



A TURNING POINT  
FOR WOMEN



## Investing in Ontario's Women and Girls

*Pre-Budget Submission to the  
Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs  
January, 2017*

YWCA Toronto is the largest multi-service women's organization in Canada. We have a long and proud history of providing direct services and tackling systemic issues to help women escape violence, move out of poverty, and access safe affordable housing. We also work with young girls - building their leadership and critical thinking skills. Our Association serves over 12,000 women and families annually in 32 programs in 12 locations across the City of Toronto.

We applaud the positive steps taken by the provincial government in 2016 to address the needs of women. In particular, we are encouraged by the speed in which the government is implementing its action plan on sexual violence and harassment; the launch of Ontario's long-term strategy to end violence against Indigenous women; the decision to ban wait list fees for child care; the new portable housing benefit pilot to assist women fleeing domestic violence; and the passage of the Promoting Affordable Housing Act, giving municipalities inclusionary zoning powers. These changes will make a difference in the lives of the women and girls with whom we work.

That said, the need remains great and women are still falling behind. According to Ontario Campaign 2000's 2016 Report Card, one in six (18.8%) children under 18 and one in five (20.4%) children under six in Ontario live in poverty – and we know that women lead many of these families. Across all of our programs at YWCA Toronto, women tell us that they are struggling to make ends meet, and to provide for their families, in light of the increasing costs of living. Women are looking for the provincial government to take a leadership role in Budget 2017 to make poverty reduction a top priority.

### **Early Learning and Child Care For All**

Access to affordable, quality child care is critical for women's equality. It can provide a path out of poverty and enable women to participate equally in the labour force. Further, Ontario's Gender Wage Gap Steering Committee made clear in its report that access to an affordable and publicly funded geared-to-income child care program is a pre-requisite to closing the gender wage gap. It is critical to create equal opportunities and eliminate barriers that prevent women's full participation in the workforce.

We are encouraged by the announcement in the Throne Speech that the government will create 100,000 new, licensed child care spaces for infants, toddlers and preschoolers within the next five years, also creating 20,000 new child care jobs. However, for this commitment to meet the needs of the women with whom we work, the affordability of spaces is critical. We urge the government to commit to new funding dollars that kick-start a process of system transformation, including more affordable, quality, not-for-profit child care spaces; addressing the underfunding in existing child care spaces; and, ensuring adequate wages for child care staff across Ontario. YWCA Toronto has a child care with 62 spaces and 10 of these spaces are vacant as the City has frozen subsidies. In this situation not only do parents requiring subsidies

suffer but it creates a deficit position for the YWCA which is not sustainable. Many other child cares in the Province are facing similar difficulties.

## **Ending Violence Against Women**

### *Free Trauma Counselling*

Access to trauma counselling is critical to helping women recover and rebuild after violence. Across all YWCA Toronto programs, women tell us that they cannot access the supports they desperately need because they simply cannot afford counselling fees. There are long waiting lists. Some counsellors are inadequately trained. Many programs are short-term or not available at all, such as addiction detox beds for women. And most importantly, the types of alternative supports survivors find most helpful – like art-based therapy – are often not funded. As we stated in our deputation to the Select Committee on Sexual Violence and Harassment, we urge provincial government to invest in free, high-quality trauma informed counselling for victims/survivors of violence and for their children.

### *Legal Representation*

YWCA Toronto is a strong advocate for free legal supports for survivors of violence. In our deputation to the Select Committee on Sexual Violence and Harassment, we stated that many women with whom we work face a variety of legal processes without access to counsel due to legal aid income thresholds that are not realistic. Women are extremely vulnerable to further violence when they attempt to take action to enforce their legal rights. They should not be left to do this on their own. Women need a lawyer in their corner who can help them prepare, give legal advice and intervene when rights guaranteed by the Supreme Court of Canada are ignored. We applaud the Ontario government for launching a pilot to give survivors of sexual assault up to four hours of free legal advice. This is a good start, but four hours is insufficient to level the playing field. We urge the government to expand this pilot in Budget 2017.

### *Preventing Sexual Abuse of Patients*

YWCA Toronto supports the recommendations of the Minister's Task Force on the Prevention of Sexual Abuse of Patients and the Regulated Health Professions Act. We welcome the recent announcement that the provincial government will expand the list of acts of sexual abuse of patients that can lead to revocation of a doctor's licence, but we urge the government to go further. Budget 2017 must include funds to support the creation of an independent body to prosecute sexual abuse allegations against health professionals. Immediate and bold reform is crucial to ensure women's safety.

