

Research for **communities**

YOUNG WOMEN, WORK, AND THE NEW ECONOMY

Young women growing up in the inner city receive little of the economic education they need to help them out of poverty,

Young women work—in their homes, in our community, in schools, with other youth and in the labour force. But young women who live in poverty continue to find themselves unable to make our economy or society work for them. Struggling to stay in school, working for low wages, and lacking childcare, young women face many challenges. At risk of a future living in poverty, and possibly raising another



generation to do the same, young women said they want to work to build a better

future and community.

Young Women Work: Community Economic Development Approaches to Reducing Women's Poverty and Improving Income is one effort towards supporting young women at risk of poverty to improve their status. This feminist participatory research study was guided by a coalition of community-based organizations that work directly with young women in Winnipeg. Two local young women were trained as Community Researchers and conducted interviews and focus groups with 50 young women in two family centres. Andrews Street Family Centre and Wolseley Family Place, located in the North End and West Broadway respectively, support young women on a daily basis in their dealings with the high levels of poverty that characterize these inner-city neighbourhoods.

The goal of the research project is to describe the barriers and opportunities for young women at risk of poverty in the new economy (characterized by information technology and knowledge-based workforce), and outline community economic development (CED) approaches to preventing poverty over the long term

among young women ages 15-24.

A CAPACITY BUILDING-APPROACH

A “bottom-up” rather than “top-down” theory, CED takes a capacity-building approach to poverty, considering individual and community assets as starting places for building local economies. It is founded on the belief that problems facing communities—unemployment, poverty, job loss, environmental degradation and loss of community control—need to be addressed in a holistic and participatory way.

CED offers promise for young women continually at a disadvantage in this new economy, which arguably offers little advantages for women as a whole over the “old” economy. Since the emergence of globalization and increasing reliance on technology in the 1990s, the new economy has given rise to a polarization of job structures, which increasingly rely on part time and temporary work. These changes only entrench women’s status as part time workers—women have accounted for seven out of ten part time employees since the late 1970s.

The new economy continues to restrict women—through occupational segregation, the wage gap and undervaluing women’s unpaid and paid work. Furthermore, inequities are exacerbated for visible minority or Aboriginal young women marginalized by racism. In Winnipeg, nearly half of Aboriginal young women (49.7%) and young men (40.1%) aged 15–24 live below the poverty line; compared to 16.2% of Winnipeg youth in this age range. These dire statistics are the result of the legacy of colonization, residential schools, and

persistent racism. This is reflected in our study: 72% of the participants (all residents of low-income neighbourhoods) are Aboriginal.

The scope of the research was broad; participants were asked to share their thoughts on their neighbourhoods, schools, unpaid work, paid work, computers, role models, and hopes for the future. This article will focus on the paid work findings; participants were asked both about the paid work they do now, and might want to do as adults.

Feminists have long argued that addressing the balance between paid and unpaid work is important to improving

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women’s status. Women take on a great deal of unpaid care work, which we were careful to recognize in our study. But working for pay is currently the only way that people can elevate themselves out of poverty. However there are significant barriers to making the transition from social assistance to the paid labour force. For example, employment- and income-assistance recipients lose benefits they were previously eligible for, such as paid prescriptions and dental coverage when they take work. Full-time work at minimum wage (\$7.00/ hour at the time of the study, currently \$7.60 / hour) provides a living at only 70% of the poverty line and rarely offers health plan benefits. Single people

need to earn at least \$9.44 per hour in order to earn a living wage in Manitoba, more if they are supporting a family.

FINDING WORK

Access to the labour force is also a challenge. Young women living in the neighbourhoods in question have higher than average rates of unemployment. For example, the unemployment rate in West Broadway and the North End was 19.7% and 23.5% respectively - double the 10.5% average rate for females ages 15–24 in Winnipeg.

