

Child poverty in B.C. is a policy-failure crisis^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Child poverty is not a given, or an inevitable fact-it is a crisis, a policy-failure crisis that violates the fundamental rights of the child.

The crisis of poverty can come for any of us, at any time. For single mothers, in our current policy climate, simply becoming a single mother plunges our children into the crisis of poverty, for one out of every two of us.

Our share of B.C.'s poorest children is extremely high. We are raising nearly 55,000 children below the poverty line-thousands more hover just above or at that line.

That so many impoverished children belong to women raising them alone, is an inescapably feminist, women's rights issue regarding economic equality and access. Rigid gender roles in relation to parenting trap women in solo child-rearing-this also impacts the child poverty rate in BC.

Single motherhood is a poverty "equalizer" among women. Current social policy in this province creates a perfect storm for single mother poverty, regardless of education level, socio-economic status, and other factors.

My experience of poverty, and struggle as a single mother over the past five years, has led me to a preoccupation with women's and children's anti-poverty advocacy in B.C. An organization I co-founded, the Single Mothers' Alliance of B.C., with a group of single mothers five months ago, is a member of the First Call coalition.

When my son was four weeks old, I became a single mother. In the fragile post-partum period, it was an instant poverty crisis. With no home of my own, and a newborn colicky baby, I was thrust into poverty. I did have basic EI maternity leave from my full-time job, though the amount I received was not enough to support myself as a lone parent with a child. I had no choice but to move in with family under duress.

Struggling to get back on my feet, I "grabbed" a random survival job in desperation-a low paying, precarious job that allowed the flexibility I needed to take care of my baby, though it did not promise hours. This part-time job without any benefits did little help in my situation.

The precarious part-time work many single mothers must choose in order to balance the juggling act of parenting, unaffordable childcare, and work excludes them from labour protection and benefits. This is unfair.

I had much trouble locating a childcare space, which is not surprising, since we have licensed child care spaces for just 20 percent of children in B.C. So, I found a caregiver, a Russian immigrant, I will call her Illana, herself struggling with poverty, to look after my son a few days a week. Her rate was \$11 an hour. My hourly wage was \$13. I took home \$2 an hour. It was a mess.

Looking closely at the three of us as case study, we can see the situation clearly. We were two women and one little boy among thousands, trapped in a culture of poverty created by low wage work and unregulated childcare in B.C.

I was trying to participate in the labour force to work, but the reality of low-wages made it futile. Working full time with a poverty wage meant I would live \$8,000 below the poverty line, and this would solve none of my problems.

Illana was one of thousands in an unprotected low-wage labour force of caregivers in B.C., made up largely of women. We have a culture in B.C. of poor women taking care of other women's poor children in unlicensed childcare settings. From each angle, the loss for Illana, myself, and my son is clear.

The childcare crisis in B.C. is a women's poverty crisis, a work force access and participation crisis for mothers, and, in the case of single mothers' struggles to work, it has a direct and profound impact on the child poverty in our province. I wanted to work. I tried to work. But the crushing cost of housing, lack of spaces in affordable housing, and the cost of childcare, had clamped down over my life like an iron claw.

And then, as the story goes with so many single mothers, especially with children under five, this trap drove me straight into a wall. One typically rainy Vancouver day I pushed my baby buggy down to the welfare office.

I had done everything I could to avoid that moment, but the deck was stacked against me it seemed. Social stigma and our "charity oriented" response to child poverty and single motherhood posits that single mothers and their children's lives are defined by hand-me-downs, hand-outs, subsidies, and state dependency, that a single mother led family is a woman and children in need of charity and government support.

This is not an inevitable reality for single mothers and their children. It is a choice our current government is making, and with the right

policies and supports, it can be eliminated.

My baby became a welfare baby.

We know well what research on the social determinants of health tells us regarding the life-long impact of early poverty on infants. It is a kind of life sentence. We also know what the solutions are, proposed today by First Call.

The Public System of Integrated Early Care and Learning with the \$10 a day child-care plan would have allowed me to work, provided my son with an enriched ECD environment, and Illana the opportunity to thrive as a new immigrant and ECE professional in this country with a decent wage and benefits. It would have prevented my son from ending up on social assistance when he was most vulnerable as an infant and toddler.

Stuck on welfare, and with time passing as I struggled, I felt my ability to work, my career prospects, start to trickle down the drain the longer I stayed out of the work force. Here enters the reality of wage inequality, discrimination against mothers and motherhood in the work force, and economic exclusion. The earnings gap in the workplace is greater for single mothers than it is for other mothers-we are at the bottom of the heap, if we are working at all.

Where women are losing in a game stacked against them in the workforce, single mothers are not even on the team. We are in the food bank line-up. Our children are the ones who pay the price.

So there I was, dangling from the shreds of monthly welfare cheques. A ministry staffer told me to "get a job, any job" right away, or I would lose benefits. On social assistance, I was pushed into getting any minimum wage job in the service sector as fast as possible.

I could apply for other higher paying jobs in my field as well, but I could not "hold out for them", as they said. Previous work I had done did not matter. If I could work at Tim Horton's tomorrow, I had to.

I finally found a daycare spot for around \$1,300 a month. Mothers with subsidy would still be left with a hefty bill of at least \$700 dollars a month, and with rent, food, diapers, and transportation costs, a minimum wage job would not even come close to meeting my needs.

And I would work 40 hours a week to remain in poverty and never see my beautiful baby. If I attained the job I was being forced to get, I could not leave the home of my relatives and pay full rent. I could not live independently. I could not afford a bus pass or diapers.

Our system was trying to force me as fast as possible back into the precise situation that had landed me on welfare in the first place. It was a chaotic nightmare that made no sense whatsoever. The welfare rates are so low that without my family and friends, my son would have been much worse off, as we know thousands are today.

Raising the welfare rates is crucial to reducing child poverty in B.C. Being on welfare, for me, was like treading water. Our broken system requires you to use all the energy you have to stay in exactly the same place. You tire quickly. You feel yourself starting to slip under, under the valued work that suits you, under the social fabric of communities, under society. You begin to lose hope, you start to give up, and you sink.

And then I got the letter. A letter that read, in summary: your rights to determine family maintenance have been suspended and assigned to the Family Maintenance Enforcement Program. I panicked. I was filled with fear for how it would affect my particular situation. It was like a punch in the chest.

How those words ring in the ears of any Canadian: "your rights...have been suspended".

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