

# Looking Out

## Prairie Women Use Photovoice Methods to Fight Poverty

KAY WILLSON, KATHRYN GREEN, MARGARET HAWORTH-BROCKMAN  
AND RACHEL RAPAPORT BECK

*Les femmes pauvres sont sujettes à une surveillance et à un examen minutieux par les autres et surtout par les agences de services sociaux. D'une certaine manière, elles sont "dans l'objectif." Cet article nous parle de "Photovoice" une recherche participatoire du Centre de santé des femmes des Prairies qui placent les femmes à bas revenus "derrière l'objectif" pour créer des photos qui forcent à regarder le monde à travers leurs yeux.*

Low-income women live with the consequences of social and economic policies that affect their lives in many ways, including the minimum wage, income assistance levels, the supply of affordable housing, child care availability, the cost of public transportation, and the location of health and community services. Yet they are seldom asked what they think about these policies or how these policies could be changed to improve the quality of their lives. "The knowledge and experience gap between those who make policy and those who must live with the consequences is enormous" (Wharf and McKenzie).

When low-income women have voiced their concerns, they have often felt that their recommendations fell on deaf ears. In a Saskatchewan study of women's poverty, one participant said, "I'd like to ask that what comes out of this report be

taken seriously and that they implement some of the suggestions that we made, because there's so many reports ... and they sit there and twenty years later, they'll do a new report and the same suggestions will come out." Another commented, "I would like to be heard. I really would" (qtd. in Kerr, Frost and Bignell).

Women living in poverty are often subject to careful scrutiny and surveillance by others, including social service agencies. In a sense, they are put *under the lens*. "Photovoice" is a participatory action research strategy that puts women living in poverty *behind* the lens, to create photographs that enable others to see the world through their eyes.

In 2005, we began working on two photovoice projects with low-income women in Winnipeg and Saskatoon. Through the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence (PWHCE), we had been involved in earlier research related to women's poverty and women's health. Like others, PWHCE was frustrated that the countless research reports documenting the adverse effects of poverty on women's health had done little to influence public policy or reduce women's poverty. We were looking for new approaches. We had seen the results of other photovoice projects and we were excited about the potential for using these methods to strengthen

women's participation in policy discussions and action that would lead to change.

While it may be a cliché to say that a picture is worth a thousand words, photographic images have the power to tell stories, to convey important ideas and to shape public consciousness. In this article we describe how two small photovoice projects aimed to place some of that power in the hands of low-income women. Our hope was that their photographs would capture people's attention, so that their voices could be heard.

### Description of Photovoice Methods

The projects used a strategy called "photovoice" to give women living in poverty the chance to express their thoughts and feelings and share their experiences in words and photographs. Photovoice is a form of community-based participatory action research (PAR) (Wang *et al.*). It is "a technique based on participation, empowerment, and self-documentation." (Moffitt and Vollman) Participants are given cameras and training in how to use them; they then photograph aspects of their realities, discuss the photographs, and share them. The process can produce compelling images and stories that become tools for social and

Selections from both photovoice projects can be found online at the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence website: [www.pwhce.ca](http://www.pwhce.ca).

### **Step 7: The Images Continue to Speak to Us**

Since these initial displays, the photovoice committees have continued to find opportunities for sharing the photos. Several images from the Winnipeg photovoice project have been used to create a calendar for 2007, called "Under the Surface ... Let the Journey Begin." The calendar sales help support the North End Women's Centre's community economic development projects and provide royalties to the low-income women who participated in the photovoice project.

PowerPoint presentations from the Saskatoon photovoice project have been shown to the board of the National Anti-Poverty Organization, to policymakers in Ottawa and to participants at a Make Poverty History conference in Saskatoon. Excerpts from the photovoice exhibit have also been incorporated into the ongoing work of the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition. This includes public presentations on poverty in Saskatoon and poverty awareness workshops that are held with service providers and policymakers.