Most of the study participants did not work for pay. Some worked casually babysitting or cleaning homes for others. A few had jobs twice weekly in community job-creation programs. Two worked at fast-food restaurants. Despite this, the young women aspired to a broad range of paid work. They were particularly attracted to professions that give back to the community and help others.

Some young

women knew which career they wanted to have, and had an idea of what was needed to get there. However others knew what they wanted to be, but were not clear on what education or training they might need. Young women who had been through career planning programs at school had a much broader range of professional aspirations, whereas those who said they had not had any career planning, aspired to work that is likely more familiar: social workers, nurses or probation officers. More research is needed to corroborate this, however it is safe to say that career education and role models

The Young Women Work study also reached the following conclusions regarding CED

1. THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET IS ESSENTIAL TO CED

Strong social programs such as accessible childcare, social housing and social assistance are the foundation that allows young women to be able to participate in CED and move out of poverty.

2. BUILDING SAFE SPACES AND GENDER EQUALITY

Efforts must be taken to make young women feel welcome and safe in programs, in their neighbourhoods, schools and communities. Aboriginal young women need to have access to cultural teachings led by the Aboriginal community. CED organizations need to continue to challenge gender norms so that young women are provided with every opportunity to fulfil their potential, and responsibilities of unpaid work are shared equally.

3. GENDERING CED

CED approaches need to consider long-term benefits for women to improve their wages and economic security in the emerging economic climate. This requires support to develop transferable skills in

high-wage sectors, and improving the wages in low-wage sectors where women traditionally work.

4. APPROPRIATE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IS INTRINSIC TO CED FOR YOUNG WOMEN

Programs must centre on what young women themselves identify as their needs and priorities. Young women have their own community and youth culture. More mentorship programs and youth-to-youth leadership development programs could build upon the capacity and strength of young women, while at the same time develop their leadership skills.

5. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IS NOT ENOUGH

Many of the supports young women are using do not incorporate supports to learn about the cost of living and how to improve their economic status. Current programming largely meet only short-term needs and will not help eliminate the feminization of poverty. Gender inequality is inextricably linked to economic equality. Greater support is needed for young women to learn economic skills, find and create meaningful work, and plan for their futures.

**CANADIAN CENTRE
FOR POLICY
ALTERNATIVES-MB**

309-323 Portage Ave.

Winnipeg, MB

Canada R3B 2C1

ph: (204) 927-3200

fax: (204) 927-3201

ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

www.policyalternatives.ca

for youth can only broaden their horizons and reveal a wider range of paths to take in their lives.

What was clear is that, when asked, young women have enthusiasm for the possibilities the future holds, however they lack information on how to get there. We found that participants did not aspire a living wage because they do not have a sense of the cost of living. Young women growing up in the inner city receive little economic education that could help them out of poverty, for example learning how to save towards an education or purchase of a home. While programs focused on social issues such as raising healthy children are easy to access in the inner city, there is a lack of education to improve the long-term economic status of young women in the community organizations and supports young women access.

ECONOMIC EDUCATION

Supports focused on economic education and job planning could be offered as modules through programs young women already access, such as Healthy Child Manitoba, or girl's clubs. Economic literacy should also include education on the rights of workers, so that young women know their rights if they are mistreated at some point by an employer.

Our research upholds previous findings that Aboriginal young women want and need supports that uphold their traditional cultures and teachings. Access to cultural teachings is important for identity formation and well being, and needs to be available in all aspects. This is best led by Aboriginal organizations with experience and connections with the Aboriginal

community.

CED offers the potential to supply better opportunities for young women in the current economy. CED focuses on multiple "bottom lines" that are both social and economic. This offers a buffer against shifting demands of the new economy, and a type of incubator where small local cooperatives and businesses can support young women to learn and develop leadership skills. CED initiatives that consider the long-term implications for women to improve their wages and economic security help build transferable skills that are valued in the economy. Young women can develop leadership skills by being mentored to guide these programs themselves. Young women are ready and willing to participate in holistic programs that respect their cultural backgrounds and build strong futures for themselves, their families and their communities.

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