

# Centre for Family Equity

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## SUBMISSION

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

on the occasion of its consideration of

Canada's periodic reports at its 89th Session

September 2024

### About

The Centre for Family Equity, formerly known as the Single Mothers Alliance, is a membership-based organization of low-income parents and caregivers in British Columbia (B.C.), Canada. Our membership is inclusive of all genders and gender identities, located in over forty-one locations across the province. The majority of our 400+ members are lone-parent mothers. We carry out community-engaged research and legal action law reform and propose evidence-based public policy solutions to address child, youth, and family poverty in B.C.

Our annual listening campaign with our members ensures our work towards justice and socioeconomic equality is continually meeting families' real and evolving needs based on their lived experiences.

### Acknowledgement

The Centre for Family Equity recognizes the stolen and occupied lands of the over 200 diverse Indigenous nations in the territories referred to as British Columbia. We acknowledge the historical and present-day impacts of colonization and recognize that poverty for Indigenous communities is interwoven with Canada and BC's colonial past and present. The Centre for Family Equity's Basis of Unity foregrounds our shared commitment to decolonizing the organization and impacting decolonization broadly. We would like to acknowledge that our address is located on the x̱m̱θḵiy̱m̱ (Musqueam), S̱wx̱w̱7mesh (Squamish), and s̱lilw̱ta̱ (Tsleil-Waututh) territories.

### Introduction

This submission is made to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on the occasion of its consideration of Canada's periodic reports at its 89th session. The submission aims to provide an analysis of Canada's progress in the Province of British Columbia in implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, highlighting some achievements and areas requiring further attention.

Over the past few decades, Canada has made significant strides in advancing gender equality and promoting women's rights. However, persistent challenges remain, particularly for Indigenous women, racialized women, and other marginalized groups who continue to face systemic discrimination. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health measures had a significant and negative impact on low-income mothers and their families. This submission addresses gaps in legal and policy frameworks, social and economic disparities, and the need for more robust measures to combat gender-based violence.

The following draws on data, research, and contributions from civil society organizations, experts, and, most importantly, from the lone mothers in our network in communities across B.C. It aims to inform the Committee's review by providing an overview of the current situation, offering recommendations for further action, and emphasizing the importance of continued monitoring and accountability to ensure that Canada fully upholds its commitments under the Convention.

We appreciate the Committee's ongoing efforts to hold States accountable to their obligations under CEDAW and trust that this submission will contribute to a constructive dialogue that advances gender equality and the protection of women's rights in Canada.

## Our Research

The themes running throughout all of our work, including research projects to address family poverty, are affordability; quality jobs and livable incomes, labour market access; and emergency adaptation and resilience.

We address how the social identities of families result in systemic marginalization, discrimination, and poverty for many. We examine and tackle systemic discrimination and poverty that may be rooted in a combination of the following: racialized identity, Indigeneity, gender identity, trans identity, sexual orientation, health and mental health status, social class, marital status, religion, ability, age.

We advocate for public policy and human rights-focused solutions to socioeconomic inequality and take a holistic, whole-family approach to family well-being. Most children and youth are in poverty because their parents and guardians are in poverty as they work below the poverty line or access income assistance in B.C. The majority of families in poverty are those led by lone mothers, and we focus on gender equality and high levels of lone-mother-led family poverty in B.C. within our mandate.

Our recent, relevant research projects include Making Mothers Matter and Justice at Work summarized below.

### Making Mothers Matter

The Making Mothers Matter project was a three-year participatory action research (PAR) project conducted through a partnership with the School of Social Work, University of British Columbia. We aimed to understand how BC's new child care affordability policies and \$10-a-day child care spaces impact the health and well-being of lone mothers living below the poverty line. Data collection and analysis wrapped up in fall 2023.

In December 2023, the Centre for Family Equity released *A Whole Life: The Impact of \$10 a Day Child Care on the Health and Socioeconomic Well-being of Low-Income Lone Mothers in BC* with a suite of ten recommendations to the governments of BC and Canada.

Our data discovered a positive correlation between access to \$10-a-day ChildCareBC Centres and improved health, well-being, and economic outcomes for low-income, lone mothers in BC.

The report also found a significant shortfall in child care spaces and pitfalls related to an unfinished system that risks deepening inequitable access to universal child care in BC.

### Justice at Work

In March 2024, we released a first-of-its-kind research report, *No Way to Escape: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Low-Income Lone-Mother Workers in BC*.

Led by a team of peer researchers who were all lone mothers, our inquiry found the pandemic had a significant, negative impact on the economic situation for most of the low-income lone mothers in the study.

Our analyses of the survey and qualitative data identified three broad themes: lone parenting and the impact of the pandemic on child care and access; health and well-being; and economic impacts—all reflecting the diversity of participant experiences throughout the pandemic. Overall, the findings reveal the unique struggles of low-income lone mothers juggling work and motherhood throughout the pandemic.

