



A TURNING POINT
FOR WOMEN



Lifting Women Out of Poverty

YWCA Toronto's Pre-Budget Submission

Ontario Legislature's Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Ontario's Ministry of Finance

January 24, 2020

"Women represent more than half of Ontario's population. But barriers, some that are easy to see and others more subtle, prevent women's full economic participation. Supporting Ontario's women is a matter of fairness — every Ontarian should have an equal opportunity to succeed — but it is also an important factor in the increased economic growth and prosperity of the province."¹

About YWCA Toronto

YWCA Toronto transforms lives. As the city's largest multi-service women's organization, we help women escape violence, move out of poverty and access safe, affordable housing. We work tenaciously to break down barriers that hold women and girls back from achieving equality. Annually, our Association serves over 13,000 people, including trans and non-binary community members.

As a member of a provincial YWCA coalition, we offer a range of housing options, employment and training programs, community supports, and girls' programs – all designed to address the needs of girls, women and their families. We also engage in systemic advocacy to advance substantive gender equality in our city and our province.

The challenges facing the communities we serve are complex and multifaceted. We are encouraged by the government's reversal of several proposed cuts, especially those to child care and social assistance. We are also pleased with the fiscal enhancement to Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters received in the 2018 and 2019 provincial budgets.

However, every day, we are confronted by the growing poverty and inequality experienced by women who access our services. We are deeply concerned that efforts to balance the 2020 Budget will result in further cuts and reduction of services at the expense of women, their children, and equity-seeking communities. In the spirit of partnership and collaboration, we urge the Provincial Government to reverse service cuts in Budget 2020 and to substantially invest in community services.

Recommendations

YWCA Toronto has a long and proud history of partnership with government. Informed by ongoing consultations with program participants, community partners, and staff, we propose several recommendations that will lift women, and their families, out of poverty and advance substantive gender and racial equality across Ontario.

Ensure Affordable Child Care for All

Women spend about twice as many hours per week providing unpaid child care compared to men.² When women have affordable child care options, they can participate in the labour market and earn an income. Access to child care, therefore, is inextricably linked with women's economic empowerment. A recent McKinsey & Company study suggests that if women were fully engaged in the economy it would add \$60-billion to Ontario's annual GDP by 2026.³ Research also demonstrates that an affordable, publicly funded geared-to-income child care system is a prerequisite to closing the gender wage gap in our province.⁴

To create equal opportunities and eliminate barriers that prevent women's full participation in the workforce, the government must invest in more affordable, quality, not-for-profit child care spaces; address the underfunding in existing child care spaces; and, ensure adequate wages for child care staff across Ontario.

YWCA Toronto operates an Early Learning Centre in Rexdale. As a member of the Ontario Coalition of Better Child Care (OCBCC), we support OCBCC's call to reverse the approximately \$48 million in funding cuts to child care and to increase operational funding to keep pace with expansion. We also call on the government to allocate \$635.5 million to begin transition to operational funding in child care centres to support low fees or no fees, and implement the provincial workforce strategy, [Growing Together, Ontario's Early Years and Child Care Workforce Strategy](#), to ensure all staff have professional pay and decent work.⁵

The majority of child care workers are women. For many child care workers in Ontario, full time work does not guarantee a life above the poverty line.⁶ With more than 50,000 registered Early Childhood Educators, and many more child care workers, it is important to ensure professional pay for the early childhood workforce.

We believe that affordable child care and decent wages for child care workers will advance gender equity in our province; contribute to Ontario's economic growth; and, help support community health and well-being.

Support Young Women and Girls

"I signed my children up for this program because it was the only all-girls empowerment program close to my home. Also, because it is a free program. Mentorship programs allow my child to be able to be more vocal about her ideas."⁷

To support the growth and safety of girls, YWCA Toronto offers girl-specific programming at our Girls' Centre in Scarborough. At the Girls' Centre, girls ages nine to 18 build leadership skills, enhance their self-esteem, make new friends, explore career options, and learn from positive role models.

The girls that access our programs navigate issues related to food security, gender-based violence, mental health, community violence, racism, poverty and sexism. As captured in a

report commissioned by YWCA Toronto, [Girls Only](#), the girls that access our Centre report stronger social skills and greater self-confidence, and gain more opportunities to develop leadership competencies.

