

Executive Summary

The Momentum: Reducing Barriers to Women's Economic Security Project was a response by the Portage Community Revitalization Corporation (PCRC) to a Call for Proposals issued by the Status of Women Canada for "Women Living in Rural and Remote Communities and Small Urban Centers." The three year project is broken into two phases: creating a community plan and implementing one priority area of the plan. This report shares the research findings of phase one: gender based research on the barriers to economic security for women between the ages 18-35 in Portage la Prairie and area.

This report presents findings on:

1. What economic security looks and feels like for women in Portage la Prairie and area
2. What is currently working for women to achieve economic security
3. What barriers women face when trying to achieve economic security
4. Recommendations to reduce the barriers women face

This report will form the basis for a community plan, to be created together with women and key stakeholders to ensure ongoing action. The next phase of the project will focus on implementing one priority area of the community plan. This priority area will be identified during a community meeting to be held in June 2013.

I. Methodology: Hearing from the voices in our community

A primary goal of our research phase was to empower women to share their stories, successes and challenges as they worked toward economic security and prosperity for themselves and their families. An asset based approach was used to keep the project focused on what was working well in our community and how to remove barriers to these assets, as opposed to focusing primarily on what was not working.

The following methods were used to gather data for this report:

- Review of existing local and national research and literature
- Focus groups with women between the ages of 18 and 35 who are facing economic insecurity
- Comparison focus groups with men between the ages of 18 and 35 who are facing economic insecurity
- Key informant interviews with representation from a large cross-section of professionals, stakeholders, and partners in the community.

In total, 47 women, 11 men and 22 key informants shared their stories and expertise through the research. Key informants included staff, management, and leaders from the areas of education, housing, employment, justice, health care, and various levels of government. In total 47 women between the ages of 19 and 35 participated in eight focus groups. They represented a variety of women in our community:

- Three-quarters of the women had children, ranging from 1 to 6 children, with an average of two children.
- 56% of participants self-identified as Aboriginal, 34% were Caucasian, and 1% represented other visible minorities.
- Six participants indicated they had a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability.
- Almost half (47%) had not completed high school, while 27% had started or completed some form of post-secondary education.
- 43% of participants were stay at home moms and 34% were employed casual, part-time or full-time. Six participants (13%) were actively looking for work and 9 participants (19%) were students.

II. What does economic security look and feel like for women

Women in Portage are not satisfied or comfortable living paycheck to paycheck. Participants expressed a desire to not only pay their bills but have money left over at the end of the month. To them being economically secure would mean no longer being faced with the task of juggling financial priorities to provide the necessities on a daily basis.

“Economic security is being able to buy all the things on my grocery list, without having to choose between essentials”

Many participants said they felt guilty when spending money, and often went without so their children could eat or have proper winter clothing. A common occurrence they shared was the difficult task of choosing between need and need, for example food versus rent. Many wished for the challenge of having to choose between need and want.

Collectively women painted a picture of what their lives would look like if they achieved financial security:

- Living in safe and affordable housing, ideally owning their home
- Reliable transportation, including their own driver’s license
- Reliable, qualified and affordable childcare
- A stable, good paying job
- Having a good education to open up opportunities
- Having time for themselves to do things they enjoy like exercise, read and rest
- Opportunities and activities for their children
- The ability to make the choice between staying home with their children or working

III. What is Working?

Women in Portage la Prairie are resilient and have found ways to cope with the stress and hardships of economic insecurity. Whether they are reaching out to friends and family for emotional support, seeking advice from a counselor or resource center, taking money management courses, or upgrading their skills and education; women in this community are working hard to create better lives for themselves and their families.

“My parents keep me afloat. They pick up my kids from school and that allows me to work.”

Key findings:

- Strong social networks of family and friends are seen by women as the key to being able to make positive changes in their life.
- Completing their Grade 12 education and taking post-secondary courses is allowing women to find better paying employment and increase their job options.
- Programs that help improve employability skills such as communication skills, computer literacy and job search skills are helping women enter and move forward in the workforce.
- Life skills training such as cooking and money management classes are helping women make ends meet and live on a limited income.
- Women are aware of and accessing many social services available in Portage la Prairie and area and are using these resources to help themselves both make ends meet and move forward with their lives.
- Family-based programming is assisting in developing skills, healthy relationships, self-esteem, and a sense of community while providing children with a healthy, nurturing, educational environment.
- Women are finding ways to manage tight budgets by seeking out financial tips, budgeting, and couponing.
- Ultimately women rely on their own self-determination to move forward, focusing on the life they want for themselves and their family.

