

# Survive or Thrive?

## *Nova Scotia Western Valley*

BY ANNA ROCH

*Cet article nous fait part de données recueillies au cours d'une enquête menée à la grandeur de la province de la Nouvelle-Écosse par un collectif de six centres de femmes sur la pauvreté des femmes, ses origines systémiques et les politiques gouvernementales qui limitent les choix et freinent les chances pour les femmes d'arriver à une stabilité économique.*

Poverty is a key determinant of ill-health, and almost one-quarter of Nova Scotian children live in families whose total earnings fall below the low-income cut-off ... Most single-parent families are headed by women, and the rate of single-parent families living in poverty greatly exceeds that of two-parent families. (Schneider 3)

*"Society looks down on us instead of trying to find ways of helping us." —Participant, WIT 2000*

The Women in Transition (WIT) 2000 project is a province-wide collaborative endeavor undertaken by the six Women's Centres in Nova Scotia in conjunction with Feminists for Just and Equitable Public Policy (FemJepp). FemJepp is a coalition of Nova Scotia community-based, equality-seeking women's organizations. Its purpose is to ensure that a broad diversity of women participate effectively and consistently in the process of creating more equitable public policies.

The centres in Antigonish, Sydney, New Glasgow, Lawrencetown, Bridgewater, and Sheet Harbour participated in the WIT 2000 project in order to develop a critical feminist

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analysis of Nova Scotia Community Services Social Assistance Policy and related programs. The area represented in this report from which the following stories are excerpted is Kings, Annapolis, and Digby Counties. The goal of the project is to empower participating women to engage in feminist discourse of poverty, to gain a better understanding of how policies are developed and to recognize how women can come together to have meaningful influence on the policy process. The key objective of the project is to proactively advocate for positive policy changes.

The Nova Scotia Western Valley women who participated in the WIT 2000 project clearly identified the inter-related issues relevant to their poverty. The determinants of these women's health and well-being are undermined because their basic needs are not met. In the words of most women, "Robbing Peter to pay Paul" is the only way to get by in many cases and, when the question is "do I

buy groceries" or "do I pay this month's rent," all other necessities do not even figure in the debate.

Statistically, the number of women in poverty is increasing at a more rapid rate than that of men. Since being poor has become a gendered issue, policy-makers must give high priority to women's poverty if federal and provincial initiatives dealing with the poverty of children are to make any headway. In other words, since women's inequality translates into living in poverty for many women, treating gender as significant a determinant of health as the rest is an important step in dealing with women's poverty.

The recommendations from the women's center on opportunity and choices. The opportunity to better oneself and to make a better life for one's children will stop the cycle of poverty and dependence for these women. Being given choices as to how to go about improving one's economic well-being will give the women the confidence to do so.

The following collection represents some of the stories of women who chose to share their experience of poverty. It is the women themselves who guided the process of collecting the stories of their struggles. To maintain confidentiality, the names of the women are absent from their stories.

### **Story # 1—Time is Money When You Have None**

We are a childless couple living in rural Annapolis County. According to the National Council of Welfare, the estimated low income cut-off for 1999 for our household [two people in a rural area] is \$15,354. in 1999

