



FASTFACTS



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Keeping them poor: women and minimum wage

In 1995, at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Canada signed the *Platform for Action*, a roadmap for women's equality. On the topic of women and poverty, the *Platform for Action* called on Governments to, "Review, adopt and maintain macroeconomic policies and development strategies that address the needs and efforts of women in poverty."

Ten years later, the level of poverty remains virtually unchanged in Manitoba. One out of five Manitoba women lives in poverty. A single mom with two children has to work more than 80 hours/week at minimum wage just to reach the poverty line.

Addressing women's poverty through the minimum wage is increasingly important as more women are involved in paid work than ever before. Over 60% of Manitoba women are employed in the paid labour force. The numbers are increasing fastest for women with young children. In 2003 two-thirds of women with young children worked for pay, up from half in 1990.

Women make up two-thirds of minimum wage earners. Aboriginal women, immigrant and refugee women, women

living with disabilities, racialized women, and young women are more likely to be employed in low-paying, low-status occupations. For example, immigrant and refugee women, many of whom are professionals in their home countries, are often forced into low-paid work during their first years in Canada while they wait for their credentials to be recognized.

Women consistently find themselves overrepresented in the lowest paid sectors including clerical workers, childcare workers, sales clerks, and food servers. In fact, women outnumber men in each of the ten lowest paying occupations in Canada except service station attendants. The list of women's top occupations today is markedly similar to women's top occupations in 1891, which included servant, teacher,

saleswoman, and laundress.

Women are also more likely to work part-time, and part-time jobs are more likely to be lower paid. Many of the reasons women "choose" to work part-time revolve around the demands of unpaid work. Part-time workers are often also full-time caregivers performing unpaid caring work that is essential to the economy and society.

The minimum wage earnings of a single mother with two children working full-time are less than half of LICO. In other words a single mother of two must work at least 80 hours per week every single week of the year just to reach the poverty line.



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The earnings of a single person without dependants working full-time at minimum wage still fall 11% below Statistics Canada Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) – Canada's unofficial poverty line. Low earnings in the working years translates into poverty as women age. Over half of single women over the age of 65 in Manitoba live in poverty.

Poor Moms - Poor Kids

Manitoba's low minimum wage policy ensures that women and their children will remain poor. A low minimum wage policy contributes to Manitoba's alarmingly high levels of child poverty. Poor moms have poor kids. The national child poverty coalition, Campaign 2000, which recently reported that over 1 million children in Canada including 53,000 in Manitoba live in poverty, identifies an increase in the minimum wage as a key element in the elimination of child poverty. Despite the Manitoba Government's claim to be interested in child poverty, our Government is keeping poor kids poor by refusing to pay their parents a wage that keeps them out of poverty. About 15% of minimum wage earners in Canada are heads of families. Campaign 2000 reports that 53% of single mother families live in poverty.

The minimum wage earnings of a single mother with two children working full-time are less than half of LICO. In other words a single mother of two must work at least 80 hours per week every single week of the year just to reach the poverty line. The minimum wage increase of 25 cents recently announced by the Manitoba Government gives this mother an extra \$10/week, barely enough to deal with ever-increasing costs of living and for Winnipeggers, yet another transit price hike.

Manitoba and Beijing + 10

Following the Beijing Conference, the Canadian Government laid out its Federal Plan for Gender Equality. It pointed to gender-based analysis as essential to achieving equality of outcome and promised that this analysis would be implemented at all levels of Government policy and programming. This promise has not trickled down to the provinces nor to minimum wage policy. A gender analysis of minimum wage would make it abundantly clear that a living wage is a key element of a poverty-reduction strategy.

At regional meetings in preparation for Beijing+10 – the 10 year review of the Beijing Conference – Canada recently reported that, "poverty among some groups of women such as lone-parents, immigrant women and unattached senior women is still too high." This statement echoed their written response on Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in which they acknowledged that "38% of Aboriginal women and 27% of immigrant women were in low-

income situations."

It is interesting to note that Manitoba is one of only three provinces and territories not mentioned in the response, leaving Manitobans to wonder what, if anything, our province reported on the steps made towards women's equality and the reduction of women's poverty. Poverty for women in Manitoba remains at record high levels.

As Manitobans prepare for the 49th Session on the Commission of the Status of Women and the Beijing+10 Review in New York this week, we are deeply disappointed that so little progress has been made on reducing women's poverty since the Beijing Conference in 1995. We are especially saddened by our Government's strong commitment to economic policies that serve to keep women poor.

Rather than protecting women's right to earn a decent living, Manitoba's low minimum wage policy helps keep women poor. The Government of Manitoba has an obligation as well as a moral commitment to use policies such as the minimum wage to reduce women's poverty. A minimum wage that is below a living wage contradicts Canada's and Manitoba's international commitment under the *Platform for Action*. Women's economic inequality is only exacerbated by a minimum wage that keeps them poor.

- Jennifer DeGroot

Jennifer deGroot is Project Coordinator for the UN Platform for Action Committee Manitoba (UNPAC). She participated in the FAFIA-led NGO delegation to the Regional Preparatory Meetings for Beijing+10 in Geneva in December 2004. UNPAC is a member of Manitoba's Just Income Coalition.

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