

British Columbia Anti-Violence

BY SUZANNE JAY

The Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security routinely refuses poor women the necessities it takes to raise a child.

Cet article nous fait part des recommandations entérinées par des travailleurs pacifistes lors de leur réunion de septembre 1999 qui assuraient la protection des droits humains chez les femmes.

In September of 1999, feminist frontline anti-violence workers and some of their allies from equality seeking women's groups met to discuss and debate and determine what critical issues related to violence against women are facing in British Columbia. We knew there was at least a year to go before the next election, either provincial or federal, but we knew that we needed to take advantage of the opportunity to do some preparation together. Approximately 100 women attended, travelling from across the province and from Yukon for a too short and dense weekend. We knew there was a need to come together across the diverse issues we were working on in our own centres and communities.

In spite of the fact that we are one of the only provinces that has a freestanding Ministry of Women's Equality, there is not enough political will promoting and ensuring the objectives of the Ministry. Despite this, women are not willing to give up on the development of a strong and effective Ministry of Women's Equality. The weekend meeting was reinforcement for all gathered that feminist analysis of the current social/political situation is a crucial and missing component in the public discourse.

The following is a record of the points in shorthand that the women gathered agreed to over the course of the weekend. This is what we determined was important to us in the year 2000 in British Columbia.

Money is crucial—it can be put to work for women in these ways

- The federal and provincial governments must reinstate the social safety net.
- The provincial government must stop poor-bashing and welfare bashing.
- The minimum wage in BC must be raised to \$9.15/hr

to meet standard of living adjustments

- Employment Insurance in the current form does not work for women and has a disproportionately harmful effect on women. We want the EI surplus in women's hands. The first step is the reinstatement of the old Unemployment Insurance policies.

- There must be a new national standard for a livable welfare rate for all women, including women who apply when newly arrived to Canada. The BC government must insist on reinstated Canadian Assistance Plan payments that include designated money for welfare.

- All policy decisions from the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security must be formally and transparently established in the BC Benefits legislation (welfare). Informal, office to office "policy," most clearly demonstrated by a "policy book" that financial aid workers are expected to use to determine what they can give a client and under what circumstances, undermines women's right to what they are entitled to by law. The policy book provides guidelines that are well under the provisions that BC Benefits legislation guarantees.

- The provincial government must reinstate the earnings exemption in BC Benefits to permit people to keep the money they earn to supplement the inadequate monthly welfare cheque.

Support

We have a collective responsibility, as Canadians, to provide food and shelter to people arriving in Canada, no matter how they arrive here. The Chinese refugee women and their children must be released from the jails and allowed to integrate into the community in British Columbia. The government must give women back their children where they have separated families.

- Every woman leaving transition houses in British Columbia must be allowed a \$300 non-repayable grant, above and beyond any other crisis grants they are already entitled to receive from BC Benefits.

- It is completely unacceptable that the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security routinely refuses poor women the necessities it takes to raise a child and then stands aside while the Ministry of Children and Families apprehends the children and pays foster families at rates that are higher than what the mother receives to care for her family.

Workers

Recommendations For Change

Feminist organizations

Funding for feminist women's groups is necessary. Women's groups cannot survive, let alone thrive on project funding like Stopping the Violence, Crime Prevention, Children Who Witness Violence, Counselling, or Breaking the Silence grants. Instead we insist that autonomous women's groups should get core funding to do the anti-violence work as they see fit. Women designed and organized our groups for our own purposes. We define the purpose and work of rape crisis centres, transition houses and women's centres. While we accept that contracts will enforce some standards on service provision we think it is much more important that the government support autonomous women's groups that meet our equality seeking standards.

- The Aboriginal Women's Action Network and Native Women's Association of Canada must receive core funding from the provincial and federal governments.

- We want our feminist alternate media funded, among them, *The Optimist* newspaper in the Yukon, *Kinesis* our national feminist newspaper, and locally produced women's shows on Coop Radio. The funding must not disallow media advocacy regarding women's sexual autonomy and women's reproductive rights. This censorship will no longer be tolerated.