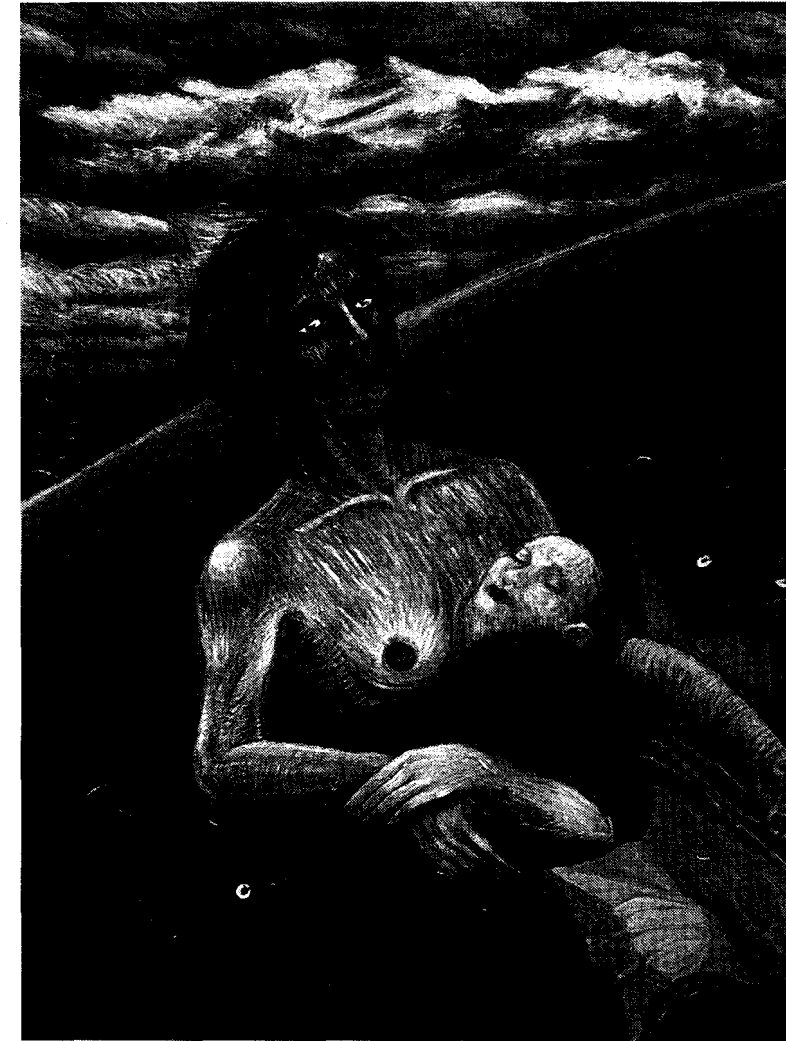
# Women Choose Change

we earned 72 per cent of that.

One of us, Partner B, works to provide the cash to finance the household. The other, Partner J, provides the support system that allows Partner B to go to work. Like a housewife, Partner J prepares the meals, cleans the clothes, and creates a space at home where Partner B can recreate enough labour-energy to be worthy of sale in the marketplace.

As a poor person, Partner B does not have any amount of power when approaching an employer. As the financial support for two adults, Partner B is in desperate *need* of a job, and will turn to almost anything. The current situation, working for BossMan has existed for six years, chosen because there is access to the work site without need of independent transport. Predictably BossMan takes advantage of the desperation. Thoughts of reporting him to assorted agencies such as Workers' Compensation or agencies examining labour practices are lost in the *necessity* of having whatever income he offers to us.

Work hours are irregular, dependent on the boss's whims. He is in business for himself, and is a person who resents the existence of payroll and employer-shared benefits. In order to maximize his profits, he usually hires people who are collecting Income Support, Disability Pension, or Employment Insurance. He then pays less-than-minimum wage with no benefits, but he pays cash, and his workers are grateful. Because Partner B is not collecting any kind of government check, BossMan grudgingly pays the provincial minimum, but then ensures that Partner B's work hours are kept to a mini-



Marie-Claude Pratte, "La Mer Morte," acrylique sur bois, 91 x 122 cm.

mum. A work week might be 36 hours long this week, quite possibly in three days, but only six hours next week. When the mood is upon him, he will decide that his cash-flow is stagnant, and workers will have to wait for their pay. Last October, Partner B worked six unpaid weeks, and then received one-hundred dollars at a time over the course of late November and December, while borrowing from friends to cover such rent and food.

The heavy equipment used by BossMan in his business is old, in poor repair, and frequently dangerous. At times Partner B feels at risk of workplace accident. Complaints are met with the standard reply, "plenty of folks are looking for work who're willing," and repairs are not done until total breakdown of the equipment forces it. On occasion, Partner B works on personal time, deeming security of person to have a value greater than wages, and makes re-

pairs at no cost to BossMan.

