

*Advancing Economic Security for Women Through Basic Income:*

*Soundings in Saskatchewan*

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## ***Advancing Economic Security for Women Through Basic Income: Soundings in Saskatchewan***

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This chapter focuses on the poverty of women who use domestic violence shelters in Saskatchewan, and the possibility of providing them with a greater degree of economic security in the years ahead through the provision of Basic Income. Our discussion draws upon data contained in *Toward a Better Understanding of the Needs of Shelter Users: A Consultation with Shelter Residents and Workers* (PATHS, 2005), and upon the reflections of anti-poverty activists in Saskatchewan who were asked to consider the desirability and feasibility of Basic Income as an alternative to current income security arrangements. We use these two studies in order to present the situation of some of the most economically vulnerable women in the province, and to create a window through which to consider a very different model of economic security for women (and everyone). Finding a way to alleviate poverty must be a key component of any strategy to assist women to live independently and free from violence. We suggest that a Basic Income program could achieve the goal of raising women out of poverty so that their chances of success and safety are increased. We hope that consideration of the needs of women who are escaping violence and activists' ideas in regard to economic security will contribute to defining strategies for advancing new and more supportive models of income security in Canada.

These questions are also connected to the question of environmental sustainability. Any time we talk about solutions to poverty, we are raising questions of distribution of the earth's resources. Our social welfare policy recommendations must always take into account their impact on the

environment.

### The Situation of Women Using Shelters in Saskatchewan

Between April 1, 2003 and March 31, 2004, 1,926 women stayed in shelters in Saskatchewan. (Taylor-Butts, 2005: 6). Using data from the Women's Shelter Information System (WSIS), which is a database developed by the Department of Community Resources and Employment (now called the Department of Community Resources) in consultation with the shelters they fund, we were able to determine some of the characteristics of women in shelters in Saskatchewan from April 1, 2002 to March 31, 2003. Seventy-four per cent of women admitted to shelters in Saskatchewan were Aboriginal including 65% who identified themselves as Status Indian, 4% as Non-Status Indian and 7% as Metis. In Saskatchewan, the economic situation of Aboriginal women is particularly difficult. Using the last census data available we know that Aboriginal women's average annual income was \$10,200 compared to \$16,300 for non-Aboriginal women. Thirty-five percent of First Nations women and twenty-seven percent of Metis women in Saskatchewan had incomes less than \$3,000. Aboriginal women depend on government transfers for almost half of their income (42%) compared to 19% for non-Aboriginal women (Saskatchewan, n.d.).

There is no specific age group which predominates among shelter users. The majority of women are between 20 and 44 years of age. The average age is 32. In terms of education and employment, women using shelters reported having limited education, with 14% having achieved grade 8 standing or less, and an additional 56% having not completed grade 12. Only 14% had

participated in a post-secondary program, most of whom had not yet finished the degree, diploma or certificate they were working towards. An overwhelming majority of women (80%) were not employed. Their major source of income was government transfers as in the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan, Employment Insurance and Band allotments. Fifty-six percent of the women at the shelters reported these transfers as their income. Thirteen percent reported that their income came from sources other than government transfers or employment. Thirteen percent reported that they had no income at all.

A range of abusive experiences brought women to the shelters during this time period. Physical abuse was the most pervasive at 65%. Other types of abuse included sexual abuse at 14%, abuse of children at 13%, abuse of pets at 5%, destruction of property at 21% and psychological abuse at 7%. Reasons other than abuse for accessing shelter were lack of housing (11%), transience (1%), mental health (4%), and other unidentified reasons (10%). The proportion of women with housing as their primary issue was not uniform across all shelters. In Piwapan Women's Centre in LaRonge, for example, and Southwest Crisis Services in Swift Current, much higher levels of 'housing clients' were reported. Some communities have such a problem with lack of housing that the women's shelters must accommodate them, although many of these women had also experienced abuse. Eighty-five percent of women in the shelter had children staying with them.

What these figures made clear to us is that women using shelters in Saskatchewan are poor, have relatively little education, are often Aboriginal and have children who have likely witnessed violence. And we know that there is a shortage of affordable quality housing in the province,

particularly in the north. We have a picture of the women using shelters in Saskatchewan as facing a wide range of challenges. The data supports this view, and it is certainly the experience of shelter workers across the province.

### The Experience of Women Receiving Social Welfare in Saskatchewan

In May of 2005, the Saskatchewan Department of Community Resources and Employment implemented the final phases of their “Building Independence Program.” Key components of this initiative were the Jobs First and Transitional Employment Allowance (TEA) programs. To quote from their document *Building Independence: An Innovative Approach*, the Department describes their Jobs First Program as one

which links new social assistance applicants who are able to work with job opportunities as a first option. The Transitional Employment Allowance provides short-term benefits to people participating in the Jobs First program, as well as those making the transition to employment or some other source of income. (Saskatchewan, 2004)

These program changes in Saskatchewan involved the opening of a call centre designed as a first point of contact for people requiring social assistance. Previous to the call centre, applicants had a face-to-face interview with an income support worker. The workers at the new call centre have a choice of streaming callers into the Social Assistance Program (SAP) or the Transitional Employment Program (TEA). They have been, however, streaming most people who call into TEA, including women who were calling from a women’s shelter. The difference between being on SAP and on TEA is quite significant. TEA provides far less financial support than SAP.