- The Feminist Alliance of Transition Houses must be recognized by the Ministry of Women's Equality and receive funding as a legitimate voluntary coalition. The Ministry must stop manipulating our structures.

Housing needs must be met

- We demand safe and affordable housing in every B.C. community.

- Low-income and poor women must receive subsidies to live in existing market housing, particularly because of the dire lack of social housing in the province and the low B.C. Benefits shelter allowances make it near impossible to secure adequate long term shelter.

- The coop housing programmes which have in the past provided financing and impetus to develop affordable community co-operative housing units must be revitalized.

- There must be safe and affordable social and market housing for women who do not have children.

Taxes

As mostly women with modest incomes, we do not support tax cuts. We don't resent paying taxes, rather, we resent that corporations and businesses don't pay their fair share of taxes and how our taxes are spent.

Feminists have established high standards for our work

In the face of highly public accusations of their lousy practises, the Ministry of Children and Families insists on authority over transition house practices. There is no precedent for this. There is no history of abuse of children in transition houses. Women's groups control our own spaces and standards and a mandated protocol with the Ministry of Children and Families will not solve or help the parenting problems battered women are faced with.

Children who witness their fathers beat their mothers do not need counselling, they need to see their mothers respected and celebrated by the community. The current "Children Who Witness Violence" program, providing such counselling is at best useless and is a further institutionalization of the undermining of battered women as mothers.

We do not support the government created Community Social Services Employers Association (CSSEA) to serve as a buffer between social service agencies and as a funding agency. Membership by agencies is required and some of the standards that CSSEA promotes undermine our feminist organizations

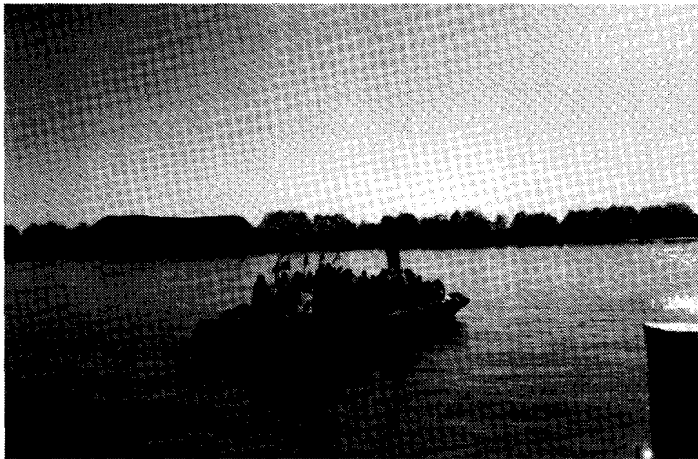
- workers in feminist organizations are forced into hierarchies

- standardizing of job descriptions bureaucratizes and limits the scope of advocacy workers are permitted to carry out.

- seniority rights that are standard in collective agreements could be used to threaten women only space, and undermine race equality initiatives. The overall effect is that women lose control over our work environment

- the longstanding alliance between women's move-

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*Women gather and prepare to welcome the triumphant arrival of Native women rafters who rafted from Prince George to Musqueam Territory on the "Aboriginal Women's Journey for Justice," Sept. 8th to 25th 2000.
Photo: Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter.*

ment and labour is undermined when we are mushed together.

- We reject the credentialing of our paid and volunteer workers. The requirement for academic or technical credentials promotes a professionalization that undermines the self-help and political model of feminist organizing.

- We insist on our right to be voluntary political and feminist associations.

- We insist on our right to set our own policy and procedures.

- It must be recognized that the women's movement provides the majority of free and voluntary training to the public about ending violence against women, and this is the standard of training and content that must be met by all other agencies and organizations, including the government.

How public education about anti-violence can be made more effective

The Living Free of Violence ad campaign created by the provincial government with donated airtime from BC broadcasters is not useful, the ads shown so far promote sexism, women's fear and racism.