“My education and practicum experience goes a long way and has helped me get a job.”

IV. Barriers to Economic Security

Women in Portage la Prairie are struggling with similar barriers women face across Canada; low incomes, child care, transportation, access to education, affordable housing, quality healthcare, and employment that pays well. These barriers are interconnected as women's challenges are directly linked to one another. For example, a single mother trying to get a job first needs to find childcare and then find transportation to get there. If either of these pieces is missing her opportunity is lost.

This section outlines the barriers identified in the research which have an impact specific to women as opposed to the general population, and that were also directly related to economic security. After each barrier description, recommendations that could potentially be implemented in the next two years to reduce the barrier are presented for discussion.

Poverty and Meeting Basic Needs

- Low income women include the working poor, stay at home mothers, women relying on a partner's income, women on social assistance, and women in unstable living conditions. They include women who are single, married or in common law relationships, both with and without children.
- According to the 2006 census, 17.7% of residents in the city of Portage la Prairie are defined as low-income (before tax).
- The likelihood of being low-income jumps to 32% for women living alone or with non-family members.
- Female lone-parent families are even more at risk, with 45% being low-income.
- Women do more unpaid work than men and have more responsibility for child rearing which impacts their ability to earn an income.
- Women face a gender wage gap: earning 83.8% of the male hourly wage. Nationally, women earn \$17.96 per hour compared to \$21.43 per hour for men.
- Many women don't have enough to cover basic needs, leaving nothing for savings, emergencies, education and retirement.
- Many women facing economic insecurity simply cannot earn enough to lift themselves out of poverty.
- Women feel trapped and isolated on systems which are designed to help them such as Employment and Income Assistance and subsidized housing.
- Many women are stuck in unhealthy, abusive or unwanted relationships because of their reliance on a husband or partner to make income.

“My husband makes more money than me so I have to stay home; I want to make enough money so that I can work too.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create a women’s leadership group that would develop the skills of lower income women in the target demographic to address the findings of this report and increase their own economic security.**
- **Continue to offer and expand training sessions on life skills such as money management and cooking or shopping on a budget.**

Employment Opportunities & Job Readiness

“No day jobs are available for single moms, only evenings and weekends.”

- Minimum wage jobs, part-time jobs, casual positions and positions requiring evening and weekend work are often the only types of work that young women without education can access.
- Many employers are not sensitive to the demands on mothers, especially single mothers, which may require them to leave or miss work due to family needs.
- Women reentering the workforce after raising children for years feel they lack necessary current skills, do not have employment contacts and do not feel they have the confidence needed for an interview.
- Findings from the 2011 Portage la Prairie Phase 3 Labour Needs Assessment Study indicated employers viewed young workers as lacking in “soft” or transferable skills such as communications skills and organizational skills. Many employers saw the need for basic literacy, numeracy, and job readiness skills.
- Paid work experience programs and employability training for every stage of learner were seen as opportunities to address employment barriers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Build relationships with business and employers to increase awareness and understanding related to gender and low-income, and promote family friendly practices to address barriers such as childcare and transportation.**
- **Provide women with opportunities in paid work experience programs.**
- **Offer employability skills workshops for women which include childcare and transportation supports.**
- **Provide training on entrepreneurship / home based businesses.**

Social and Emotional Supports

“I have no real friends in Portage. It’s cliquy here.”

- Too many women are feeling lost and alone, without the social and emotional supports they need to make positive changes in their life.
- Women new to the Portage la Prairie report having difficulty making new friends or feeling accepted.
- Stay at home mothers often feel isolated.
- Negative influences from family and friends are holding women back, and in some cases women feel sabotaged by friends and family as they try to make changes to their lives.
- Mental health concerns including depression and anxiety are stopping some women from accessing social support networks.
- A lack of mental health resources was perceived for women unless they were experiencing a crisis or had been diagnosed with a mental illness. More preventative mental health supports are needed.
- Social supports for gay, lesbian and transgendered individuals are lacking in Portage.
- Family and friends are the biggest social support network; helping with child minding, living arrangements and transportation.
- Support groups such as parenting groups and church groups, as well as issue specific support groups dealing with mental health, addictions and children with disabilities also provide women with the support they need.
- Family programming is providing an opportunity for socialization and respite from their children.
- Resource centers like Tupper Street Family Resource Centre and Portage Friendship Centre provide social supports and connect women who in turn end up as supports to one another.
- Relationships with individual staff within social programs are key to helping women move forward, and often it is the person, not the program that makes the difference in women’s lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Continue to provide opportunities for women in support groups such as those offered at Tupper Street Family Resource Centre, Portage Friendship Centre, Canadian Mental Health Association (The WELL), and Youth for Christ’s “The Door.”**
- **Provide opportunities for women to mentor other women.**
- **Provide training for service providers on diversity and gender barriers.**

Education & Training

“I feel stuck in my job because I don’t have money to go back to school, the costs are too high and night classes take away from family time.”