While the actual allowance rates are similar (for example \$615 per month for a parent and child), TEA will not pay for utility connections, will not pay for or defer utility arrears, and pays a flat rate for utilities which does not come near to covering the actual cost. TEA will also not pay damage deposits for rental accommodation, will not pay for special diets or any other allowances for disabled people, and will not cover clothing allowances or furniture grants. People on TEA are not allowed into the Trusteeship program, to assist them with managing their monthly expenditures. There are no special allowances under TEA for children's needs or to help support children visiting non-custodial parents. There is no education expenses for children, and moving costs are only covered if the move is employment-related. Emergency benefits for people who have no resources at all are theoretically available under TEA. It appears, however, that workers either do not know about this benefit or have been instructed not to dispense it. All these critically important additional benefits provided under SAP have been lost to people on TEA. Although levels of assistance on SAP were abysmally low, the loss of SAP-related supports makes economic survival on TEA completely impossible.

When a woman is streamed into the TEA program, she cannot see an employment counselor for approximately ten days. When the caller asks what she is to do for food and shelter for ten days, the call centre worker has nothing to offer. Human service workers report that women have been approaching agencies such as the YWCA looking for food and shelter. These agencies are not equipped to provide these services free of charge and therefore must turn women away. Subsequently, some of these women have turned to prostitution or returned to abusive relationships. People on TEA also do not receive enough money to pay for utilities so that many

face a Saskatchewan winter with no heat. SaskEnergy has indicated that it will not supply gas for heat to non-paying customers even in winter months. Women on TEA who are undergoing cancer treatment or who have life threatening illnesses, high risk pregnancies or newborn babies have also been told they must find employment.

The Saskatchewan government has taken an aggressive approach to removing people from social welfare and moving them into the labour force. The Executive Director for Strategic Policy at the Department of Community Resources recently published a document entitled “Strategy for Achieving Equity and Prosperity in Saskatchewan” (August, 2006). In this document he advocates for getting “as many of the currently-marginalized population into employment as quickly as possible” (August, 2006:6). He refers to people using social welfare as a “subpopulation” or “subclass” who should be directed to entry level jobs because they will never be suitable for other types of work. He argues that

[t]he short-term challenge for most of this sub-population is to make them ready for the most attainable goal - employment at the low-skilled entry level to the economy. Jobs for pipeline welders, operating room nurses and high-crane operators are of no value at all to a population that could not reasonably hope to qualify for them, even with years of investment and preparation. (August 2006: 7)

August also ties rights of citizenship to production, stating that

[e]xpansive 1970s notions of comfortable, unconditional payments from the state to citizens have long been laid to rest in the real world of policy development, since no

society can sustain a social relationship in which the rewards of producing and not producing converge. (August 2006: 3)

He comments on the results of this rapid ejecting of people on social assistance into the workforce, pointing out that

[t]housands of parents have left welfare for work, and because the reform strategy relies on leveraged benefit from the labour market, provincial expenditures on income support have decreased. (August 2006: 9)

This single-minded focus on attachment to the labour market in low-skill and poorly paid jobs is clearly a problem for women leaving abusive relationships. The challenges which women who come to a shelter face after leaving abusive relationships often do not leave them in a position to be successful in employment. Women leaving abusive relationships often need time to recover from the abuse with some suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They are not able to meet the demands of the workforce, particularly the demands of “bad jobs” where employers typically do not provide paid sick leave or allow for flexible hours of work. Women suffering from PTSD often exit the labour market entirely since they find it impossible to perform their jobs adequately. Even if a woman is able to continue in her work, she may have to leave due to harassment at the workplace by her partner.

We also see many women staying at shelters who are struggling with addictions. There are many reasons for their addictions, with most of the women we see having a history of living in

dysfunctional or poor families or who are suffering the long-term effects of cultural genocide. Overcoming an addiction can be a lengthy process and often has a very low success rate. It is extremely difficult for people with addictions to be successful in the labour market.

Many of the women who stay at shelters are caregivers for children who have witnessed violence and are in distress from having experienced a lifestyle that may have involved neglect, poor nutrition, and abuse. As mothers attempt to make positive changes in their lives, they must help these children to heal and guide them into productive lives. The children require much energy and attention, making it difficult for their mothers to balance these child-rearing responsibilities with paid employment.

As indicated earlier, women who use shelter services typically have very little education. They have often been raised themselves in dysfunctional families and have not had the opportunity to succeed at school. Many have aspirations to go to university and to have professional careers, but the odds are against them succeeding in this regard. Probably the greatest barrier is the financial inability to return to school. To expect women with so many barriers to success to rely on student loans is placing an unreasonable financial burden on them. It is an option which most women do not consider to be viable. Instead, they are steered into “bad jobs” by short-term government programs such as TEA.

