

Women's centres in Canada face funding crisis

Frances Birdsell and the Women of the North - United (WON-U) coalition discuss urgent issues facing women after crippling funding cuts to women's centres in British Columbia, Canada.

After facing funding cuts, two years ago, that eliminated core operational funding for Women's Centres in the province of British Columbia in Canada, many Women's Centres have closed their doors. Some have altered their focus to service delivery programs; some have folded operations completely; some have partnered with business to create a community enterprise; some are dealing with structural issues while trying to walk softly upon the earth; and all are struggling to survive as best we can. We believe in creating a better world for tomorrow. And, we know that women are a significant part of any workable solution for community development and strategic planning for the future.

To further this vision of the future, a coalition of six northern Women's Centres, spread out across two-thirds of the geographic area of the province of B.C. (an area bigger than Europe) has recently been formed: "Women of the North - United" (WON-U). The population of this huge region is less than 10% of the provincial total, and so the rural, isolated resource-based and First Nations communities in the hinterland face particular and additional challenges.

We have issued the following position paper entitled "A Gender Lens on Northern Issues". We apply a Gender-Based Analysis to the "Northern Factor" in hopes of raising awareness about women's concerns in rural isolated communities in Canada. In submitting this position paper to Wo! Magazine, we would be interested in knowing if similar issues arise in rural isolated Australia. What contributes to any differences, or similarities experienced here in the northern interior part of British Columbia?

A GENDER LENS ON NORTHERN ISSUES:

The Women's Centres in the Northwest, the Northeast, and the Cariboo have survived in spite of major funding obstacles, and are eager to speak out on the issues facing women in northern British Columbia. We are pro-active, and preventative, encouraging dialogue around issues of concern to women. We want to research, educate and spread awareness through our "Gender Lens" work.

Many Women's Centres in smaller, more isolated communities have closed due to lack of funding support. Of the nine communities in the North & Cariboo where Women's Centres existed two years ago, now only five Women's Centres are still operational. In eight of those communities the Boards still exist, and programming continues albeit of a different focus. In late May, representatives of women's organizations in Terrace, Kitimat, Fort St. John, Quesnel, Williams Lake and the Queen Charlotte Islands came together in Williams Lake. Representatives from Chetwyn, Fort Nelson and 100 Mile House were not able to attend but are interested in joining future gatherings. During the three days we found that while the communities are far apart and very diverse we found we had much in common.

The following common issues were identified:

>> Lack of access to health and support resources means more travel for essential care. Women are often forced to cope with treatment alone, without family supports. The cost of transportation in the north is high, impacting families' ability to meet basic needs. Kamloops and Prince

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George are the closest detox centers; for some women this will require traveling for two days each way in order to enter treatment. Care-giving responsibilities are both a joy and a challenge for many women, but are often a barrier to full participation as well as access to services and resources.

>> Violence against women is the biggest crime issue in the north, taking a large amount of policing time. Northern Health Authority statistics indicate that domestic violence, in the area, is twice the provincial average. We would like to conduct an economic analysis of the true cost of domestic violence: policing, court services, emergency medical services, health treatment, recovery services, lost wages, impact on children who witness, mental health services, influences on substance abuse, co-dependency, sexual exploitation, high-risk behavior, suicide, poor health indicators.

>> Teen pregnancy rates are higher in northern communities. Domestic violence, in its broadest definition, can be seen to have an impact here – particularly in the areas of self-esteem and assertiveness. Lack of opportunities for education and employment are contributing factors.

>> Sexual exploitation of girls in exchange for housing, food or drugs also occurs in many communities.

>> Outreach to First Nations & Multicultural women is needed to identify their specific needs and how best to respond with appropriate culturally sensitive programming. Child welfare, vio-

lence, and poverty are critical issues in isolated communities. Aboriginal, multicultural, elderly and disabled women are more at risk of domestic violence than the general population. The voices of these sectors of our communities need to be heard in order to develop strategies for change. Partnerships and coalitions build strength, as well as a broader perspective of underlying factors.

>> HIV/Hep C rates are increasing for aboriginal and rural women, in the Northwest & Northeast regions of B.C. Research is needed to develop an understanding of the unique needs of these women, and the contributing factors for the high rates of increase.

>> Housing is an issue in many communities. Overcrowding on reserves and in boom communities and lack of subsidized housing and deteriorating housing stock is an issue in other communities. Homelessness is a hidden problem.

>> Low literacy rates are much higher in the north. Cutbacks to post-secondary institutions are limiting available programs in smaller communities, as well as comprehensive programming in Prince George. Access to post-secondary education is more difficult and costly in the north, because students are generally required to travel long distances from their home communities. Online resources are less accessible in remote and isolated communities.

>> Poverty: The gap between the rich and poor, and the gap between women's wages and men's wages are dramatically higher in the north. High paying resources jobs usually go to men and there are few well paying jobs available to women

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in the north. The high paying jobs often require workers to live in camp situations or hours of work are long. These facts present major barriers for women because of child rearing responsibilities. Cost of food, fuel for transportation and heating are higher in the north.

>> Lack of transportation is a big issue in the north. Few communities have public transit, and for those that do the routes and times of service are limited. The cost of owning and operating a car is high. The lack of a vehicle is a major barrier for many women and families. Hitchhiking becomes a reluctant choice, when poverty has blocked other options.

The relevant statistics can be referenced at the BC STATS website, under the Northern Health Authority, Statistical Profile for 2005. The Northern Health Authority, comprised of the Northwest, Northern Interior and Northeast regions of the province, spans 63.5 percent of the land area of BC. If we extend the southern border of this region to include Williams Lake, then our six Women's Centres are speaking out about gender issues facing 66%, or two-thirds of the geographic area of British Columbia. While the population base is less than 10% of BC, the wealth of the province is generated in the northern region.

The majority of research is based in urban communities and often these communities are close to other urban communities. Isolation, availability of services and different climate considerations impact significantly on women and families. Research is needed that explores the impact of the above issues in rural, remote, isolated, primarily resource based communities. The NORTHERN FACTOR needs to be assessed. The economic analysis of the cost to society of these ten common northern issues would be insightful.

We are also in the process of establishing a working relationship with the Women North Network / Northern FIRE, a network of northern women working out of the University of Northern British Columbia. The Women North Network (WNN) was created to facilitate information sharing as well as research and policy development among northern women, in order to build healthy communities for northern women and their families. WON-U is convinced that research is a necessary first step towards developing appropriate and effective programming to respond to the needs of northern women. We look forward to working with the Women North Network in developing our research plans and ensuring that northern women have access to the results of research that has already been initiated.

We need support from the provincial and federal governments, as well as the Northern and Interior Health Authorities, to address these concerns in a pro-active, preventative way that will change the dynamics in a positive manner, and actually save the government and Health Authorities money in direct service delivery, over time.

Women of the North United is made up of the following:

Terrace Women's Resource Centre
Tamtik Status of Women (Kitimat)
Queen Charlotte Islands Women's Society
Fort St. John Women's Resource Society
Contact Women's Society (Williams Lake)
Quesnel Women's Resource Centre

For more information contact the Women North Network (WNN):

wnn@unbc.ca ■