Girls and women are drivers of change. Evidence from around the world confirms that investing in girls and women creates a ripple effect that yields multiple benefits, not only for individual women, but for families, communities, and regions. Despite offering a safe, girl-positive space for young women and girls, YWCA Toronto's Girls Centre does not receive any level of government funding. Due to a lack of government support, we struggle to properly respond to community needs and recruit and retain staff.

We encourage the provincial government to consider the challenges facing girls and the unique position of women-centred organizations to support them. Budget 2020 must include new investments to create a dedicated funding stream for girls-specific programming to encourage girls to build confidence, gain leadership experience, build healthy relationships, and support the entry of young women into traditionally male-dominated careers such as STEM fields.

Address Gender-Based Violence

One in four women in Canada will experience gender-based violence, with children being directly exposed to that violence and suffering from long-term impacts. In Ontario, this statistic equates to over two million women and children in our province who will be exposed to gender-based violence. However, the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) only receives \$166 million annually to address this problem.

Gender-based violence is a serious and complex social issue that requires all levels of government to invest in gender-equity strategies and community services so that women can leave violent situations, access programs designed to promote healing, and live in a society that values women's safety, participation, and economic empowerment.

Support Shelters

YWCA Toronto operates four shelters, including two VAW shelters that receive provincial funding. Our shelters are running either at or beyond capacity. Given the affordable housing

crisis and the lack of transitional housing options, women are staying longer in our shelters – they literally have nowhere to go. The longer a woman stays in a shelter, the longer the next woman and child waits for a shelter bed.

As a member of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH), we support the recommendations put forth by OAITH on January 17th, 2020 to the Standing Committee on Finance & Economic Affairs to:

- Annualize all fiscal enhancement investments to VAW funded agencies through MCCSS from the 2019 Provincial Budget;
- Include mental health and addiction counselling and support services in VAW shelters as part of their core programming through the Mental Health & Addictions Strategy;
- Increase investments for Ministry of the Attorney General-funded VAW services, including the Family Court Support Worker Program (FCSWP); and,
- Move forward with a comprehensive action plan, attached to investments to prevent, effectively respond, and improve outcomes.

Free Trauma Counselling

Access to trauma counselling is critical to women establishing themselves in safety after experiencing violence. Across YWCA Toronto programs, women tell us that they cannot access the supports they desperately need because they cannot afford counselling fees. The waitlists for low-cost or free counselling services are long. Some counsellors are inadequately trained and do not reflect community demographics. Many programs are short-term or unavailable, such as specialized support for women co-victims of gun violence and addiction detox beds for women. Additionally, alternative supports that survivors find helpful – like art-based therapies – are often underfunded or not funded at all.

We urge the provincial government to invest in free, high-quality trauma counselling for survivors of gender-based violence, as well as their children. Such funding has a high return on investment and can produce long-lasting positive impacts on marginalized and rural communities impacted by gun violence and gender-based violence.

Access to Legal Aid Ontario

“Women fleeing domestic violence, seniors and people with mental health challenges facing evictions by unscrupulous landlords, and newcomers working in non-unionized low-waged jobs who are exploited by their employers are but some of the individuals who will likely be turned away when they seek help from community legal clinics, which capacity to serve them will be drastically reduced.”⁸

Access to justice is a fundamental human right. Many of the women we work with rely on Legal Aid Ontario for legal representation during court hearings and to navigate legally complex, high-stakes proceedings. Women need lawyers who can help them prepare, give legal advice and intervene when rights are transgressed. Legal Aid funding is essential to protecting the rights of women and marginalized communities.

We urge the government to reverse the funding cut to Legal Aid Ontario in Budget 2020. Reducing legal representation for marginalized community members, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, does not ultimately save money in the long-term because it will increase trial times, demands on public services, and the cost of legal proceedings for everyone involved.

Due to systemic racism, racialized and Indigenous groups also face greater legal challenges including carding, racial profiling and workplace discrimination. These communities rely on Legal Aid services to seek justice and navigate legal proceedings.

We strongly believe access to justice should not be based on class, race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, or status. Fiscal balance should never compromise the rights of marginalized community members. We urge the government to re-instate the \$133 million cut from Legal Aid Ontario and to restore full funding to an already under-resourced legal aid system.