- Despite the fact that 46% of focus group participants had not completed high school, gaining a better education was seen as the key factor in gaining employment and a higher income.
- The cost of education is stopping lower income women from accessing education. Unless covered by an assistance program, post-secondary education feels out of reach for many women.
- Local educational opportunities are helping women who do not have the financial means to leave the community for post-secondary or who have family commitments locally.
- However, limited post-secondary education options offered locally limits women’s choices. Travelling or relocating to Winnipeg for education is not an option for many women.
- Balancing the time commitments required for education with family and/or employment needs is challenging, especially for women who tend to have more responsibility for child rearing and household duties.
- Even with local education and training, limited childcare and transportation is holding women back from pursuing educational opportunities.
- Women report the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre is helping them upgrade their literacy skills and get their grade 12 diplomas. On-site daycare and flexible classes including evening classes is allowing women to juggle education and parenting or work commitments.
- Red River College Portage Campus courses are providing post-secondary opportunities that provide specific employment skills. Women feel the education they receive at the Portage Campus directly increased their chances of finding higher paying employment. Practicum opportunities in the programs were also viewed as helping open up opportunities.
- Apart from accomplishing their Grade 12 or post-secondary achievements, women found value in parenting courses, money training, and personal development workshops as a way to succeed.
- Women were also interested in learning a variety of skills in the areas of resume writing, budgeting, and filling out forms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Address the barriers of childcare and transportation to allow more women to participate in education.**
- **Offer women led education sessions on how to access services such as housing, childcare, and education.**

Childcare

“I’m basically working to put my children in daycare; I’m not getting anywhere.”

- A lack of affordable, quality childcare is stopping women from accessing opportunities in employment and education which would increase their economic security.
- Waiting lists for licensed daycares can take years, and often even limited costs are too high for low-income women.
- Most daycare hours do not match the hours for jobs that are often available to entry-level positions, which are often shift work, or require evenings and weekend hours.
- Many women don’t see the point in working a minimum wage job while someone else raises their children.
- Traditional gender roles place women in the care giver role, resulting in the mother being the one who misses work due to their child being ill or having to deal with child related issues.
- Child care licensing regulations make it difficult to set up a licensed home daycare, which is required for women to access child care subsidies.
- Access to subsidized daycare spots is helping mothers become or remain employed, or access education or training.
- Services such as the Tupper Street Family Resource Center and the Portage Learning and Literacy Center which provide on-site daycare are allowing more women to participate in their programs.
- Before and after school childcare offered through the Short Stop Rec Club at Crescentview School is helping working parents of school aged children and is a model women would like to see expanded to other schools.
- Many mothers are independently working out systems to rotate childcare between each other or providing emergency childcare for children who are too sick to go to school or daycare.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop a task force to work on increasing the number of licensed childcare spaces in Portage la Prairie, including before and after school programs to address school aged child care needs.**
- **Create a model of “mom sharing” or “granny on the go” to address needs of short term or emergency childcare.**

Transportation

“I cannot afford taxis or shuttles; it’s not in my budget. It’s almost \$20.00 a day after daycare and work. It’s not worth it.”

- Lack of transportation was mentioned in all focus groups as a barrier to accessing education, employment, childcare, and services such as health care and recreation.
- Portage la Prairie does not have a public transportation system, and although there are numerous shuttle companies and cab services, women report these as expensive and unreliable.
- Many young women in Portage do not have a driver’s license or a vehicle.
- Although walking is a primary form of transportation for many women they are often scared to walk our streets at night.
- Lack of transportation is particularly challenging for those with young children and those who live farther away from services and employment.
- Although young women and service providers see transportation as a significant barrier to employment, many employers do not feel that transportation is a barrier to potential employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop a transportation strategy to identify creative methods for transportation including public transportation options, and shared shuttle services for employers, education or services.**
- **Develop a program to help women get their driver’s license.**

Racism and Stigma

“I feel like I’m wearing a name tag all the time. People assume I’m garbage.”

- The Social Planning Initiative Report (2009) notes a “division in the community” between the Aboriginal population and other residents.
- This was echoed in every focus group as a factor holding women back. It was a barrier to getting a job, finding a place to live, and accessing services.
- Many Aboriginal women felt judged or unwelcome when accessing services, and in the community in day to day life, because of their race.
- Other women felt the stigma of being on assistance, or being viewed as “poor.”
- Others felt that they were constantly being judged for past mistakes, which was difficult to escape in a small town.