There has been a tremendous response to these photovoice exhibits. People who have seen the exhibits have commented on their truth-telling and their power. Some have reacted defensively, but many have written expressing thanks and asking permission to share the work with others. We have heard from other people living in poverty about the images that ring true for them. We have heard from ordinary citizens, daycare workers, students, civil servants, social workers, teachers, nurses and physicians who have been moved to reexamine the poverty in their own communities. And we have heard from others working in the anti-poverty movement who

draw inspiration from the courage and creativity that are reflected in these images.

We plan to continue making the photovoice exhibits available for display at events where the purpose is to raise public awareness of the realities of living in poverty and to stimulate action for just social and economic policies to improve the conditions of women's lives.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we described how two groups of women used photovoice methods to produce consciousness-raising photo exhibits that challenge the status quo. The women who have created these photographic exhibits have given us a gift by sharing their lives with us. The community partners helped make this gift possible by planning and guiding the projects.

The women's photos show us the place(s) of low-income women in our society. Their work offers a critical lens on social policies that leave them struggling to cope with poverty, violence, discrimination, poor housing, food insecurity, lack of transportation and other barriers. Their work also reveals their compassion, humor, joy, wisdom and their hopes for a more just society. Taken together their words and images awaken us to the realities of their lives. They provide an important contribution to public policy critiques and community development discussions, where the voices of low-income women are often absent or go unheard.

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*Kay Willson is a research associate of the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence and a member of the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition.*

*Kathryn Green is an Associate Professor of Community Health and Epide-*

*miology at the University of Saskatchewan.*

*Margaret Haworth-Brockman is the Executive Director of the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence.*

*Rachel Rapaport Beck is the Manitoba Research and Policy Associate of the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence.*

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personal change, vehicles to raise consciousness and influence policy-makers.

### ***Step 1: Developing Community Partnerships***

In October 2004, the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence invited the Women and Fair Income (WAFI) Group from Calgary to display their photovoice exhibit in Saskatoon during Poverty Awareness Week, an annual event organized by the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition. Three low-income women, whose photographs were included in the display, spoke about their work at a public reception. They described how they had taken pictures, shared stories, and created a photo exhibit that portrayed the realities of living in poverty. The example of their work inspired several women to imagine the possibility of undertaking a similar project across all three prairie provinces. When we were unsuccessful in securing a grant to support a three-province project on women's poverty, we decided to proceed on a smaller scale in Saskatoon and Winnipeg.

In the spring of 2005, the PWHCE approached the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition and the Winnipeg North End Women's Centre (NEWC) to explore possible collaboration on photovoice initiatives in both cities. PWHCE had worked with these organizations in the past and had established relationships of trust. Both organizations responded enthusiastically and became full partners in the projects, contributing their time, expertise, meeting space, knowledge of the community and connections to community women.

The North End Women's Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba has a long-term commitment to the local community and to women's equality. The centre has provided a variety of programs and community development initiatives to assist women and their families for over 20 years, tackling issues of poverty, unem-



*Lisa Aymont-Hunter, "Women Are Not Garbage," 2005.  
"Another one of our community women was murdered and her body was disposed of in a BFI bin. And it really touched, hurt, struck a deep cord in all of us as women... that she was thrown away like garbage."*

ployment, violence, and isolation. Staff from the North End Women's Centre worked with PWHCE staff to develop plans for a photovoice project that would benefit some of the women who lived in the area and utilized the centre's programs.

The Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition was established in 2001 when anti-poverty groups and individuals came together in response to a provincial plan to redesign income security programs. The coalition's first major initiative was the Roots

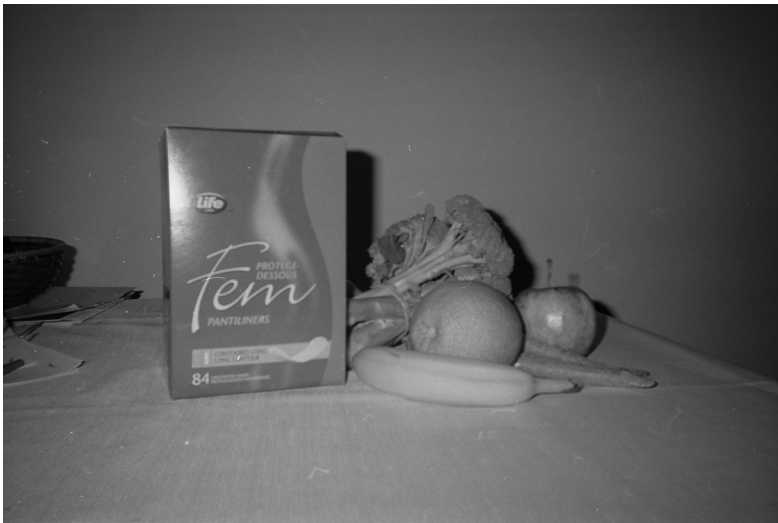
of Poverty Project, a series of workshops and community meetings to foster public participation in social policy reform. (Stensrud and Grosso) The coalition has also undertaken work on gender and poverty and has organized Poverty Awareness Weeks in October in conjunction with the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Having seen the photovoice exhibit from Calgary, members of the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition were keen to try a similar project themselves.





Shosana Funk, 2005

"Behind the glass you can sort of see the mannequin, the idea of the "real woman." And then you see the reality—the real people at the bus stop, who can't afford to shop there. It's like they're mocking us."



Lynn, "Feed or Bleed," 2006.

"The choice is clear. If I don't eat, no one will know. If I don't buy sanitary supplies, everyone will know. I already use \$110 toward extra rent money needed, out of the \$210 that I have to live on."

After an initial meeting about the Saskatoon project, one of us wrote this journal entry:

*June 2, 2005: I had a good meeting yesterday with the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition.... Four women volunteered to be on a steering committee for the photovoice project. Three of the four are women living in poverty. People in the coalition acknowledge the differences in power and resources accessible to different group members, and are working to avoid dominance*

*by coalition members who have more income or status as professionals. In fact, this subject was the first item on the meeting agenda. I am happy that three low-income women volunteered right away.*

*But they also welcomed another member, a professional who works for the health region. They talked about the need to work together across our differences because we can learn from each other. People seem enthused about this project because it will provide opportunities for creative expres-*

*sion and because they think that the photo images will carry more impact than written reports or words alone.*

At early meetings with our community partners, we reviewed the project goals and talked about what we wanted the project to accomplish. While we hoped that the project would produce a photo display to raise awareness about the realities of living in poverty, we didn't want to impose any preset agendas on the participants. We wanted to encourage the women to choose their own subjects, express their own ideas, and tell their own stories of what poverty meant to them. And we wanted to leave things open so that they could share the good experiences in their families and communities, not just focus on the problems and barriers they faced. Our partnerships were based on a shared commitment to facilitating a process that would empower low-income women to express *their own* ideas and perspectives.

Although we helped to organize and facilitate the photovoice group sessions, our community partners played key roles in leading both projects. In Winnipeg, the project was guided by PWHCE and NEWC staff. In Saskatoon, we formed a committee that included a university professor, PWHCE staff, a social worker and three low-income members of the anti-poverty coalition. Working together, we made decisions about the project goals and operations. Our community partners recruited women to participate in the projects. They made sure the participants felt safe and comfortable, and had a chance to talk about their feelings. They attended and helped to facilitate group sessions and they helped organize public exhibits of the photo displays at the completion of the projects. Their knowledge of their communities and of community women was essential to the projects' success.

For example, knowing that low-

income women often feel alienated and objectified by mainstream research, our community partners raised concerns about whether to refer to the photovoice projects as “research.” This provided opportunities for us to have open discussions with them, and with the women participants, about their roles *doing* the research, rather than *being* researched. The participants embraced the concept of community-based participatory action research and saw it as a process that would bring their voices forward and recognize their experiences as valid sources of knowledge.