All these factors make it difficult for the women who we see at our shelters to be successful in the labour market. They are rarely if ever candidates for “good jobs.” It is an unfortunate

contradiction that the only jobs which are available are the “bad jobs.” They are the jobs which are least suited to their circumstances. Essentially we have people with a host of problems who can only find work which is low paying, part-time and temporary with poor working conditions and no benefits. They are, therefore, set up for failure in the labour market. At times there seems to be no way out of the poverty-trap. It is no wonder that we see the same women returning to our shelters over and over again.

### Links Between Economic Insecurity, Redistribution, and the Environment

Traditionally, advocates for improvements in the economic situation of women in Canada have focussed on increasing women's access to good jobs, or on raising social welfare benefit levels. These arguments typically have not involved discussion about where increased government expenditures to ensure jobs or better benefits would be found. It may be that social welfare activists have remained impartial as to whether such increased government spending should derive (via taxes and transfers) from redistribution of existing wealth, or from the creation of new wealth through economic growth.

Welfare states regimes that emerged in the post-World War Two period, such as the one here in Canada, were founded in part on the premise that economic growth would fuel increasing prosperity, and the some of this expanding wealth could be redistributed to those at the lower end of the economic continuum. In this way, those at the top experience less pressure to part with their wealth in order to help the poor.

This strategy for fighting poverty was only partly successful. During the long postwar boom of 1945 to 1975, poverty was ameliorated for some groups but certainly was not entirely eliminated in wealthy industrial countries. This ‘welfare-through-economic-growth’ approach also does not address the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves today - in fact, it helped to create this crisis. Environmentalists are telling us that we can no longer sustain an ever-expanding economy in order to ensure that those at the bottom have enough. As awareness of environmental problems increases and as ecological crises become more acute, the argument is advanced that economic security must come from the redistribution of existing wealth rather than from expanding wealth. Redistribution will mean that we can make environmental protection a priority and produce at a level and in ways that will not destroy the earth, even if that means a lower standard of living for those who are the most well-off.

#### Basic Income as an Alternative Approach to Economic Security and Environmental Sustainability

Basic Income is an alternative approach to economic security that provides a potential solution to the financial vulnerability of women, including those who seek help in women’s shelters. BI is also part of the solution to the problem of protecting the environment. To define what is meant by Basic Income (BI), we can look to the work of Philippe Van Parijs (1995, 2000, 2004), who has been the individual who has done the most to stimulate and broaden the debate on Basic Income over the last several years. He defines universal basic income (UBI) as:

an income paid by a government, at a uniform level and at regular intervals, to each adult member of society. The grant is paid, and the level is fixed, irrespective of whether the person is rich or poor, lives alone or with others, is willing to work or not. In most

versions – certainly in mine – it is granted to not only to citizens but to all permanent residents.

The UBI is called ‘basic’ because it is something on which a person can safely count, a material foundation in which a life can firmly rest. Any other income – whether in cash or in kind, from work or savings, from the market or the state – can lawfully be added to it. (Van Parijs 2004, 12-13)

Fitzpatrick’s work is also helpful in explaining the concept of BI and the debates surrounding it. He examines five different ideological perspectives on Basic Income: the radical right, welfare collectivism, socialism, feminism and ecologism. He argues that Basic Income is being considered by those from these various points and corners of the political-ideological spectrum (Fitzpatrick 1999: 42). He identifies the strengths and weaknesses of BI according to each of these perspectives. His analyses based on feminism and ecologism are most relevant for our discussion here. Feminists find Basic Income attractive because it has the potential to “enhance female independence because it would be paid to individuals rather than to households and on the basis of citizenship rather than employment” (Fitzpatrick 1999; 163). Non-waged work would be valued and women’s bargaining position would be improved. An additional benefit is that the welfare state becomes debureaucratized, which is an advantage to anyone who has had to navigate this extremely complicated system.<sup>2</sup> Some feminists also advise caution in regards to the Basic Income model (Bergmann, 2004: 116). BI could potentially provide put pressure on women to forego participation in the paid labour force, and to stay at home and do unpaid

caregiving work as mothers, wives, and homemakers, while men continue to opt for paid work.

On the other hand labour market measures that would protect women, such as pay and employment equity, flexible work arrangements, and ready access to good child care, could guard against such relegation of women to unpaid domestic labour roles if a BI scheme were in place.

Fitzpatrick says that ecologists can support Basic Income because it dampens economic growth, promotes an ethic of common ownership, and redistributes jobs rather than creating more jobs (Fitzpatrick 1999: 187). Some environmentalists are concerned about Basic Income because it does not address environmental imperatives specifically. In order to protect the environment, therefore, BI would have to be accompanied by laws and policies such as penalties on pollution, tax policies to encourage sustainability, and programs to educate the public on the need to lower consumption and preserve the environment.

If we accept the argument that a Basic Income will benefit women and the environment, the next essential question is how do we achieve such a radical transformation in the way we distribute wealth. Before exploring how to move the debate forward, it is worthwhile to have some knowledge of the previous discussions and proposals for BI and BI-like schemes in Canada.

### The Contours of the BI Debate (So Far) in Canada

In the 1930s in Alberta, the Social Credit Party of William Aberhart argued for regular cash payments made by the government to all, as a means of economic stimulus and redistribution.