We want control of the \$50 million donated by BC broadcasters for the Living Free of Violence ad campaign. This means setting up an advisory committee made up of feminist, aboriginal and immigrant women who will have the power to exercise editorial control over future public media in the campaign, including the website content.

The Justice Institute, a training institute primarily for law enforcement officers, is not the appropriate vehicle to train women's equality advocates. They deliberately undermine us and train people that undermine us. They prevent gender analysis from proceeding and are explicitly antifeminist in their perspective. We do not accept that women must take courses from the Justice Institute to have the appropriate experience to work in women's services. We want funding diverted from the Justice Institute programs so the contracts to women's groups provide regular, core funding that allow for women's groups to decide the appropriate tools for training and education of our workers and the public about ending violence against women.

Law and order won't work

We reject the idea of victim's rights. We are about the business of securing women's rights for all women not just courtesies after we are made victims of crime. Women's groups will not be forced to service victims of crime. We prefer to serve any woman who comes to us before, or after, or in order to prevent violence. It does not matter whether that violence is deemed illegal and whether or not it could be proven in a court of law.

We want our contracts to reflect that we are doing work

with the justice system to promote women's equality under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. This does not mean that we will be required to provide training to the justice system, but that it is recognized that in the course of our work as advocates, we provide education about violence against women whenever we have contact with workers in the justice system.

There is a crisis in policing. Police do not follow their own training, or obey the policies and procedures of the provincial/territorial or federal government about violence against women. We are not tricked by their propaganda and tactics of diverting the attention away from themselves and onto the other parts of the justice system that are also not working. We demand that police:

- respond to all violence against women calls as priority calls
- follow mandatory arrest policy in Violence Against Women In Relationship situations
- recommend no contact orders routinely as part of bail conditions
- investigate complaints of violence against women completely and with an understanding that this violence is gendered
- respond to breaches of peace bonds, no contact orders and restraining orders by arresting men as per the Attorney General's Policy on Violence Against Women In Relationships and the policy resulting from the Josiah Woods report on RCMP practice
- stop arresting women on mutual assault charges. There is no such charge in the criminal code.
- substantiate women's complaints of violence with diligent and thorough investigation and documentation
- send all substantiated cases of violence against women to the crown for consideration.
- use culturally knowledgeable translators, not family members or friends, for women whose first language is a language other than English.

Police (RCMP) insistence on "gender neutrality" undermines the Violence Against Women In Relationships policy. Self defence is not a criminal offence and women should not be charged when we fight back against violence men do to us.

•We disagree with diversion from jail in cases of violence against women. Accused men must be prosecuted before a judge before any diversion measures are activated.

•We support Native women's leadership, as led by the Aboriginal Womens Action Network and Native Women's Association of Canada, to protest the restorative justice initiatives put forward by the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of BC.

•We are alarmed by the continued privatization of justice services such as 911, the police (using private security companies with police-like operating styles), prisons and court (encouraging mediation as an alternative to court). There must be public accountability recommendations about these services that address women's access

and equality rights.

•Cellular phones and electronic bracelets on battered women and prostituted women do not work to stop men's violence against those individual women. Men who rape, batter and buy women must be charged and tried under the criminal code. We are not tricked by the government telling us they are doing something about ending violence against women by legislating new laws and longer sentences. We know the most effective measure is to apply the current laws and win convictions!

•It is not an accident that the majority of men facing criminal charges in court continue to be the poorest white men, men of colour/newly immigrated men and Native men. All charges of violence against women by men of every socioeconomic and racial group in Canada must be investigated and be heard before a judge.

•The current immigration law punishes women abandoned by violent men by making them vulnerable to deportation or requiring them to remain financially tied to the man. Conversely, criminal law is not made available to provide protection to women from these men.

•Safer City task forces have proven themselves to be bankrupt. Women in our urban centres are not any safer as a result of these processes, and in fact, positive conditions which increase the likelihood of women's safety from violence have declined drastically in the past ten years.

•No one should require an advocate to get legal aid. We demand the provincial government restore legal aid funding to ensure women have adequate access to legal counsel when faced with dealing with the justice system for family, civil or criminal cases.