Although the six-hour, even zero-hour work weeks are predictable, they are not set by any schedule, and frequently occur by default. BossMan will announce "I'll phone when the truck is loaded," and Partner B stays within hearing distance of the phone, as Monday passes into Wednesday and the week evaporates with no productivity, no accomplishment, and no wages either paid or due. Fear of missing the phone call keep Partner B from leaving to look for other work. Total absence of income ensures that wardrobe, gasoline, and photocopied resumes simply do not exist. Poor and under-employed, Partner B is unable to determine how the hours of the day are spent; there is no "spare time."

On the home front, the simplest of chores are time consuming if they are to be accomplished without cash flow.

We heat with wood. We cannot flip a switch or crank a thermostat. We must go out into the woods, cut down trees, haul them home, junk them into 18 inch lengths, split them with an axe, stack them in the woodshed, and then carry them to the kitchen wood stove as needed. The chimney has to be cleaned every year. The stove has to be cleaned and maintained. During the season, the ash trap has to be regularly emptied and the ash safely disposed of. If someone was paying a wage for that work, we would have the cash to pay for propane or oil. We are cash-less, therefore it is our time that we expend.

Dirty clothes are most often the subject of hand laundry. Our bathtub is big enough to soak and agitate three pairs of soiled work jeans at a time. It takes a long time to scrub and wash them, and then attempt to squeeze them to damp in order for the rinse water to flush the leftover soap out of the fibers. The bath is upstairs, so carrying the dripping wet clean clothes down through the house to get them out to the clothesline is an exercise in buckets and

great care. Bed linen, towels, and other clothes are processed in the same way.

New clothes are simply non-existent. We are fortunate to be irregular recipients of cast-off clothes from other underprivileged people. 90 per cent of the clothes we own and wear today are ten or more years old.

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Cooking to provide the nourishment that will reproduce the labour that Partner B sells, and Partner J needs to perpetuate, is done with unprocessed foods. We buy rice, dried beans, lentils, raw fruits and vegetables, flour and sugar. We do not buy frozen foods, instant noodles or cake mixes. Meal planning and preparation is a time-consuming process. Even when the food itself does not need to be manipulated for a long time, it likely needs to be cooked for a long time. Cooking starts early in the day to allow time for soaking or boiling of pulses and legumes. In the afternoon, time must be set aside to peel and chop vegetables in order for them to be ready to cook for the evening meal.

In season, we grow some of the foods we use, and that effort requires time in planting, weeding, tending, picking, and then preserving. Partner J freezes some vegetables, and makes jam, relishes, pickles and canned fruits, spending the late sum-

mer with the water-bath canner bubbling until long after the sun sets in order to ensure a supply of these foods during the winter when imported produce prices make fresh purchases impossible.

Transport is forever an issue. We live in a rural area, miles from any form of public transit. We maintain an ancient jalopy with vast mileage behind it. Partner B does the repairs that are needed, parts are purchased from scrap yards, tires are bought second hand. They don't last, the purchases need to be repeated often, but the cash-flow is too small to allow for *investment* in new tires that would, quite possibly, outlast the vehicle itself. For several years we drove it, without insurance.

Partner J used to take private contract jobs in palliative care and overnight respite for homecare patients. The absence of reliable transport now excludes this as a source of income.

When the opportunity arises, one of us often travels away to work. This last winter, Partner J spent seven weeks in Ontario on a contract job. Partner B was stressed by the necessity of attempting to single-handedly renew the labour energy that was required for work. This resulted in diverting Ontario income in order to hire someone to keep the wood stove stoked and the water pipes unfrozen. Additionally there was the expense of purchasing foods that could be prepared quickly at the end of the day. Because the absence of Partner J was noticed, BossMan elected to stem all payments to Partner B during that seven week period, citing his own banking woes and Partner B's alternate income as justification. The contract work did offer a small net profit; we have invested it in seed to plant an extended market garden this season. We are slowly building a micro business in produce grown without chemicals. We cannot get status with the bureaucrats who can certify our operation as organic; we don't have the cash to purchase their inspections and licensing.

