

Tis the Season to Spoil Our Sisters



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Re-thinking Workfare

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Plusieurs femmes en Ontario, surtout les femmes rurales et les mères monoparentales se retrouvent complètement exclues du marché du travail. Leur seule façon d'y revenir est le programme du « Ontario Works' Workfare ». Malheureusement, ce programme fait très peu pour les aider à sortir de la pauvreté. Toutefois avec la participation du gouvernement, il y a une solution.

A woman faces many challenges in her lifetime, including parenting children or caring for elderly parents. These challenges may remove her from the workforce for a time, leaving her economically vulnerable. And, for many women, returning to the world of paid employment is very difficult, especially if they are from rural communities where jobs are scarce.

Women living in rural areas and small towns are at particular risk of needing government assistance, as are single mothers. It isn't because they don't want to support their families; rather, they are unable to find employment. If they do find a job, often it does not provide enough to keep the family's bills paid and mouths fed. According to Statistics Canada's 2001 Census data 36.6 per cent of all low-income families in Ontario are headed by a woman, and those families have an average deficit of over \$10,000 per year.

More people living in Rural Small Town (RST) areas have been found to be "persistently poorer" than those who live in Large Urban Centres (LUC) (Phimister and Weersink). And, unfortunately, women are a large subset of the persistently poor. According to their analysis of the 2001 Census data, Euan Phimister and Alfons Weersink found that

female working age, unattached individuals in one person households ... and female lone parents with children under 25 are the dominant characteristics in both [RST and LUC] low income sub-samples. (1)

In Ontario, a woman who cannot support herself and her family has one option only: to apply for "social assistance" from Ontario Works (OW). Ontario Works (OW) is the recently revised version of Welfare in Ontario (formally "General Welfare Assistance"). It is administered at the Municipal level, and provides monthly income support to people in need.

Applying to Ontario Works can, however, be a degrading experience. The applicant must reveal the most intimate details of her economic and marital status. Her life insurance policy, vehicle, jewellery, investments, bank accounts, and any other assets must be laid bare for the Ontario

government to see. And if her assets exceed the allowable limit of \$1,457 (Community Development Halton), she must divest herself of them and live off the proceeds until her total assets have dropped below the limit. Even her car is subject to value limits. If it is worth more than \$5,000, she may keep it for six months while she looks for a job. If she is still receiving benefits after six months, she must sell the car and live off the money until her assets are under \$1,457. For rural women this is an insurmountable obstacle. A rural woman without a car cannot grocery shop, pick up her children from school, go to the doctor's office or do any other aspect of normal life that involves leaving her home. She becomes a prisoner of Ontario Works (OW).

If the OW applicant owns her home she must consent to allow OW to put a lien on it. The lien is not supposed to be put on the home until she has received OW benefits for twelve months, however the lien form she *must* sign in order to begin receiving benefits gives OW the legal right to slap the lien on immediately. The lien allows OW to collect, upon the sale of her house, an amount equivalent to all benefits she has received. So, every month that she receives money from OW, her equity in her home drops by an equal amount.

Once a woman becomes a client of OW, she usually finds her problems

are far from solved. This is due to decreasing amounts of Social Service payments and increasing costs of living, especially for rent. "Typical rents far exceed the housing portion of welfare benefits ... so money for basic needs like food, clothing, transportation, etc. goes to paying the rent" (Ontario Coalition for Social Justice (OCSJ)). She has sacrificed her self-esteem to keep a roof over the family.

OW clients are obligated by their participation agreement to be engaged in the search for a job. While she is searching for a job, which many experts say should be a full-time job in and of itself, she must also contribute 70 plus hours a month to "one or more of three programs: Employment Supports, Community Participation and Employment Placement" (Community Development Halton).

According to the Ontario Works Policy Directives, employment supports "include job search, job search support services, referral to basic education and job-specific skills training." Employment support is aimed at getting the client job-ready, with resumé in hand, and providing the client with access to a job bank and a fax machine to facilitate applying for jobs.

"Community participation is any unpaid community service activity under the direction of community and/or public or non-profit organizations." (Ontario Works Policy Directives). Community placement is only allowed to continue for six months, except when there is a specific training program going on, in which case it can continue for eleven months.