This party achieved power in the province, but its promise of such a “social credit” paid to all

citizens proved difficult to implement (Fitzpatrick, 1999: 13). In the late 1970s, there was a version of guaranteed annual income (dubbed “Mincome”) that was piloted in Manitoba by the federal and provincial governments, although few results of the experiment were published, and it fell off the policy-making agenda after 1979 (Hum and Simpson, 2001). In 1985 the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada (often referred to as the Macdonald Commission) recommended that a guaranteed annual income scheme (called the Universal Income Security Program or UISP) be adopted, as a streamlined and more comprehensive alternative to much of the existing welfare state. However the amount of financial support was set at such a low level that the UISP met with strong opposition from the Canadian labour movement, among others (Mulvale, 2001: 100).

Two relatively brief and accessibly written books on Basic Income (Lerner et al, 1999; Blais, 2002) have been published in Canada. Both of these books have introduced the concept and rationales of BI, and have addressed general questions in regard to its implementation. The original publication of Blais’s book in French (with the title *Un revenu garanti for tous*) occasioned a feature article in the Québec daily newspaper *Le Soleil* (25 February 2001, p. A5) which was entitled “Une allocation universelle initiée par Ottawa, à 300\$ par mois.” A lengthy review of BI-like approaches by Lionel-Henri Groulx (2005) has also been published in French.

In early 2003, the Canadian Council on Social Development convened “A Working Conference on Strategies to Ensure Economic Security for All Canadians” in Ottawa. At this meeting Sally Lerner of the Basic Income Network “noted that a major challenge lies in how a secure economic

foundation can be created for the increasing numbers of ‘flexible’ workers demanded by employers.” The discussion also “raised many important questions regarding governments’ responsibilities in providing basic income security, as well as social services and resources, to all citizens.”<sup>3</sup> While Basic Income did not predominate as a topic at this meeting, it was among the approaches discussed. The Victoria (BC) Status of Women Action Group has been actively promoting the idea of “Guaranteed Livable Income,” with a public statement on this question (L’Hirondelle, 2004) and a website (<http://www.livableincome.org/>) that has been launched to educate and advance the debate on this model of economic security. In September 2004 feminists from across the country met in Pictou, Nova Scotia, and developed a “Feminist Statement on Guaranteed Living Income” (Lakeman et al, 2004).

#### Moving the BI Project Ahead in Saskatchewan and Beyond

To be successful in getting Basic Income on the political agenda in Saskatchewan, it will be essential to have those who advocate for economic redistribution and justice champion this cause. Innovative social welfare measures that advance economic security and social justice do not generally originate with progressive politicians or enlightened bureaucrats. Rather, such innovation is brought about by the struggles and advocacy of committed activists and engaged social movements, who work (usually over an extended period) to turn a ‘radical’ idea into mainstream thinking with broad public and political support (Piven and Cloward, 1972; Allen, 1973; Guest, 1997; Teeple, 2000). Politicians in power have to adopt the new idea, and must charge bureaucrats with framing legislation, filling in the policy details, and designing delivery mechanisms. But the essential impulse for change comes from the bottom up, not from the top

down. Social movements bring about social policy innovation that promotes equality - political elites (not to mention vested economic interests) typically stifle or oppose it.

Indeed we are seeing a shift in Saskatchewan away from some of the more punitive SAP and TEA policies discussed above. People receiving TEA are now being granted emergency money more frequently. They have the possibility of receiving money for a damage deposit on an apartment, and they can potentially receive money to purchase furniture, although this renewed generosity is still discretionary. We are also seeing fewer people being referred to the TEA program, and income support workers displaying more compassion and understanding of women's individual circumstances. These changes have been a direct result of the mobilization of the human service community which resulted in opportunities for dialogue with government members and bureaucrats. There has been some expression of interest by government to bringing people together to discuss possible innovations in social welfare delivery. It should be noted that these changes are preliminary and it remains to be seen how far government will go in implementing its expressed commitment to change. At this point, however, it would appear that the changes that have occurred have been prompted by the actions of community activists.

### Research Methodology

To assist in the process of mobilizing activists in Saskatchewan, Focus Groups were convened to discuss the desirability and feasibility of Basic Income in three different cities in Saskatchewan in 2005.<sup>4</sup> The participants in these groups were people with direct personal experience of living

in poverty, and people who worked as anti-poverty activists in community-based organizations. A total of 32 individuals participated in the Focus Groups. This number was exactly evenly divided between people with personal experience of poverty and people working in community organizations addressing poverty.<sup>5</sup> The gender breakdown was 19 women and 13 men. At least five participants had a disabling condition, and at least three participants were of Aboriginal ancestry.

The size and selective composition of these Focus Groups do not permit us to generalize the findings from the discussions across broad sections of the Saskatchewan population, let alone the Canadian public. Nonetheless, the themes that emerged from the Focus Groups were articulately and often passionately expressed by people who are living on the ‘front-line’ of anti-poverty struggles. The deliberations of these Focus Groups are illuminating in regard to framing and engaging in a broader debate on the merits and possible implementation of Basic Income in Canada.