Living below the poverty level en-

sures that we are incapable of achieving a minimum of social acceptance. Apart from the scantiness of wardrobe possibilities, or the total unreliability of transport, neither partner is able to afford dental care.

Because Partner J is able to earn the princely sum of \$30 a week by writing a newspaper column, the computer and internet connection have become the expense that overrides all other needs. Partner J possibly could make more money writing, but the prohibitive cost of printer cartridges, paper and postage, restrict opportunities to pursue this source of income. Nonetheless, internet access allows for participation and personal development as part of an on-line community.

In the past we have availed ourselves of Income Support from Community Services—once in 1997 when Partner J was extremely sick and unable afford the prescribed treatment, and once again in 1999 when BossMan shut down his business for several weeks.

On the first occasion, Partner J was sent from the hospital into the downtown area—dressed in pajamas—to sign papers at the local DCS office. Although the worker was sympathetic, the experience was humiliating. In 1999, the total supplement paid out was \$120, for which we were duly grateful, but which came attached to no less than four compliance visits—each obligating us to set aside our daily work to drive several miles to meet with a worker who had nothing more to offer than suggestions that we look for jobs.

We are not indecent. We are not pathetic, we are not stupid. We are well-educated, skilled people in our forties. We have been trapped in a cycle that is next-to-impossible to escape. We do not want to be rescued; we want realistic labour laws, safe workplaces, and respect.

### **Story #2—How Do We Define Poverty?**

Defining poverty isn't about in-

come alone. It's a fixed income, it's decided for you, but some have extra resources and that opens a lot of doors for them. For example childcare from family is affordable and free and then when you're in the workplace you hear about other jobs and opportunities. Otherwise you're very isolated and that isolation keeps

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you from getting ahead.

Isolation isn't just not being able to go somewhere. I live in town but I'm very isolated.

Before I talk about stereotyping, I stereotype myself. My needs are met by outside things but not by my own means. It makes me feel that that's where I belong ... that defines me more than I would want it to. I never thought I'd find myself like this. I find it difficult to believe that others stereotype me because I stereotype myself.

My daughter's chances will be increased if I teach her. If I teach her that there's another way of life. What I live she lives. I think she should do what she wants to do. I want to show her there's more. There are many possibilities, opportunities. As long as you try you've succeeded. If you don't try you don't succeed. That's what I want to teach my daughter.

How could it be that if the economy hasn't gotten better, they're expecting people to live off less.

What's more important, a home or eating? If the emphasis were put more on quality of life, it would be better.

The social system is there for people who have need but when you're in that situation you look for a quick fix, such as gambling, smoking, addictions that keep you in the system because your personal care is not there.

If an employer could give me a break, like work around my schedule, that would help. Once you have a job, it's easier to get a job. But once you're in the system there's not much you can do.

I would like to ask my MLA, "What would you do?" So they would see that we feel this on a daily basis, What this really means to me is what the reality is.

### **Story #3—Complaining Does No Good**

White occupation started by immigration groups who were farmers. They brought their own livestock and farming implements. Settlers soon set up logging camps built dams and mills which subjected the Indians to losing their camping grounds, fishing and hunting grounds, and the loss of sacred burial grounds. In 1909, a local woman wrote to the local rag and said if government didn't stop the moose hunting in the province, the moose would be extinct in a few years. In 1909 the Fisherman's Club were mad because the government leased Fairy Lake Indian Reserve to an Annapolis Royal Businessmen's Association and the Club was mad because it interfered with their hunting and fishing. Fairy Lake is Keji Park now. Scalping proclamations which stated in part: "Annoy or kill the Indians wherever they are found," kept my people from their occupations. Records support my claim that by ignoring the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and the treaties leading up to it, that Indians suffered by not being able to carry on with their natural way of hunting and fishing for survival which was

the prime reason for increasing poverty among the Indian population. Before white occupation the Indians didn't want for anything. And by ignoring the terms of the Royal Proclamation for settlement in the province of Nova Scotia it led to mass immigration. If there was nothing left for the Indians how could there be much left for the immigrants?

Now, the Provincial Government, distributes hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Sheraton Casino for economic development to alleviate poverty for the Indians. I see nothing; but money is sent to my band for me. Complaining does no good.