Employment placement is with a private sector employer for a term of six months, and comes with no guarantee of permanent employment. In fact, Ontario Works offers private sector employers with funding for up to six months (Ontario Works) to provide extra training or supervision for Workfare workers. Since those businesses and agencies that provide

paid employment to OW recipients are re-paid by the Ontario government "on a performance basis using a share of the funds that would otherwise be paid out in financial assistance to the participant" (*Ontario Works Policy Directives*), there is no incentive for job creation or permanent employment. In fact, it does the opposite. When an employer can get a job done by a minimum wage OW

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client, they can stop paying regular employees who get benefits and wage increases (Community Development Halton). So, employment placement serves to subsidize the private sector, but does not result in a permanent job for the OW client.

While the OW client is searching for work and doing her placements, her children theoretically, are in school. But they aren't, since "school hours do not mirror work hours nor adult education and training hours" (Community Development Halton). OW makes no provisions to provide for childcare. The suggestion has been made that some women may meet their participation agreement obligations by taking care of other people's children. But, as Community Development Halton points out, "a caregiver that must look after children as a condition of receiving a welfare cheque will not be motivated to provide quality care. Furthermore, she will not have the financial means or training to provide adequate care" (Section 5).

Welfare is an expensive business. The Canadian Government spent \$99.1 billion on Welfare in the 1999-2000 period. Ontario spent \$4,847,110,000 on Social Assistance during the same period, to benefit 802,000 people (Statistics Canada). Programs like OW are aimed at lowering government contributions to welfare by helping welfare recipients become self-supporting.

Many OW clients are experienced, talented, and educated people. In Halton, Ontario, for example, "only 4 per cent of clients had no high school education and 21 per cent had some post secondary" education (Community Development Halton 5). These are people who want to work, and are capable of doing many different types of jobs. So, instead of forcing OW recipients to volunteer in community placements or work for minimum wage in a job that OW subsidizes, why not offer OW and Employment Insurance (EI) clients real jobs?

Municipal, provincial and federal governments could offer qualified OW and EI recipients the first crack at any government jobs that become available while they are receiving benefits. Government jobs range from manual labour positions, through administration to management. In rural areas, municipalities and government agencies provide some of the only jobs with reasonable wages and benefits. There are skilled people, many of them women, on the OW and EI recipient list who could do these jobs well, especially since they would approach the position with the enthusiasm of someone who knows what it is like to have nothing. If there is no one in the OW or EI pools with the appropriate qualifications, the job could then be opened to the general public. But if there is an OW client who is qualified to do the job, everyone benefits. The client is freed from the humiliation of having to take government assistance and the government has one less family to support on welfare.

Lisa Carver has a Masters in psychology and has published articles in a variety of venues. She is also a single mother. She and her son have spent the past seven years living in rural Lanark County where she works as a consultant in the non-profit sector.

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LEA LITTLEWOLFE

gustatorial

bruised banana peels stringy
mandarin orange sweetly brew-y pleases tongue
too-mature cauliflower blooms black speckled
juliened broccoli and purple cabbage
feel rot mushy
dark green cucumber molds spotty under wax sealant
gladly I accept this food bank bounty
unacceptable produce from monster-store grocery

a child, I feasted with siblings
on pears blotched brown, sharp green lettuce wilted
blue plums unable to ripen to softness, too-small bananas
corkscrew yams, red apples gone starchy
in secret cardboard boxes handed
to my father "for your pigs and sheep"
behind the small-town grocery
because a merchant preferred our brown skins
to Hutterite black clothing

when my daughter on loan from her self-imposed
foster-home exile came home for birthdays
she gorged on fresh fruit
from table, fridge, garden, forest
her delighted teeth and tongue
swished, gurgled, smacked, juiced
overripe peaches, thumb-size blueberries
ruby raspberries, tart strawberries
pithy mangoes, succulent nectarines
juicy watermelon, sweet cantaloupe
even sometimes conceded foster care
she had overrated

Lea Littlewolfe has been published in grain, NeWest Review, Other Voices, Briarpath, Western People, McGill Street Magazine, Ash, Paw Prints, The Prince Albert Daily Herald, The Painted Gopher, and Canadian Literature.