### Focus Group Findings

The Focus Group findings are organized into seven categories of themes below.

#### **1. The Unacceptability of the Status Quo in Economic Security and Social Welfare Programs**

A strong, and sometimes predominant theme in the Focus Groups was that it is both cruel and counterproductive for government to attempt to force social assistance recipients into

employment when they are trying to cope with living in poverty and with family responsibilities (such as care of young children), and when they are also confronting personal challenges such as disability, mental illness or addiction. Focus groups participants viewed schemes to force social assistance recipients into the labour market as emotionally abusive, personally stigmatizing, and *not* successful in helping the presumed beneficiaries obtain secure, steady, decently paid jobs. Workfare-like schemes were also seen as an impediment to individuals wanting to further their education and pursue training programs that would enable them to obtain ‘good’ jobs.

Aside from such problems with social assistance and workfare-like measures, the Focus Group participants described with passion and in detail the overall lack of security actually provided across the current income maintenance system in Canada. Twenty years of cuts to and deterioration of our social safety net - including unemployment insurance, and financial support for post-secondary education and training – have left people economically vulnerable and have trapped them in poor jobs. Off-loading of program responsibilities from the federal to the provincial to the local level of government has made social programs weaker, and has led to a much higher reliance on ‘charitable’ measures in local communities. It was argued that community-based organizations do not have the fiscal capacity or the organizational resources to design and deliver good programs for economic security.

At the program delivery level, Focus Group participants noted that income security workers have had much less discretion in recent years to take individual circumstances into account, and to

tailor programs to a particular client. Focus Group members also remarked that it requires “hard work” to negotiate the income support system as a poor person, leaving little time or energy to invest in programs that are designed to help you, or to tend to your other responsibilities in life.

Another strongly emphasized point made in the Focus Groups was the fact that social assistance rates are very inadequate, and are set at such a low level that they fall far short of meeting basic needs and permitting a life of dignity and choices. Also, it was stated that social welfare cuts are having particularly harsh effects on certain segments of the population such as single parents, women leaving abusive partners, persons with disabilities, and subordinated racialized groups such as Aboriginal peoples. Poverty traps built into social assistance programs very often impede people from entering the labour force when they desire to do so. Finally, the focus of newer programs on children (such as the National Child Benefit) obscures the fact that poor children live in poor families. Addressing child poverty in isolation can cause us to ignore the broader economic and social roots of poverty that impact on parents and other adult caregivers of children, and can reinforce the idea that children ‘deserve’ our help while their parents are ‘undeserving’ and are in poverty due to their own fault.

## **2. Philosophical and Political Rationales for Basic Income**

The Focus Groups very strongly emphasized the continuing relevance and attraction of the principle of *universality* in the design and delivery of social programs. They cited this principle in their discussion of a range of programs – including early learning and child care, health care,

and income support measures. Participants pointed to the advantages of universal entitlements in social programs, including the lack of stigma for beneficiaries, the elimination of the red-tape and expense of setting and policing ‘cut-off’ lines for eligibility, and the breaking down of popular misconceptions about the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor.

The theme of BI as an ideological counterweight to neo-liberal and related anti-welfare discourse was raised in one in the Focus Groups, and was advanced in very articulate and sometimes passionate ways. It was argued that poverty, actual or threatened unemployment, and other manifestations of economic insecurity serve ‘positive’ functions in the global, profit-oriented economy. They are means for economic elites to hold wages down, impose “disciplinary measures” on working people and the poor, and dampen expectations for economic justice or redistribution. BI would tip the balance of economic power somewhat more towards the poor and economically marginalized. BI was also seen as a possible antidote to the rise of ‘charity’ as the preferred means of ‘helping’ the poor, because BI is based on the principle that social entitlements should be funded through public purse. It was stated in Focus Group discussions that BI proposes the “modest” goal of adequate standards of living for all, and holds the potential to realize the “big dream” of leveling economic inequalities in fundamental ways. In this sense, BI confronts the pro-business view that “there is no alternative” to market-driven neo-liberalism, and presents instead a vision of the “common good” and a new and more just “social contract.”

### **3. Basic Income and the Re-Definition and Re-Configuration of Work**

All three of the Focus Group argued for the need for an expanded, multi-faceted, and more inclusive definition of “work.” There was strong agreement that our understanding of work must include not just what we do for wages or a salary in the paid labour force, but also the unpaid work that people do at home caring for children and performing domestic labour. The question arose as to why we are only considered to be of value as human beings when we are “producing” in the formal, economic sense. It was also observed that there is no recognition of the “personal work” in which many people are engaged (e.g. overcoming personal or social problems, or enhancing one’s life skills and individual resources). Such efforts can increase one’s chances for success, fulfillment and quality of life in paid employment, in the community and in family life. One participant stressed that quality of life, and having dignity and meaning in one’s life, are more important than just “having a job.”

