

Assessing the Impact of Social Policy Reform on Women's Health*

Women's health and the health of their children depend on economic and social security. How are women who are most vulnerable, and their children, affected by changes in social policy and the underlying philosophy that guide these policy changes? Without social and economic security, women face undeniable barriers to equality at home, in the workplace, and in the community. For example, dependence and isolation are key factors in wife abuse.

The overall goal of this research project was to assess the impact of changes in social policy on the health of single mothers. The research looks at the interrelationship of current federal and Prince Edward Island provincial social policies and their effect on the health of single mothers. It explores the factors that single mothers identify as the main determinants of their health and the relationship of these factors to social policy.

The researchers concentrated on programs in the departments of Health and Social Services, Education, Revenue Canada, and Justice. They also assessed societal attitudes towards social assistance recipients, and their impact on public policy; the role of advocates for mothers on social assistance; and the level of economic security and social supports for single mothers and how these affect the health of the women.

Methodology

❖ The study was guided by a group of women who worked by feminist principles and participatory action research methods (i.e., that women's stories are the basis of knowledge about women's health, and that women most affected would have a say in how the study was done).

❖ In this research project, women on social assistance were members of the working group. They were active participants at all levels of the research; from the design of the 24 interviews to the final report.

Findings

- ❖ Single mothers on social assistance are an at-risk group for both physical and emotional ailments and disorders.
- ❖ The health of single mothers on social assistance is dependent upon their level of economic capacity to provide for the well-being of their children; for mothers, their own health is secondary.
- ❖ For single mothers on social assistance, ungenerous public policies governing the social services system and insensitive implementation of those policies are a health threat which compounds the effects of living impoverished lives.
- ❖ The chronic social and economic insecurity of one-parent women on social assistance makes them vulnerable to any changes in social policy; even apparently minor changes, or perception of changes, which may produce distressing effects on health.
- ❖ Negative attitudes of the community contribute to the state of unhealthy isolation for single mothers on social assistance; these same attitudes support public policy making which does not favor mothers on social assistance.

****Assessing the Impact of Social Policy Reform on Women's Health was researched and written by the Cooper Institute for the Prince Edward Island Advisory Council on the Status of Women.***

Recommendations

- ❖ Screen all social policies and programs from the perspective of their impact on the health of single mothers.
- ❖ Raise the level of income for single mothers on social assistance to meet their basic needs and those of their children.
- ❖ Establish a policy-making and implementation environment which effectively respects and enhances the dignity of single mothers on social assistance by recognizing their right to adequate assistance and programs.
- ❖ Create a transparent process for policy and program changes which affect single mothers.
- ❖ Provide the women with plain language, up-to-date information about their rights.
- ❖ Establish a process by which community and government can enter into effective partnerships to improve the lives and health of single mothers on social assistance.

Conclusions

The results of *Assessing the Impact of Social Policy Reform on Women's Health* have the potential to influence policy and programs in favour of single mothers on social assistance. This potential resides in the power of their voices to persuade both policy-makers and citizens. It can influence policy-makers to develop and enforce policies and programs which protect and enhance the health of single mothers. It is expected that the strength of their voices will encourage citizens to insist on just legislation, and on programs and procedures which promote good health.

The women have exposed the reality that they are at-risk for their physical, emotional and spiritual health because of economic deprivation and insecurity. The stigma attached to dependence on public money for ordinary human needs plus feelings of self-depreciation create a social isolation which is conducive to ill-health at all levels.

It is hoped that this research serves as a source of new and compelling information about the lives of single mothers. The researchers are optimistic that this information will move all concerned sectors to take a fresh and courageous look at the philosophies, attitudes, and behaviours which govern the formulation of policies having a direct influence on the health of single mothers on social assistance. It is hoped also that the information gaps revealed by this research will lead to deeper investigation into concrete policies, programs, and their implementation which will guarantee a healthy life for the women.

The findings, conclusions and recommendations of this research can contribute to the development of progressive policies depending on:

1. The level of commitment from the Department of Social Services and the provincial government to rearrange fiscal priorities in order to cover the basic needs of single mothers on social assistance.
2. The success of the research in mobilizing community opinion to favor policies bettering the health options of single mothers on social assistance.
3. The extent to which this research can be integrated into, and contribute to, the research efforts of MCEWH.

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