Our response to thematic areas for Canada

This submission addresses the following issue areas: access to justice (5); employment and economic empowerment of women; poverty, homelessness, and nutrition (19 and 20); and Canada's Emergency response including to Covid19 (25).

### 5. Access to Justice

We have been listening to women impacted by intimate partner violence since we founded in 2014 and the majority of our membership of low-income parents are impacted by all forms of gender-based violence which has increased their risk of poverty.

Many of our members have experienced intimate partner violence followed by poverty and hardship after they flee dangerous situations, often with their children. We have heard about their negative experiences trying to access family law while living far below the poverty line with limited access to legal aid services. Lack of access to justice for some women has resulted in physical danger, violence and, as evidenced by femicide statistics, sometimes death.

Seven years ago, the Centre for Family Equity, then known as the Single Mothers' Alliance, launched a charter challenge against the Province, the Attorney General of B.C., and Legal Aid B.C., the crown corporation that provides legal aid, for their failure to provide adequate legal aid family law services for lone mothers escaping intimate partner violence.

Earlier this year our charter challenge was resolved with the announcement that the Province of British Columbia will invest \$29.1 million over the next three years to enhance service delivery with a new wholistic clinic model that provides enhanced service for those impacted by intimate partner and family violence. The collaborative agreement also brought in many measures and policy changes including a significant increase to the income cut off for eligibility which means many more lower income survivors and others can access legal aid in B.C.

While we are hopeful that enhanced services will provide better access for mostly female parents who have faced financial and other barriers to obtaining legal services, we, along with other NGOs, will be monitoring the implementation and client outcomes closely.

#### Recommendation

Legal Aid B.C. to implement all required changes and expansion as required by the collaborative settlement to ensure those impacted by family violence receive the trauma-informed holistic clinic wrap-around services they need to stay safe and survive. We recommend the provincial government closely monitor the implementation of enhanced family legal aid services and prioritize tracking outcomes and data collection.

#### 19. Employment and economic empowerment

Working families can't make ends meet. In fact, many of our lone-parent members work two or more jobs and still live on low-incomes. Other parents and caregivers living on social, or disability assistance live in deep poverty, trapped by rules and fixed government incomes that keep them living well below the poverty line.

Our research with lone-parents tells us that most want quality, family-supporting jobs. However, persistent lack of access to child care is most often cited as a primary barrier to good employment. While lack of access to training and skills-building programs are also a top barrier to obtaining higher-income jobs.

While promising a universally accessible \$10-a-day childcare system for all, the province has failed to build a fair and accessible system that provides enough universal spaces to meet existing needs in B.C. The provincial government can do more to ensure adults raising children have pathways to family-supporting jobs including and especially for those who are marginalized and face barriers.

#### Recommendations

Implement an equity-based approach to ensure parents accessing income and disability assistance have priority access to \$10-a-day spaces, enabling them to access the labour market.

Establish public delivery of before- and after school care using the public school system to address the province-wide shortage of school age child-care spaces.

Provide an additional five days of employer-paid sick days per year in BC for caregiving responsibilities related to dependents' and other family members' sickness and care needs.

Expand the Single Parents' Employment Initiative (SPEI) to include programs longer than two years in length and expand the types of job training and educational opportunities available.

Implement career and job-path Supporting Pathways counselling and support services for those accessing income and disability assistance to support their access to the labour market and family-supporting employment.

Allow income and disability assistance recipients to access post-secondary grants, bursaries, training, and educational programs as part of a Supporting Pathways services approach.

Provide access to upskilling programs for mid-career workers who wish to raise their income, skills, and employability in a diversity of sectors.

Provide student loan forgiveness for low-income parents.

Provide amnesty for all low-income Canadians with CERB debt.

## 20. Poverty, homelessness, and nutrition

In 2021 (the last year for which data is available), 14.3 per cent of B.C. children were living in poverty, up from 13.3 per cent in 2020. The situation for lone-parent families, mostly led by mothers, is far worse, with 40.4 per cent of children in these families living in poverty compared to 7.4 per cent for children in couple families. Eighty per cent of lone-parent families were female-led.

Female lone-parent led families had a median before-tax annual income of \$55,140. This is 74% of the median income for male lone-parents at \$74,550. The child poverty rate for children in lone-parent families is over five times higher than in other families.

On-reserve child poverty rates in 2021 were even more devastating, with rates dramatically higher than the provincial average of 14.3%. On 59 B.C. First Nations reserves, the overall child poverty rate reached 31%, impacting at least 4,360 children. Rural reserves experienced a child poverty rate of 35%, significantly higher than the 27.5% rate observed in urban reserves.