Focus Group members generally rejected the argument that a Basic Income would result in lazy and unproductive lifestyles. In general, Focus Group participants argued that such ‘free-riders’ on Basic Income would eventually get bored and feel unfulfilled in their lives. It was felt that most people are motivated to be active and self-reliant. Freedom from compulsory labour market participation would enable people to spend more time with their children, to help friends and neighbours, and to do volunteer work. It was noted that the current lack of recognition for volunteerism is peculiar, given that the demand for volunteers has increased as a result of social program cuts and fewer paid staff in human services. The case was made in the Focus Groups that there *is* an obligation upon people to contribute to the community in meaningful ways, whether it be through paid employment or unpaid or volunteer work. While people generally

want to take advantage of labour market and educational opportunities, they resent being *compelled* to go to work or school.

Focus Group participants very strongly emphasized the lack of economic security available in today's paid labour force. On this basis, they seemed willing to at least entertain the potential of Basic Income to counteract such vulnerability. A host of problems in the labour market were cited, including the increasing proportion of part-time, short-term, low-skilled and poorly paid jobs, and the downward pressure on wages due to globalization. The case was made for increasing the quantity of well paid and secure jobs. Focus Group participants also saw the need for labour market reforms that would enhance economic security, including:

- a livable minimum wage (perhaps coupled with a 'maximum' wage to curb excessively high incomes)
- increasing the labour force through more readily available and effective training programs, as a partial alternative to bringing in more immigrants to fill vacant jobs
- redistribution of work through a shortened work week, with no loss in income for workers
- re-structuring workplaces to make them more democratic and humane

The question was raised in the Focus Groups as to whether Basic Income and/or labour market reforms would make impending labour shortages in Saskatchewan worse. Focus Group participants expressed some optimism that if appropriate connections are made between economic and social policy, then economic security could be achieved in Saskatchewan through a combination of good jobs, humane conditions of paid work, and adequate and innovative income support programs that provide for people outside the labour market.

#### **4. Affordability of Basic Income (And Potential Targeting)**

Questions were raised in Focus Groups concerning the cost of BI, and whether or not it would be an affordable government expenditure. One participant argued that BI would in fact not be affordable at the provincial level – only *potentially* at the federal level. Discussion emerged that BI might be both more affordable and more just in its design if it were targeted to those living at lower income levels. One suggestion in this regard was that BI could be introduced as a supplement to social assistance, with the aim of bringing recipients up to an income level of approximately \$30,000 per year. A BI targeted in this way to low-income adults would complement the attention paid in recent years to ameliorating the poverty of children. While the introduction of the National Child Benefit has been a good step, it was also noted that poor children live in poor families, and that their parents (and other adults) should not be neglected in our determination of spending priorities to alleviate poverty. Focus Groups participants felt that public spending priorities should not be focused only on children.

There was some concern expressed that BI could be an incentive to be lazy for those who do not want to work, and in this sense a potential waste of money. The question was also raised about whether the rich should receive a BI benefit, or whether it should at least be “clawed back” from the wealthy in a *post hoc* fashion through the tax system.

#### **5. BI Delivery and its Possible Articulation with Other Social Programs**

There was a great deal of discussion in the Focus Groups about how a potential BI scheme might fit in with other social programs at the provincial and federal levels. A general caveat was raised – there was a worry expressed that the introduction of a BI might play into the further dismantling of the welfare state. A cautious approach would need to be taken in any future attempt to implement BI, to ensure that it would be paid out at a level that would ensure a modicum of economic security, and that it would not be used as an excuse to do away with existing programs that pay better benefits.

Recent new initiatives in social programs have been aimed at children, especially the National Child Benefit, and the federal-provincial agreements on early learning and child care (negotiated by the Liberal federal government prior to its defeat in the 2006 general election). Questions were raised in regard to if and how any future BI initiative (given that most versions of BI approach are paid to adults and not to children) would relate to and interact with child-specific benefits.

Questions were also raised about whether BI should *replace* or *augment* existing programs. Great emphasis was placed on the importance of indexing benefit levels of even a partial BI scheme to the cost of living, given the fact that the government of Saskatchewan has failed to raise social assistance rates in any appreciable way since the early 1990s, and that this has led to a dramatic decline in the real level of benefits. Also, the question was raised of how to balance ‘in cash’ and ‘in kind’ benefits in designing a total economic security package. The concern was expressed that the introduction of a BI scheme might increase the tendency to ‘marketize’ goods and services currently provided in the public sector (e.g. health care, home care for the disabled

and elderly, child care, social housing, prescription drugs, and the municipal water supply). Focus Group participants expressed the concern that privatization of public goods would undermine rather than augment economic justice.

The point was made in the Focus Groups that considerable resources and personnel are currently devoted to ‘policing’ economic support programs. This diverts money away from the people who need economic support. A universal BI scheme is more efficient than existing means-tested programs, in this sense. Conversely, it was stressed that even with a BI in place, there will be a continuing need for social supports and human service programs to help people deal with issues in their lives such as substance abuse problems, parenting challenges, and disability. It was noted in this regard that a ‘no strings attached’ version of BI could potentially worsen problems for certain individuals who are coping with problems such as addiction, parenting difficulties, and poor budgeting skills (e.g. spending the money received in a BI cheque on beer and cigarettes instead of on groceries for the kids).