My family has eaten out of dumps, gotten clothing from these dumps, and furnished our shacks from these dumps. We skip more meal times than have meals. Many a night I cried myself to sleep with hunger pangs. There were six kids in my family who shared this experience. My parents couldn't get a job because we are Indians. To this day there are no Indians employed in the Town of\*\*\*\*\* or \*\*\*\*\*. Indians were pushed from place to place—as history has recorded—and herded on Indian Reserves scattered around the province, although there is no proof Indians ever agreed to retire to these Reserves (*Denny, Paul et al. v. the Queen* 1990). And the government wants me to pay taxes to support them when all they do is take from my people. The government rewards those Indians who chose to live on those reserves by paying them to stay there because they weren't wanted out in white society. Those who refuse to live on reserves are punished and denied the funding given to all Indians.

How many white people were shoved off their land and kept from hunting and fishing in order to survive? How many whites were subject to Residential schools and ripped from the bosoms of their mothers? The answer is none.

As if starving my people wasn't enough, they ripped the children from the parents to send these Indi-

ans to residential schools to civilized them. Indians do love their children but were treated by officials as though we didn't.

Government Policy—mass immigration—kept all people in poverty. The purpose of this immigration was to have more people to pay taxes to government, to support that govern-

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ment, and the only ones benefiting are those in power.

White people are accepted in their communities but Native people are not. The officials at Welfare, when they see you, a wall goes right up. They don't like people advocating. As an Aboriginal woman I have no representation at any level of government.

Native men think that Native women should walk behind them and they adopted this from white men. White men and Indian men want women to be subservient. But I won't settle for it. I'm full of hate inside. I was subjected to racism in school but I won't bow down and will see that my children will carry on where I left off. People in poverty all struggle but the only way is to stand up for your rights. I've been trying to do it by the white man's law but no one will stand up for me.

The situation of Native women is not good and women are the backbone of our society. Poverty brings

this on: alcoholism, promiscuity, men use you. Poverty brings on violence. It has to be stopped. Men get everything, it's a man's world. This [WIT 2000] project has to be aggressive to government. The realities have to kick in. Government takes notice only when a tragedy happens.

#### **Story #4—Basic Needs**

You can not have inner peace unless you know where your next piece of bread is.

You can't move forward unless your basic needs are met.

You can't even demonstrate unless your basic needs are met.

We are a developed country but the social safety net doesn't provide for the poor unless family, church, food bank band together.

If the community wants peace then they have to provide for the basic needs of all.

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Women's poverty in Nova Scotia's Western Valley region is a measure of the function of the interactive determinants of health identified by Health Canada such as income and social status, social support networks, employment/working conditions, social environments, physical environments, personal health practices and coping skills, and gender among others. Women's poverty issues, seen through the looking glass of the population health approach, reflect the lack of equitable interplay between the determinants of health. The substance of this approach is that it links the positive interaction of determinants of health with positive outcomes, the negative interaction of the determinants with negative outcomes. This analysis allows us to see how inequitable policies impact negatively on women's lives, while ignoring the very population health approach they are meant to support.

The poverty issues identified by the participant women clearly demonstrate the interactive role of the

determinants of their health and well-being. Since the determinants of women's health and well-being are interactive, a wise investment in any of the health determinants is bound to produce various benefits in many others. First and foremost, it is the women's economic well-being that needs to be improved; when basic needs are not met, the mental, social, and physical health outcomes can not improved.

*Excerpted from the Women in Transition 2000.*

*Anna Roch is a researcher and advocate for women's equality issues, with an emphasis on community economic development and health promotion. She works with community-based and provincial organizations in a wide range of capacities which include facilitation, documentation, evaluation, needs assessment and planning.*



**Where your daughter will learn:**

- *in a small class setting*
- *to have joy in her learning*
- *to risk and achieve success*
- *to be valued for what she thinks and does*
- *to develop strong academic skills*
- *to practise her skills in the arts, athletics and computers*
- *to value differences*
- *to imagine a world beyond her own*

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