- Feelings of being unwelcome or judged stopped women from participating in programs and seeking services.
- Those suffering with mental health issues are reluctant to seek support due to fears of being ostracized or singled out in the community.
- Some mothers fear losing their children to Child and Family Services if they admit issues related to mental health or addictions.
- Key Informants saw the value in continuing to educate the general public and employers on Aboriginal culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop a public education campaign to create community understanding of diversity.**
- **Provide diversity and cultural awareness training to employers and service providers, such as the Walk a Mile in My Moccasins program.**
- **Provide opportunities for women to build their self-esteem, such as women’s retreats and workshops, including opportunities to learn about traditional aboriginal culture.**

Housing & Safety

“People gang up on me here. I’m afraid of being jumped when I walk down the street.”

- In discussions with women, housing and safety were often linked.
- Low vacancy rates, maintenance issues, and lack of security were common complaints causing many women to feel unstable with their living arrangements.
- Women felt they had little options in where they live due to the limited amounts of rent they could afford. What they could afford was not in safe neighborhoods.
- High transiency rates were seen among young women, which impact the ability of women to nurture social supports and create difficulty for service providers to connect with women.
- Many informants noted and expressed concern about the quantity of low-income housing placed in the North East End of Portage la Prairie. This area has a disproportionate amount of low-income parents, the City’s lowest average median income, low rates of high school completion and high rates of government transfers as a form of primary income. The area is also located away from services, creating challenges with transportation.
- A need was seen for second stage housing for women in transitional situations such as leaving abusive relationships or addictions treatment.
- Besides feeling safe in their homes and neighbourhood, other safety related topics included being safe from an abusive relationship or protecting themselves or their children from aggressors or bullies.

- Some women do not trust police or see them as protectors, and voiced strong complaints about being discriminated against by law enforcement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Involve local women and local law enforcement in discussions about safety and develop a strategy to increase understanding and trust.**
- **Increase women’s involvement in neighbourhood based safety programs such as Neighbourhood Watch.**
- **Provide education and programming on safety issues such as stalking, bullying, domestic abuse, child abuse and sexual abuse.**
- **Develop a working group to explore housing needs, including the creation of transitional / second stage housing for women.**

“There is a huge lack of affordable housing in Portage la Prairie. If you are the working poor it’s very hard to find a decent place to live.”

Awareness and Collaboration between Service Providers

- Both women and service providers indicated that they are not aware of all of the programs and services available that may be able to help women.
- Women are sometimes falling through the cracks either due to services not being available, or not being aware of services that are available to help.
- A lack of communication between service providers on available programs and services was a barrier to providing clients with information and resources.
- Stakeholders desire more open discussions and forums between service providers and community leaders that focus on taking action on community issues.
- Women felt they were spending too much time navigating unfamiliar waters when accessing information for daycare, housing, education, and funding.
- Centralized methods of keeping track of available services such as an online or print guide, a centralized person who could refer women to a number of needed services, or a centralized location with a number of services available were all suggestions to improve awareness of services both for women and service providers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create a regularly updated resource database showing available programming.**
- **Coordinate ongoing meetings of service providers, community leaders and women based on theme areas in this report, focused on sharing information and taking collective action.**
- **Explore a dedicated position to assist women in navigating the maze of services and assisting in removing barriers to accessing services.**

- **Explore the development of a “one stop shop” or access center that would provide multiple services under one roof.**
- **Provide education on gender based analysis to ensure programs are aware of and responsive to the unique needs of women.**
- **Take a holistic approach addressing issues related to economic security such as self-esteem, health, child care, housing, education and employment together instead of as separate issues.**

V. Next Steps: Developing and Implementing a Community Plan

It is apparent that no one issue addressed in solitude will meaningfully impact economic security. A coordinated community response with the buy in from women, service providers, businesses and community leaders is needed to make a tangible difference in our community. Women and stakeholders alike have no time or energy for a project that does not take real steps forward.

In June 2013 a community forum including participation from women and stakeholders will be held to discuss the research findings and recommendations in the report. A collaborative process will be used so the voices of women, community groups and leaders are each heard in as equal a manner as possible. The results from this meeting will inform the Community Plan. The Community Plan will identify and focus on one key priority that will be addressed over the next two years with the funds from Status of Women Canada. At the same time, other community resources and funders will be engaged to implement and address additional priority areas.