



**Brief to the Standing Committee on Social Policy**  
**Regarding Bill 152:**  
*The Poverty Reduction Act, 2009*

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## **Introduction**

On behalf of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH), we would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to submit this brief to you regarding *Bill 152, the Poverty Reduction Act* and in particular, to comment on its importance to women who experience violence.

OAITH is a province-wide association primarily of first stage emergency shelters for women who experience violence, and their children. The Association has been working to end violence against women for over 30 years and is well-placed to speak to the issue of poverty reduction as it relates to women and children in Ontario.

Poverty is enmeshed with violence against women in an insidious and destructive partnership that has forced women across Ontario to choose between poverty and violence. More specifically, since the gutting of social programs and social assistance rates in Ontario since 1995/96 by the 'Mike Harris' government women have experienced serious barriers to freedom from violence as a result of poverty, as well as lack of affordable housing, child care, legal aid and a host of other supports that depend on economic security.

Since that time, women have often expressed the desperation of facing the violence of abusers at home and the violence of poverty at separation.

## **The Issue**

Poverty and lack of low-income housing are the top two challenges for women and children leaving abusive relationships in Ontario women's shelters.

Our own research with women and shelters across Ontario shows that women who leave abusive situations continue to face impossible choices between violence and hunger, between rent and food, between their health and the well-being of their children. Poverty affects their decisions to remain with or return to abusive partners. It jeopardizes their ability to find safe, adequate housing. It puts them in "no win" situations, for example, between the scrutiny of the child protection system and the oversight of the social assistance system.

Women using shelters have reported both physical and psychological damage created by poverty—from the lack of food and shelter to the stigmatization of low-income people, especially of social assistance recipients as abusers of honest people who "pay their taxes and obey the law," as they were commonly called in the mid-90s.

The majority of social assistance recipients are women and children, and many of them have been forced on to assistance because of violence. They are "victims" of abuse, yet women have reported feeling like "criminals" and "garbage" within the social assistance system. This is no way to respond to women and children who

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escape violence in the hope that their community will support them to live free of abuse or, indeed, in some cases to live at all.

Women leaving abusive situations often dream of education, training, good jobs in order to rebuild their lives after escaping violence. But many find that these options are not available to them. Without money, they live on the margins, engaged in a time-consuming, exhausting and debilitating struggle to survive economically, psychologically and sometimes, even physically.

Even when women are not forced on to social assistance, they often end up in poor-paying, part-time or contract jobs that exploit them and offer no relief from poverty. This is particularly true for First Nations, Métis and Inuit women, immigrant and refugee women, and women of colour across Ontario. Women with disabilities often cannot find any form of employment and when they do, join the ranks of poorly paid workers. These communities of women will earn much less than women in the general population and in some cases, less than half. They will also earn less than their male counterparts and a lot less than men in the general population.

The resilience and courage women express in taking control of their lives and leaving abusive situations has not been rewarded with the level of support they deserve to stay safe and live free lives in Ontario.

### ***The Poverty Reduction Act, 2009***

We would like to congratulate the Government of Ontario for making action on poverty reduction a priority for the Province. Framing poverty reduction within legislation is an important step towards achieving a poverty free Ontario. The *Poverty Reduction Act* acknowledges that poverty is not inescapable or and that government can and should create policy to reduce poverty.

The principles of the *Act* are significant: the elimination of barriers, full participation in the community, recognition of the differential impacts of poverty, support for families, respect, involvement of those affected by poverty and a commitment to work with them and with community stakeholders.

It is positive that government acknowledges the need for specific targets for poverty reduction, the need for community consultation and the responsibility to review, evaluate and report on progress towards reducing poverty as time passes. It is positive that government sees the need to regularly upgrade and renew the commitment to new targets for poverty reduction.

We acknowledge this proposed legislation as a strong statement about government responsibility for social development and change and a commitment to include all citizens equally in the life of their communities.

As advocates working with women who experience the worst kinds of violence, including murder, and whose lives are made more vulnerable as a result of poverty

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and marginalization across Ontario, we want to be assured that this will be a law that works for them and all Ontario women. We believe it is critical, therefore, that the legislation passed is concrete, effective and strong and that it cannot be redefined or misinterpreted in future years.

If this legislation is not to become a missed opportunity for real change, there are a number of important ways that it must be strengthened to reflect the purpose and principles outlined in Sections 1 and 2 of the *Act*.

### **Strengthening the Foundation**

Although we note that a number of marginalized communities are mentioned in recognizing the differential impacts of poverty in Section 2(2)3, it is troubling that women as a whole are not included as a disadvantaged group.