## **Lifting Women Out of Poverty**

### *Social Assistance Reform*

Ontario's social assistance program does not meet basic needs. The women with whom we work on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) are living in extreme poverty – especially single women – and struggling to survive in an increasingly expensive city. According to a study from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the poverty gap (between total benefit income and the poverty line) for a single person on Ontario Works has nearly tripled, from 20 per cent in 1993 to 59 per cent in 2014. And, as Hugh Segal wrote in his discussion paper for the Basic Income pilot: "It is hard to conclude that the income support that is now available for those living in poverty is adequate in any meaningful way."

For these reasons, we support the call from the Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC) and the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition to add another billion dollars immediately to enhance social assistance programs. As ISAC highlighted in their pre-budget submission:

- Within this investment, \$700 million should be spent on a 10% increase in basic needs and shelter allowance rates, with the remaining \$300 million spent on making positive rule changes.
- Rate increases should include a disproportionate increase for singles on OW, who currently receive the lowest benefit rates at \$706 per month, and the percentage increase should be applied to benefits intended for the family members of people with disabilities on ODSP, who have not seen a rate increase for four years.
- Rule changes should support relationships and work, improve access to medical and dental treatment, ensure benefit fairness, remove punishments, and allow people on OW and ODSP to save.

This investment represents less than 1% of the province's total budget. More importantly, it will help to improve the health and dignity of low-income women, reduce poverty and the costs of poverty. All women should be able to live in dignity, and with security.

### *Good Jobs with Livable Incomes*

Many of the women with whom we work are trapped in precarious jobs – low-wage, part-time employment, often without the benefit of child care. [Studies](#) from the United Way Toronto and York Region highlight the disproportionate numbers of racialized women trapped in these jobs in the GTHA region; and [recent research](#) out of Ryerson University has linked negative health outcomes for racialized and immigrant women to precarious work. The title of the 2016 Ontario Budget was 'Jobs For Today and Tomorrow'. We have to ensure that the jobs for tomorrow are full-time jobs with livable incomes.

The Changing Workplace Review offers an opportunity to tackle the systemic root causes of precarious work and develop a framework for creating decent jobs. The most urgent changes include implementing the recommendations of the Gender Wage Gap Steering Committee, strong enforcement measures to tackle wage theft, protection for temp agency workers and increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. We also call on the provincial government to include paid leave for victims/survivors domestic violence and sexual violence (as outlined in Bill 26) in the Employment Standards Act changes.

The provincial government can also play an increased role in creating employment and apprenticeship opportunities for equity-seeking groups, including women, Indigenous people, Ontarians with disabilities, racialized workers, LGBTQ communities and newcomers. We urge the provincial government to leverage the province's infrastructure commitments to push businesses to implement equity-based hiring practices, as was done with the Community Benefits Agreement for the Eglinton Crosstown construction project.

### *Food Security*

Food insecurity impacts physical and mental health – it also results in increased costs to our health care system. At YWCA Toronto's Girls' Centre in south Scarborough, poverty is a dominant issue. Many of the girls disclose food access issues, and take food home with them. According to the Daily Bread Foodbank's annual report, Daily Bread and North York Harvest agencies saw over 900,000 visits to their food bank programs last year. They attribute this to a combination of stagnant incomes, rapidly rising food and housing costs, and an influx of newcomers making the difficult transition to a new country with little income. The mandate letter for the Minister Responsible for the Poverty Reduction Strategy includes a directive to develop a food security strategy that addresses physical and economic access to sufficient, safe

and nutritious food, including in remote First Nations communities. We urge the provincial government to include adequate investment for this strategy in Budget 2017.

### *Access to Health Care*

Living in poverty has a negative impact on health and well-being. In the 2014-19 Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, the government committed to creating a low-income health benefit for children and youth, including vision care, assistive devices, prescription drugs and mental health services. Since then, there have been no public updates regarding the implementation of the benefit. We urge the province to create and set time lines and targets to ensure that children are able to access this essential health care service. We also support calls for the government to extend this benefit to all low-income adults in Budget 2017. All Ontarians must have access to the health services, assistive devices and the medication they need.

