in order to save later. The future social costs to the government and the citizens of Alberta will be far higher than any will be willing to pay.

The poverty being experienced now by too many Alberta women seems pointless in the midst of plenty and is based on an outdated ideology which serves no one well. The challenge to the Alberta government will be to level the playing field – to acknowledge the potential of those most vulnerable to make their contribution to this province – to help single mothers raise healthy children – to remove the institutionalized racial barriers for Aboriginal and immigrant women – to raise the minimum wage to a living wage – to increase welfare benefits. All this and more is possible if the political will is there.

The question we are left with is: How much better would we be as a people and community if the most vulnerable of us were given the opportunity and the means to fully participate in the “Alberta Advantage”?

*“Where a great proportion of the people are suffered to languish in helpless misery, that country must be ill-policed and wretchedly governed: a decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization.” Dr. Samuel Johnson <sup>19</sup>*

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## **Strategies for Action**

We hope that everyone who sees these photos takes at least one action.

### ***Make one phone call or write one letter***

Let folks hear about your concern for poverty in Alberta and your recommendations for change. Many people believe the health of modern democracy depends upon citizen engagement. Everyone has a role to play – the Prime Minister, the Premier, members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), local city or town councilors (called “Aldermen” in Calgary), family and friends, and other community members.

### ***Participate in official reviews***

Regularly check the Alberta government website ([www.gov.ab.ca](http://www.gov.ab.ca)) or call the toll-free Rite Line (310-0000) to see what is underway and how you can participate. In the past is a way to predict the future, social programs are regularly reviewed and altered. The government is currently looking for opinions on the social assistance program known as Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) ([www.gov.ab.ca/hre](http://www.gov.ab.ca/hre) or go directly to [www.gov.ab.ca/hre/aishreview](http://www.gov.ab.ca/hre/aishreview) by November 30.)

### ***Support local campaigns – such as the Edmonton Social Planning Council’s MBM initiative***

The Edmonton Social Planning Council says the introduction of the Market Basket Measure – a poverty measure developed jointly by the federal, provincial and territorial governments – would demand an immediate increase of \$5,000 to \$7,000 a year to social assistance income and \$1.50 an hour to minimum wage. Check out their material and lend a hand ([www.edmspc.com](http://www.edmspc.com)).

### ***Participate in social policy initiatives***

Many initiatives would like to inform their work with first-hand information from people living in poverty. Check out your local United Way, social planning council and city or town council to see what is underway in your community. Join.

### ***Whatever you do, have a big heart***

Efforts to address poverty are weakened by the tendency to divide people into the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. Watch out for this tendency in yourself and in others. Our project shows the value of people abandoning these labels and judgments and working together for a common good. As we say in our report: “Poverty is stigmatized in rich Alberta. Poverty has been kept secret and hidden out of shame. We say it’s time to come forward as people who live in our shared community and who deserve human rights and quality of life.”