We acknowledge the need to support mothers as women who experience serious disadvantage, and in particular single mothers who face sometimes desperate levels of poverty with little support or respect. Specifying *only* single mothers for support within this legislation, however, is utterly unacceptable and must be corrected before the *Act* is passed.

Poverty in Ontario, as in Canada and the world, is gendered. The economic inequality of women—not only of women who are single mothers— is well-known both in Ontario and in the country as a whole. Indeed, the disproportionate levels of poverty between women and men, and among women themselves, has been researched and documented repeatedly. We are, therefore, mystified to see the feminization of poverty virtually ignored in this legislation. The *Act*, as it is written, is not inclusive of women.

Within its gendered context, women's poverty is also constructed on marginalization of First Nations, Métis and Inuit women, racialized women, immigrant and refugee women, women with disabilities and low-income women, among others. The intersecting of any form of marginalization with any other form increases the impact of inequity and the vulnerability of women to both poverty and violence. The increased impacts of these intersections has also not been outlined or addressed in this legislation and this must also be corrected if the law is to work for women. For the principles of "eliminating barriers" in this *Act* is to be realized, the intersectional nature of economic inequality in Ontario must be recognized.

We appreciate the wish of the government to respond to the needs of children in Ontario. While child poverty may look like the "place to start" in the work to reduce poverty, it is unwise to frame poverty primarily as a children's issue. Children are poor because their parents—largely their mothers—are poor. Future governments using this legislation must be guided by a commitment to address the roots of child poverty as outlined above, so that they do not become preoccupied on short-term initiatives or superficial responses to what are, in fact, issues of fundamental human rights.

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Between women and men, and among women, economic inequality has created entrenched disadvantage for women that must be addressed as a foundational plank in any strategy to reduce, and hopefully to eradicate, poverty in Ontario.

***Recommendation 1:*** That with respect to providing an equity framework for the legislation, the preamble of the *Poverty Reduction Act* specifically speak to the social, economic and political inequality women face in Ontario, the poverty that results from this imbalance and the increased impacts and vulnerability to violence and poverty of women who experience intersecting inequality arising from systemic racism, colonialism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of discrimination and inequity.

***Recommendation 2:*** That Section 2(2)3 be amended to include the word “women”.

### **Target Setting**

We are pleased to see the government legislate the setting of targets for poverty reduction and acknowledge in the preamble one target and timeline for action.

In Section 2(3)1, it is encouraging to see that any poverty reduction strategy created under this *Act* must include a poverty reduction target. This section of the *Act* should be strengthened by providing for guidance a *minimum* target (e.g. 25%) for the current and each subsequent strategy, rather than leaving to fate and political will the decision to choose a target without parameters. In addition, the choosing of a specific *minimum* timeline should also be included as a requirement linked with the poverty reduction target (e.g. within the next 5 year review period).

The setting of minimum targets and timelines for poverty reduction targets will guide future poverty reduction planners with regard to making meaningful progressive steps towards the goal.

***Recommendation 3:*** That Section 2(3)1, Section 3 and Section 7(a) of the legislation be amended in to include a *minimum* poverty reduction target and timeline.

### **Building an Effective Strategy**

Section 1 of the *Act* outlines the purpose of the legislation to “establish mechanisms to support a sustained long-term reduction of poverty in Ontario.” We agree that mechanisms must be developed, but it is also important to have comprehensive mechanisms that will be clear in future years to all governments and systems directed by this legislation.

While it is fine to craft law that provides a measure of flexibility, it is also important not to be so broad as to weaken the legislation in the future. It is necessary for mechanisms to be thorough, unambiguous and transparent so that they reflect

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support for action that corresponds to the overall needs of those affected by poverty.

The mechanisms in this *Act* should be enhanced with more specific targets and areas for government initiatives, as well as listed indicators by which government will evaluate its strategy.

In the same way that the government has outlined a list of principles for the *Act*, it must also provide some guidance for those broad areas of action and initiatives where legislators can most effectively address poverty, based on knowledge of lived reality for low-income Ontarians, social and economic policy research, human rights and equality law and so on.

Some areas for initiatives that should be listed within the legislation include provision of affordable, publicly funded child care, pay and employment equity, initiatives to increase social assistance rates to reflect the cost of basic needs, enhancement of the social safety net to assist low-income individuals, education and training, housing supports, access to decent jobs and wages, programs to eliminate barriers based on discrimination and protections from exploitation, harassment and unsafe working conditions, to name some.