We also recognize the higher rates of family poverty in newcomer and racialized communities. Based on 2021 Census data using the LIM after-tax measure, most racialized children in B.C. face higher poverty rates compared to non-racialized children. Arab, Korean, and West Asian children have more than double or triple the risk of poverty. The census data also reveals that in 2020, over one in five (21%) recent immigrant children aged 0-17 lived in poverty in B.C.

A comprehensive overview of child and family poverty including the data cited above can be found in the 2023 B.C. Child Poverty Report Card produced by First Call Child and Youth Advocacy Society.

Families living on disability or social assistance provided by government live far below the poverty line. And broadly, female lone parents with a disability are at a far greater risk of living in poverty. The reports from the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability showed that nine in ten lone parents with disabilities (85%) were women. The same Statistics Canada research report showed "...23% of lone parents with more severe disabilities were living below the poverty line."

"However, the impact of lone parenthood was greater for those with disabilities (18% of lone parents with disabilities were living below the poverty line), and this was further compounded by severity—23% of lone parents with more severe disabilities were living below the poverty line. It is important to note that close to nine in ten lone parents with disabilities (85%) were women, while among those without disabilities, close to eight in ten lone parents (75%) were women."

These statistics expose the stark reality that certain families in B.C. face a significantly higher risk of living in poverty.

Families are facing an unprecedented increase in the cost of living and lone-parent-led families are being hit harder by this reality. Wages are not keeping up with inflation and there is not enough safe, affordable rental family housing in B.C.

More and more families turn to regular use of food banks, curtail their use of public transit, and go without basic necessities.

## Recommendations

In all areas of policy, we recommend that governments at all levels recognize the different needs of equity-deserving families in BC including lone-parent single-income families, families impacted by intimate partner and family violence, families living on disability or income assistance, newcomer families, Indigenous families, 2SLGBTQIA+ families, kinship caregivers and parents living on fixed incomes in all policy development and poverty-reduction measures.

Increase the annual supplement for lone parents in the BC Family Benefit.

Index the BC Family Benefit to inflation, increase the upper net-income threshold and its benefit reduction rate and adjust it to consider the number of children in a family.

Introduce an additional Early Years Success Supplement for all families receiving the BC Family Benefit with children aged five and under.

Separate the living allowance from the housing allowance in income and disability assistance rate calculation, align the living allowance portion of income and disability assistance with the Market Basket Measure, and raise the shelter allowance to reflect the cost of housing in BC.

Remove the earnings exemption for those accessing income and disability assistance to support labour market access, on-the job training, skill-building, and networking opportunities.

Accelerate the building of all forms of affordable housing across the province.

Increase the minimum wage to a living wage to ensure salaries align with the cost of living.

Ensure that employers provide all full- and part-time workers with extended health benefits.

Establish an intersectional Pay Equity Act that enshrines in law the responsibility of all employers to identify and close gaps in pay for work of equal value.

Implement the ABC model as the legal test for determining employee status, reverse the onus of proof so workers are considered employees unless the employer can prove otherwise, and eliminate exemptions and carve-outs to the Employment Standards Act.

## 25. Emergency response (including to Covid19)

Our peer-based research funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada as part of their feminist pandemic recovery funding stream revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly and negatively affected the economic situation for low-income lone mothers across B.C. Overall, researchers with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives uncovered that the economic fallout from the pandemic and public policy responses erased two decades of progress for single mothers.

At the height of the pandemic, over a quarter, or 37.5%, of lone mothers with children under the age of twelve lost their jobs or had their hours significantly cut. A short period of job loss has the potential to put lone mothers in a downward spiral of deep poverty, with 56% at risk of failing to get by even after exhausting all other means of earning income, including selling belongings and assets.

At the height of the pandemic, 2.8 million women lost their jobs or had their hours reduced. For working lone parents with children under six, half lost their job or had their hours reduced due to the pandemic. The systemic and structural inequities that affect lone mothers' access to the labour market have been amplified by the pandemic.

Most egregious was the fact that emergency shelters and other core services were closed in locations throughout B.C. particularly small cities, towns and rural and remote locations that left mothers and children escaping intimate partner and family violence at risk and often homeless during the pandemic.

## Recommendations

Designate child care an essential service for families identified as at risk for economic hardship due to loss of child care.

Ensure emergency income supports are equitably inclusive and accessible to those on income and disability assistance and those who work precariously.

Create a permanent Provincial State of Emergency Vulnerable Populations Task Force with a mandate to address the needs of low-income and marginalized children, youth, and families.

Designate all intimate-partner and gender-based violence services including transition shelters and legal aid as essential services with guaranteed uninterrupted service.

Develop emergency services protocols to ensure special-needs children and their families receive a continuum of essential services.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our research and recommendations.