In another example, members of the Saskatoon committee recognized the vulnerability and emotional strain that comes with looking closely at the problems women in poverty face. They emphasized the need for the project to be a safe place for women to share their experiences. Two low-income women offered to act as peer supports and the social worker volunteered to be available for women talk about emotional issues as they arose. As things turned out, this was an important issue for the group to address. During the course of the project, women dealt with a lot of emotions as they reflected on the impact of poverty on their lives and as they faced family health crises, job losses, and threats of eviction. That they persevered and continued to produce their photographs, in spite of the pain, is a testament to their strength and their courage.

### **Step 2: Recruiting Participants**

We tried to make the photovoice projects accessible to women by providing transportation and childcare allowances and ensuring that women with disabilities received necessary supports. Our community partners helped us with the logistics of providing refreshments, childcare and transportation so that women could attend the group sessions. They helped us find suitable meeting space and to ensure that

the meeting spaces and the galleries where the photos were exhibited were adapted to be wheelchair-accessible.

Members of the Saskatoon committee recruited participants through a variety of formal and informal networks, including their friends and neighbors, other members of the Anti-Poverty Coalition, and people using low-income housing and public health programs. An effort was made to recruit women from different neighbourhoods, ages and cultural backgrounds. The North End Women’s Centre recruited participants by inviting local low-income women who came to the centre for other activities. The photovoice sessions were held at the centre so that the women would be comfortable in a familiar setting. The Saskatoon sessions were held in a centrally located church.

After the first meeting with the participants, one of us wrote:

*October 17, 2005: It was my first time at the North End Women’s Centre and I loved the place, it has a terrific “feel” to it, very inviting and woman-positive. Women arrived early to the session and were clearly eager to participate.... One thing that surprised me was how open the women are to sharing their stories. They came prepared to discuss why they were joining this group in terms of their own struggles and shared quite a bit. There was a lot of discussion about public policy and its impact on their lives.*

Each participant was given a recruitment brochure that provided a brief explanation of the project. The brochure explained that the participants were invited to participate in a process that would take place over several group sessions. The early sessions were designed to prepare the women for taking photographs. During the following sessions, the women were invited to share and discuss their photographs with each other. In the final sessions, women were asked to select photographs

and text to be shared with a wider audience in the community.

Across the two cities, 16 low-income women were recruited to the projects. They all received training, took photographs, and contributed to the photovoice displays. The participants included Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian women; women living alone and women living with partners and/or children; women of different generations; women receiving income assistance and women who were “working poor”; and women with differing abilities.

### **Step 3: Getting Ready to Take Photographs**

The first few photovoice sessions provided an opportunity for the participants to establish some ground rules for the groups. These included treating each other with respect, listening to each other, sharing the time to speak, keeping group discussions confidential, and acknowledging each woman’s right to decide about the use of her own words and photographs. Early sessions also included discussion of the ethical issues that come with taking photographs, particularly photos of other people or photos that deal with sensitive issues.

In each city, we recruited a professional photographer to provide training on how to take pictures. The photographers encouraged the women to express their own ideas through photographs. They taught techniques to help the women produce images that would capture attention. They provided instruction on the basic operation of the cameras as well as helpful tips on framing and composition. The women were encouraged to try different approaches to photography—to hunt for images that occurred spontaneously or to carefully construct images to represent an idea or symbolize an important part of their experience.

### **Step 4: Taking the Photographs**

Following the training, each





*Nadia, "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change" (Dr. Wayne Dyer), 2006*  
*"The reality is—I am disabled. I am a woman. I live in poverty, my voice is not heard. The truth is—my spirit has risen above this. There are times, though, when people or situations come along to remind me of what I am and try to put me back in my place."*



*Suzanne McLeod-Chartrand, 2005*  
*"I hope that we would all, as women, do something positive so that the children will rise up to be strong eagles. Right now, she's a bald eagle, but she will have feathers. Yep, she's a little bald eagle, but one day she will be an eagle and she will fly and carry on the work that I've started."*

woman was given a disposable camera and invited to take photos of whatever she wanted that would represent her experiences of living in poverty and her reflections on public policy. Several women received a second camera so that they could refine their techniques after they had a chance to see how the first photos turned out. The women were encouraged to choose their own subjects, to create images that had meaning for them.