By including these areas, among others, within the legislation government establishes a more concrete and transparent, as well as defined direction for action and improvement. Progress and outcomes in these areas can effectively determine where the strategy is succeeding, as well as where new initiatives are needed to move forward. They should be clearly outlined within the legislation and where applicable, minimum targets for improvement should also be named as standards for determining positive progress.

***Recommendation 4:*** That Section 2(3) of the legislation be amended to list the above areas and others that are known to improve economic stability and equality, for initiatives as outlined above.

***Recommendation 5:*** That in addition, Section 2(3) of the legislation be amended to require in each subsequent poverty reduction strategy, where applicable, *minimum* targets for program success over each five-year review period. For example: minimum number of affordable housing units to be provided, minimum percentage of increase in assistance rates, minimum number of new child care spaces, and so on.

### **Maintaining a Successful, Accountable Strategy**

The inclusion in the legislation of regular reporting and a five-year review process are both positive aspects of the *Act*. We agree that periodic evaluation and review of any action strategy is important, particularly with so complex and tenacious an issue as poverty. We also support ongoing consultation with those affected by poverty and with communities working with them. We agree that the results of reviews, evaluations and consultations should be a matter of public reporting.

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We believe there are ways to improve the *Act* in this regard, however. The *Act* provides for government to review and evaluate measures taken to reduce poverty and to report of these findings on an annual basis.

A more transparent and objective review and evaluation is needed, one that is independent, requires the involvement of those affected by poverty and community groups working with them (as indicated in the opening principles of the *Act*), and is presented for debate to the Legislative Assembly as a whole, as well as to the public.

***Recommendation 6:*** That Section 6 of the legislation be amended to provide for a transparent, independent review and evaluation of each poverty reduction strategy.

***Recommendation 7:*** That any annual or five-year reports or evaluations of the poverty reduction strategy be provided to the Legislative Assembly for full discussion, in addition to being made available to the Ontario public, in both English and French, as well as in alternate formats.

### **Financing the Strategy**

As encouraged as we may be to have a government recognize the need to legislate action on poverty reduction, we also know that economic forces can derail many well-intentioned plans. As advocates often facing struggles to compete for funding dollars, we know that marginalized people—especially those who experience poverty—are not often at the top of the list for funding priorities.

We would like to see this legislation ensure that funding will be designated to poverty reduction, regardless of other economic pressures or priorities in the future, so that low-income Ontarians are not left behind and can truly participate in the life of their communities as outlined in the principles of the *Act*.

***Recommendation 8:*** That the legislation be amended to include a new section allocating a *minimum* percentage of each provincial budget to the poverty reduction strategy on an ongoing basis.

### **The Vision**

As an advocacy network that consults on an ongoing basis with women who experience serious levels of poverty, violence and inequality in many forms, we urge this government to look beyond a vision of poverty reduction to a poverty-free Ontario. Ontario is still a rich province in a rich country. Poverty can be eliminated for every citizen of Ontario.

It is not necessary for us to find acceptable *any* level of poverty. We suggest a more ambitious goal for Ontario—not to see poverty diminish, but to see it disappear.

***Recommendation 9:*** That the legislation be amended to change the wording from “poverty reduction” to “poverty elimination”.

## **The Last Word**

This submission has not provided an exhaustive examination of poverty in Ontario. We are sure that you will receive a lot of research information from many other sources.

But we believe that to end poverty we must start with women. And we worry that you may not receive *enough* information about the need to examine women’s poverty in Ontario, as distinct from the poverty of men, both in its form and impact. To provide some balance of information, therefore, we would like to particularly support and reference for your attention work done by the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC) and the Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (WACT).

OAITH, along with many other women’s networks, community groups, and individuals, was part of a province-wide project leading up to the release of the current Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario

This project, entitled Take Action, brought together the voices and experiences of women who had experienced violence against women and poverty in all its terrible variety. In its report, *No Cherries Grow on Our Trees*, the project outlined the material conditions of low-income women’s lives in this province and, in consultation with women across Ontario, formulated recommendations and solutions for eradicating women’s poverty specifically in preparation for the provincial poverty reduction strategy work.

No poverty reduction strategy or legislation that seeks to have validity or inclusivity will ignore the women of Ontario or the voices they have raised in the Take Action process. We urge you, therefore, to examine not only our brief recommendations for improvement to this piece of legislation, but also the recommendations of the *No Cherries Grow on Our Trees* report.

You can access the report online at:

<http://www.metrac.org/programs/info/take.action.report.dec08.pdf>



## **Recommendations**

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