### **Safe, Affordable Housing**

Access to safe, affordable, quality housing is a right. With over 98,000 households on the wait list for social housing in Toronto, we urge the provincial government to continue investing in safe, affordable housing to meet the need. Women need a continuum of housing supports, including funding for shelters, transitional housing, and permanent housing options – recognizing that women are homeless largely because they are fleeing violence. Budget 2017 must also include investment to support staffing and funding models for shelters that deal with the complexity of trauma and the mental health and addictions issues that women experience, including case management, specialized services and partnerships, community-based counselling and women's programs. We also urge the provincial government to address the inequities within rent control guidelines by including units built after 1993. These changes are critical to ensuring that all women and families have a safe, affordable place to call home.

### **Supporting Reconciliation**

Building a new relationship with Indigenous Peoples is critically important in Ontario – and across Canada. We urge the government to continue investing in programs and actions that focus on reconciliation as laid out in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. We also echo calls from the Ontario Native Women's Association for Indigenous women to lead the programs and services which affect Indigenous women and to be centrally involved in reconciliation efforts. We also urge the provincial government to advocate for its federal counterparts to end the inequities facing Indigenous communities – particularly in the areas of child welfare, education, health care and basics like clean water and decent housing.

### **A Strong Anti-Racism Directorate**

At YWCA Toronto, 67% of our program participants are from racialized communities, as are over 50% of our staff team. Eliminating racism must be a priority for the provincial government, and for all Ontarians. We urge the provincial government to ensure a strong Anti-Racism Directorate with proper funding and staffing (equal to that of similar equity offices in Ontario), and a clear mandate. We endorse the following recommendations from the Colour of Poverty coalition:

- Develop a public Anti-Racism Strategy to guide the work of the Directorate;
- Review and revise the Anti-Racism Strategy at least once every five years;
- The Anti-Racism Strategy must contain specific, objective and measurable targets aimed at addressing systemic racism in the province;

- The Government must consult with racialized communities and community groups on the development, review and revision of the Anti-Racism Strategy;
- The Anti-Racism Strategy must recognize the differential impacts of racism as experienced by different racialized communities, and must contain specific goals and consultation plans with respect to Indigenous and Black communities;
- The government must pass legislation to buttress and support the Directorate;
- The Directorate must issue policies and directives to all provincial ministries, offices, agencies, boards, commissions and corporations on how to address systemic racism and require all of them to set targets with measurable goals and specific timelines;
- The Directorate must make it mandatory for all ministries, offices, agencies, boards, commissions and corporations to collect ethno-racially disaggregated data, and to conduct regular audits to report on whether their targets are being met;
- Where possible and appropriate, funding to all ministries, offices, agencies, boards, commissions and corporations must be tied to meeting the targets and reporting requirements as set out by the Directorate; and,
- Performance measurements of all deputy ministers must contain an evaluation of the ministries' achievements of the targets and reporting requirements set out by the Directorate.

### Investing in Transit

Women rely heavily on transit and often make multiple trips throughout the day to meet work and family responsibilities. In addition, women have higher poverty rates meaning that we are disproportionately impacted by rising fares. We applaud the recent decision by Toronto City Council to launch a Fair Pass Program, decreasing fares for up to 200,000 low income transit riders. However, more investment is needed to address transit overcrowding, physical and geographic accessibility issues, repairs, and maintenance-related issues. To help improve transit in Toronto, we urge the provincial government to increase its per-rider subsidy. Specifically, we support calls to reinstate provincial support for municipal transit operating costs, eliminated in 1998. This could provide an influx of over \$330 million in new funding for the TTC and Wheel-Trans.

Safety on transit is also an important issue for women. According to the Toronto Police, there is one sexual assault every three days on the TTC yet very little is being done to address this issue. Given that the Government of Ontario is a leader in the fight to end sexual violence and harassment with the *It's Never Okay* Action Plan, we urge you to advocate for your municipal counterparts in Toronto to be the same – Toronto City Council must create an action plan to make transit safer for all riders, especially women.

In closing, YWCA Toronto offers our assistance as civil society partners to move forward with urgently needed changes to help women escape and recover from violence as well as address its root causes. We are deeply committed to building a better future for women and girls in Toronto and across Ontario.

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