Whenever photographers took photos of other people, they were asked to get their written permission. Understandably, some people did not want to be photographed, so there are images missing and photos not taken, out of respect for the wishes of others. While some of the women initially had doubts about their ability to take photos that would convey the kinds of messages they wanted to share, given their lack of experience in photography, their creativity flourished once they started shooting and each one found her own "photographic eye."

The films were processed and each woman received a full set of prints. A second set of prints and CDs with digital images for each roll of film were used during group discussions.

### ***Step 5: Sharing the Stories Behind the Photographs***

During the next few group sessions, women selected some of their photographs to share with other members of the group. Sometimes the photographs were passed around the room, and sometimes the images were projected on the wall, using a laptop and an LCD projector. Their discussions were tape-recorded.

As the women described the images and shared their meanings, others in the group often found connections between the images and their own lives. It often took great courage for women to expose the scenes of poverty in their own lives and there were many moments of pain, anger and sorrow. But there were also shared moments of laugh-

ter and joy and celebration for their strength and survival in the face of hard times. The stories behind the photographs also gave rise to discussion of the policies and practices which women found harmful and oppressive. Their images highlighted the consequences of policies and practices that fail to respond to their basic needs.

### **Step 6: Creating a Photovoice Display**

In the final group sessions, the women's writings and transcripts of the discussions were used to create captions to accompany the photographs. Each woman was given time to edit the captions and review her selection of photographs. Each photographer signed a permission form specifying which of her photographs and captions could be used in a public exhibit and whether she wanted to use her real name or a pseudonym. The selected photographs were enlarged and mounted on plaques.

The displays consisted of a wide variety of photographs, with insightful titles and accompanying text that varied in length from a sentence or two, to a long paragraph. The subjects of the photos ranged from positive aspects of the photographer's life, to specific challenges faced by her or others living in poverty and symbolic representations of themes such as inner strength and the personal journey.

After several weeks of meeting together, the women in the groups were really looking forward to putting their work on display. They participated in the decisions and helped make the plans for the opening events. Here is an entry from one of our journals.

*April 13: The women are quite excited about getting the photo display up for people to see, and want to see it used. We talked about whether to call it "research" and what kind of research to call it. The women favoured describing the project as "participa-*



*Elaine Gamble, "It's Like You're Handicapped," 2006.*

*"This is a picture of my daughter's prosthetic limb. When you're living in poverty it is like you are handicapped because there are so many restrictions, so many limitations. Someone can go in the store and buy a magazine or a shirt that they need for their kid. They can go ahead and buy it, but you can't, because you have to think about other things. You have to think, 'Well, if I buy that, then I can't pay my phone bill.'"*

*tory action research" and "health and wellbeing research." Two of the photographers also offered to bring baked goodies for the event. A couple others offered to help make arrangements to get a ramp so that the raised area of the gallery is made wheelchair accessible. Everyone pitching in makes it seem doable!*

The photographs were first put on display at private showings for the photographers and their invited guests. This provided an opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments and share their work with family and friends. This was followed in both cities by public exhib-

its of their work. In Winnipeg, the women's photovoice exhibit "Poverty: Our Voices, Our Views" opened at the University of Winnipeg as part of the May Works celebration in May 2006. It was shown again in Winnipeg at The Label Gallery, November-December 2006. In Saskatoon, the exhibit "Looking Out/Looking In: Women, Poverty and Public Policy" was displayed at the Saskatoon Community Youth Art Programming (SCYAP) Gallery in May 2006. The exhibit was also shown in the main lobby of Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon during Poverty Awareness Week in October 2006.