## **6. The Impact of Basic Income on Specific Populations**

It was stressed in the Focus Groups that BI could especially benefit two groups in the population who experience a high degree of economic insecurity – *women* and *people with disabilities*.

Mothers caring for young children, and women who are experiencing violence or abuse from their partner and who wish to leave the relationship, could be greatly assisted by BI. Particular emphasis was placed in the Focus Groups on how female single mothers living in poverty are

being put under great pressure to take (typically ‘bad’) jobs, regardless of their circumstances and their children’s needs. This ‘labour-market-attachment-at-all-costs’ policy of the Saskatchewan government places single mothers and their children under great stress, and is unlikely to increase either the mother’s opportunities or the children’s well-being. Such stress in fact may worsen problems and lead to an even higher degree of social exclusion. An adequate and dependable BI program would obviously take pressure off a single mother to accept a job that would jeopardize her child’s or her own best interests.

Focus Group members challenged by disabilities (including those that are intellectual, physical, and psychiatric in nature), and their advocates who also participated, spoke with great commitment about the need for better means of economic support *and* labour market insertion. Flexible employment arrangements, and moving beyond the “duty to accommodate” to the “desire to include” were cited as important goals in regard to labour market access for persons with disabilities. Access to a BI would presumably provide a basis for flexible work for a disabled person seeking a job, and would indirectly benefit the employers seeking to expand their workforce and to take advantage of the skills and availability of persons previously shut out of the labour market.

## **7. Questions of Political Strategy in Regard to BI Implementation**

The Focus Groups had very interesting and thoughtful things to say about questions to do with political mobilization to implement BI – such as how can public support be built, how politicians

can be brought on board, and how can policy and legislative outcomes can be achieved on the long road towards some kind of BI program. It was observed that the conceptual cousin of BI, Guaranteed Annual Income, has been discussed and promoted in past decades by faith communities such as the United Church of Canada, by civil rights and poor people's movements in United States, and by the Macdonald Royal Commission in the 1980s. At the same time, the concept of BI is an unfamiliar one to Canadians in general. The importance of educating both the general public and young people in the school system was stressed, if we are to reach a broader and deeper understanding of BI and other social entitlements. It was also noted that newer Canadians may feel a somewhat weakened commitment to existing social programs, and may in fact be denied access to them.

Politicians were blamed for a shameful lack of courage about doing even the immediately necessary things, such as increasing social assistance rates that are very much below the poverty line. It was observed that governments frequently have to be embarrassed before they act. There is currently a noticeable lack of political will to work towards a BI policy. If politicians and government officials agree to engage in consultations on the potential for BI, such consultation must be sincere and genuine. The point was made in the Focus Groups that BI is a concept that holds potential appeal across the political spectrum. The left may see it as a means for redistribution of wealth and as a social justice measure. The right may see it as a way of rationalizing and streamlining our current labyrinth of multiple, confusing, and expensive-to-administer income support programs. On the other hand, some Focus Group participants made the point that BI was unlikely to be achieved without a certain level of "class consciousness" and

a willingness to confront corporate complicity in perpetuating poverty. It was also suggested that enshrined legal guarantees, such as the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* at the international level, and Section 7 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* at the national level, could help us move in the direction of an universal and adequate Basic Income for everyong in Canada.

Finally, it was noted that work is currently being done at the National Anti-Poverty Organization to draw together various components of economic security (existing, improved, or new programs) into a coherent and comprehensive ‘package.’ In this sense, a concerted campaign at the national level for a ‘patchwork quilt’ BI may already be underway, and it may be unnecessary or even counter-productive to pursue BI as new idea that requires independent campaigning.

### Analysis of the Findings

The opinions of community activists in Saskatchewan can inform supporters of Basic Income as to what needs to be done to move us closer to having a BI model adopted by government. The challenges inherent in promoting a radically different approach to income security can be summarized into a number of key areas which can guide BI proponents in developing a strategic plan. We have learned that there are many aspects of BI that anti-poverty activists and low income people find positive. They like the idea of the universality of the model. They see Basic Income as providing those who are not able to work with a livable income where people are not stigmatized and not policed by the state. They see it as an improvement to a current system that

is clearly inadequate. A more inclusive definition of work is also attractive. We must know what the appealing features of Basic Income are if we are to build a political support base in order to move forward towards implementation.

There were also reservations expressed and these can inform us about potential weaknesses of the model, or areas that will need to be addressed before community activists, the general public and politicians can consider implementation. First, it is clear that there will have to be an education campaign designed to acquaint the public with the principles and merits of BI.

Although, there have been tentative attempts to implement programs with some similarity to Basic Income in Canada, it is a new concept to many people including social welfare activists. If we are to convince others of the merits of this model, people must come to understand its principles and how it might be seen to be attractive no matter where they might sit on the political spectrum. Social welfare advocates are unlikely to support a system that they do not understand, and the same is certainly true of the general public.