The "downtown problem" is not only the downtown problem of Vancouver

We do not want a traditional war on drugs. We have told the municipal, provincial and federal levels of government this for a long time. Ignoring us is a cynical and blatant disregard of the advice of the experts on the ground, including not only the advocates for the poor but the majority of the women's movement.

The Vancouver Agreement, proposed as a model of how municipal, provincial and federal governments can control a troubled area such as the Vancouver Downtown Eastside, is under negotiation now. It clearly outlines a new way of governance which is antidemocratic and bureaucrat led. In order to dismantle the entrenchment of this status quo, it is critical that the equality seeking non-governmental organization involvement in the Vancouver Agreement be at the policy level not just the current advisory level. There must be immediate correction for this that provides for the involvement of the leaders of the communities whose rights are the most immediately at stake and whose rights are already formally recognized as

in need of protection and promotion women, Aboriginal people, and the asian community as a visible minority group.

It is likely that the Vancouver Agreement will be promoted as a model of governance for other parts of anada. it is important that the process of its construction promote democratic participation and the progressive development of our rights as set out in the Charter. If the process meets these criteria, then the resulting product will be more likely to do the same.

In response to drug addiction, the minimum of measures for most communities in British Columbia must include:

- safe fix sites
- needle exchanges
- women's detox beds for women with and without kids and that are not in criminalized spaces
- transitional housing for women moving out of detox and recovery, that is separate from the anti-violence transition houses
- long term funding for drug user-led projects
- there must be spaces organized by and for women, where women are free from threat of violent attack by men, at each of these points.

The current situation with immigration and immigrants

•We abhor both the statements and the lack of statements on behalf of the new Chinese immigrants who arrived by ship through the summer and fall of 1999. The appalling silence reveals the ordinary racism of the government and police.

•The proposed changes to immigration law, as outlined in the White Paper, must not become law. The provincial and federal governments are using the situation of the Chinese immigrants to push through the reforms, despite overwhelming opposition to the reforms across the country.

•We object to the provincial and federal government's use of the Chinese immigrants situation to make immigration a matter of criminal law instead of civil law. We recognize this as a further institutionalization of racism.

•The provincial and federal governments must uphold international agreements about prisoners rights and allow family and community access to the immigrants currently being held in detention. Families must be reunited as per international agreements.

•We insist on public accounting of both the legal process and the treatment of the detained immigrants. One of the ways to begin this process is by permitting namable advocates into the detention centres so that the detainees can speak with people they trust about the conditions of their lives both in China and now in Canadian jails.

•We protest the shift in government policy that sees Iran as a safe state and therefore denies battered women refugee status and which also deports them back to the battering husband.

Decriminalize prostitution

•The federal Justice Minister must remove all parts of the criminal code which criminalize the acts of prostituted women.

•We oppose the legalizing of brothels, no matter what they are currently called (massage parlours, escort services, etc). While there is no need for police to focus on individual women, we must interfere with the pimps and the johns.

•We object to the current and regular collecting of licencing fees/taxes from brothels (massage parlours, escort services etc.) that is current practise in most Canadian cities and municipalities. This is government making money off prostitution, and is in fact legalized prostitution.

•We insist the government create law and consider the Swedish model, which criminalizes the buying of any and all sexual services.

•We commit to fight for the existence of feminist, organized by and for women, exit services, for women to use as they try to leave the sex industry.

•We insist that the police and crown go about the business of routinely charging men with procuring charges (sec 212.4 of the criminal code) when they buy sexual services from girls 14 to 18 years old.

•Police and crown must charge men with the rape and battering of prostituted women and work to undermine the myths and forces which work against these charges getting a fair hearing in court.

Suzanne Jay is a collective member of Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter. She grew up in the northern interior of British Columbia, brought up by working-class parents who immigrated from China. She has worked at the local, provincial, and national level as an advocate of women's rights from the grassroots as a rape crisis worker and transition house worker for the past six years.