

# Public policy for women

A recent conference in Vancouver took up the issue of public policy as it relates to women. **Margaret Condon** reports back from *Imagining Public Policy to Meet Women's Economic Security Needs*.

RECENT DISCUSSION OF PUBLIC POLICY and how it serves women's needs has been limited. Hence, when the Simon Fraser University Women's Studies Department and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, BC Office held a conference on the subject in Vancouver in early October, it was a reminder for many of the "boomers" in the audience of the 1960s and 1970s women's movement, while for the "genx-ers" it was an occasion to revisit their women's studies curriculum of the 1980s and 1990s. Sponsored by the Economic Security Project, a multi-year research initiative funded by a SSHRC Community University Research Alliance grant, the "Imagining Public Policy to Meet Women's Economic Security Needs" conference presented an opportunity for both the academic and the community-based participants to go beyond criticizing existing policy to imagining realistic policy based on both new ideas and successful programs elsewhere.

The conference opened with an address from the Hon. Monique Begin, who set the scene by making a compelling case for a focus on women's economic security needs—for example, 22% of women vs 12% of men are in low-paid

(>\$10/hr work)—and also for the identification of public policy examples from around the world that better address women's needs—for example, 99.7% of children aged 3–5 years in France attend pre-school. She recounted an interesting anecdote from her early days as Minister of National Health and Welfare (1977–1984), namely that it was her goal to introduce a Guaranteed Annual Income program, but that the idea had to be set aside when she learned of the impending recession and that it would have required a doubling of the social assistance budget due to the numbers of the working poor.

She concluded by cautioning us about the myth vs the reality of our nation, and to be aware that Canada is not "the Sweden of North America." She challenged us to think about why we are so parsimonious with social assistance, yet so generous with health care, and offered that values of equity and social justice are prerequisites to public policy that meets women's economic security needs.

The conference program covered the policy areas of employment standards and barriers to labour force participation, social assistance and social policy, and community-based health care.

**"We need to better address women's needs—for example, 99.7% of children aged 3–5 years in France attend pre-school."**

Selected highlights follow:

- Alternatives to the traditional model of labour and social protection were presented that consider the life course of the individual as opposed to strictly the employment relationship, and reflect shared work and valued caregiving as opposed to unequal work and undervalued caregiving.
- The Living Wage concept, which has gained momentum in the UK, where it was found to be 30% – 40% above the minimum wage on average, and has led to the prominence of the visible minority community and defacto faith-based communities there, was presented as an issue that has the potential to unite different groups in Canada.
- The criticality of showing that welfare benefits don't only accrue to the poor but to all of society was stressed.
- Likewise the need to demonstrate the economic value of good social policy that is integrated and flexible and thus able to meet diverse needs was emphasized.
- The various dimensions of caregiving and the increasing likelihood of women to be simultaneously seeking or providing care for children *and* aging parents emerged during the discussion on social supports.
- The fundamental need for good child care and other supports in welfare-to-work programs was highlighted, along with a warning that an increased focus on family can lead to spousal and child abuse not being a priority.

The conference concluded with a presentation on strategies for change by Hilary Wainwright who reminded conference attendees of the need to address mobilization along with

**“Canada is not ‘the Sweden of North America.’ Why we are so parsimonious with social assistance, yet so generous with health care?”**

the development of alternative policies. She recommended working to strengthen the autonomy of popular democratic organizations outside of the state through use of state public resources. She offered that feminists and other activists have very few allies today and therefore need to develop cross-sectoral organizations. At the same time she suggested that the crisis of legitimacy of traditional organizations such as the World Trade Organization presents an opportunity for the emergence of transformative organizations, where there is a connectedness from below rather than above. This environment could give rise to new values that would lead to public policy that meets women's economic security needs. ■

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#### Resource Websites

##### ESP Conference

<[www.sfu.ca/espconference2005](http://www.sfu.ca/espconference2005)>

##### National Action Committee on the Status of Women

<[www.nac-cca.ca](http://www.nac-cca.ca)>

##### Status of Women Canada

<[www.swc-cfc.gc.ca](http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca)>