Second, it will be important to do academic research on costing out a Basic Income program. Where the money would come from is one commonly asked question about Basic Income. This question was articulated by the Focus Group participants in Saskatchewan. We are at the point of having to make the concept more concrete in order to illustrate that BI is a real financial possibility. Answering important questions as to cost will help people to begin to accept some radically different methods of wealth redistribution. Research may have to include examining

partial models of Basic Income that could be the forerunners of a universal guaranteed livable income for all. This incremental approach is advocated by Van Parijs (2004: 13) who suggests that “the easiest and safest way forward” towards a universal basic income is “enacting a UBI first at a level below subsistence,” but then “increasing it over time” until it reaches “the highest sustainable” level.

Third, politicians will need to be lobbied and educated about Basic Income. The precursor to this strategy is that social welfare activists and the general public understand the system. These groups will then put pressure on politicians to consider the model. This lobbying can be accompanied by the required academic research on definitions, possible models, and cost. When promoting Basic Income with politicians it will be important to keep in mind their political ideology. As was mentioned earlier, BI can be attractive to people on the right and the left, which in some ways makes the lobbying less challenging. A political party will not necessarily feel compelled to reject the idea because it also has been proposed by their opponents.

One of the most difficult ideological struggles that has characterized the BI debate is the ‘free rider’ issue. As a fourth strategy, advocates of Basic Income will have to be able to respond to the pervasive belief that people have an obligation to contribute to society in order to receive money. Social welfare activists believe that people want to work, and will do so if they are able; however, even they express the idea that if people are able to work they should be making a contribution in return for receiving a Basic Income. The general population will most likely

experience even more difficulties in accepting unconditionality because they often do not appreciate the barriers to employment faced by many people. Environmentalists may not have as much of a problem with the ‘free rider’ issue in that they see having less people producing as desirable; however, even this premise could be questioned. We might want to ask whether *not* contributing at all to society is a mentally healthy choice. Do we believe that people must contribute through their paid or unpaid work in order to be eligible to receive a Basic Income? This is a question with which BI promoters must come to terms. Perhaps there is a moral case to be made for insisting that people have to participate. Then we would need to ask if the financial costs of policing eligibility for BI would be acceptable. Also, would there be potential human rights violations in having the state engage in this sort of bureaucratic surveillance of our personal lives? This dilemma will be resolved only through well-informed debate and consideration of practical methods of BI implementation.

Finally, the Focus Group participants did not immediately see how the BI model would be beneficial to the environment. They saw it only as having the potential to improve the well-being of poor and disadvantaged people. They also did not emphasize the global implications of Basic Income - that it could be a model which, if adopted internationally, could improve the circumstances of the world’s poorest people. Seeing Basic Income as a means of redistributing resources beyond the local could have implications for how wealth is shared between rich and poor countries. If we are to advocate for an ecological rationale for Basic Income, we will have to understand that the earth’s resources must be more equitably distributed which will involve a move to a less consumerist society. People must come to understand that the environmental

advantage of BI results from those in affluent countries producing and consuming less.

Advocates of BI must make this principle part of their education process. To do this they will need to align with environmental organizations who in turn must be challenged to connect their issues to the question of the fair distribution of wealth. A Basic Income program which works only to improve the well-being of the less fortunate in rich countries will not contribute to improving the situation of the poor in other countries or to ensuring an end to environmental degradation.

### Conclusion

We can say that Basic Income would advance the economic security of women who have experienced violence. For women who use shelters in Saskatchewan, a Basic Income would allow them to be able to recover from abuse. They would have the financial resources to allow them to heal, to care for their children, to further their education or to develop other essential skills and supports. They would have the option of entering the workforce gradually. A Basic Income would provide women with choices that they do not currently have. Recently, in Saskatchewan, we have seen women turn to prostitution and return to abusive partners when their access to social assistance benefits was denied. If they had been entitled to a livable income which was not dependent on the judgement of a worker over the telephone, or on the value judgements of the politicians and bureaucrats of the day, they would have been able to take measures to improve their circumstances.

A universal BI would also provide economic security for women and men generally, and would enable us to protect the environment and create an economically just and sustainable society. As a next step in Saskatchewan, it will be necessary to press for a discussion of innovative models of economic security on province-wide basis with legislators and government officials, anti-poverty and environmental activists, academics, and progressively minded members of the business community. This discussion will serve an educational purpose in that the participants will learn more about the concept of Basic Income. Through communication with a broad range of citizens and decision makers, we can also design creative approaches which will ensure economic security for all people in Saskatchewan, particularly for women. At the same time we will be making certain that our children and grandchildren have a healthy environment and sustainable world in which to live.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Savarese and Morton (2005) describe in detail the complexity of the income support system in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.ccsd.ca/events/2003/conf\\_es.htm](http://www.ccsd.ca/events/2003/conf_es.htm)

<sup>4</sup> These Focus Groups were conducted by Jim Mulvale, who has assisted in two of the meetings by Kris Naclia, a graduate student. Funding to conduct the Focus Groups was provided by a grant from the President’s/SSHRC Fund at the University of Regina.

<sup>5</sup> One Focus Group participant did experience poverty earlier in life, but went on to employment as an anti-poverty advocate. In the numerical breakdown here, this person is counted in the former category but not the latter.