Support Indigenous Girls and Women

As captured in [*Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*](#), it is the responsibility of all levels of government to protect the rights and safety of Indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people. Indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people experience violence, incarceration, poverty and illness at dramatically higher levels than non-Indigenous women and girls. As the report points out, the root cause of this issue is persistent and gendered colonial violence and intergenerational trauma.

We are deeply concerned by the high rates of gender-based violence experienced by Indigenous communities. We urge the provincial government to work with other levels of government and Indigenous Peoples to implement the 231 Calls to Justice beginning with the creation of a National Action Plan to address violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. We also urge the provincial government to ensure adequate plans and funding are in place for safe and affordable transit and transportation services and infrastructure for Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people living in remote or rural communities in Ontario.

Address Gun Violence

“Black mothers that found themselves unable to access supports, whether formal or informal, experienced higher levels of stress and ‘disenfranchised grief.’”⁹

*“To think we can arrest our way out of this is a falsehood.”
Toronto Police Chief Mark Saunders*

As captured in YWCA Toronto’s report, [*The Forgotten Victims of Gun Violence*](#), the communities we work with have been greatly affected by rising gun violence in our city. Black community members are disproportionately impacted and face complicated grieving and healing journeys due to the intersections of racism, poverty and trauma. This is particularly true for Black mothers who are expected to continue providing for their families and caring for their children after violent loss with access to few community supports and limited counselling services.

Like Toronto’s Board of Health and many other organizations, we support the call for a public health approach to address community violence in our city. This includes greater investments to address the root causes of gun violence including poverty, a lack of opportunities for youth, and systemic racism. Investment in affordable housing and child care, youth programs, decent jobs, income security, education, and community supports have the potential to reduce poverty *and* violence in our city and our province.

Therefore, we urge the government to critically re-examine budget priorities and to ensure that investments are made in poverty-reduction initiatives and in culturally-responsive social and health services that support mothers and children impacted by gun violence.

Substantially Reduce Poverty

Ontario's poverty numbers are growing — a trend which stands opposite to the rest of Canada.¹⁰ The proportion of Ontarians living in low-income rose by 26 per cent from 2003 to 2016.¹¹ From 2003 to 2016, the proportion of Ontarians under the age of 18 living in low-income rose from 13.3 per cent to 16.2 per cent.¹² As documented in a recent report by Metcalf Foundation, [*The Working Poor*](#), the rate of working poverty for Black women is growing in our city as well.¹³

On average, women earn 80 cents for every dollar earned by men, a gap that grows drastically for racialized and newcomer women, women with disabilities and LGBTQ2S+ people. In our province, Indigenous women earn 43% less than non-Indigenous men; immigrant women earn 34% less than non-immigrant men; racialized women earn 42% less than non-racialized men; and women with disabilities earn 48% less than men without disabilities.¹⁴ Women are overrepresented among the poor and concentrated in minimum wage jobs and precarious employment.

Reducing poverty requires investments and interventions, specifically geared towards marginalized communities. Investments in safety net programs, such as social assistance, have a positive impact on women and families, communities, and on all of Ontario. Health research demonstrates that a reduction in income inequality and poverty result in better health outcomes for all residents over the long term, resulting in cost savings and relieving pressure on an overloaded health care system.

Social Assistance Reform

Ontario's social assistance program does not meet basic needs. The women we serve who are on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) are living in extreme poverty — especially single women — and struggling to survive in an increasingly unaffordable city.

Ensuring the health and dignity of women on low-incomes, reducing poverty, and supporting families must be of paramount concern to government. All women, and their children, in our province should be able to live with dignity, and with security. We appreciate that the government recognizes the social assistance system is broken and requires reform; however,

we urge the government to ensure such changes are informed by the needs of the communities which rely on social assistance services.

We continue to support the call from the Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC) to reform the system in a positive direction. As ISAC highlighted in their 2020 pre-budget submission, they are calling on the provincial government to:

- Increase social assistance rates to reflect the real cost of living, including housing costs based on average market rents, utility costs, the cost of a nutritious food basket, and transportation;
- Maintain the current definition of a “person with a disability” for the purposes of eligibility for the Ontario Disability Support Program. We oppose the proposed change to align the federal program definitions that could disentitle people with disabilities in need. A new, more restrictive definition of disability in ODSP will take supports away from people with the greatest need; and,
- Make the Canada-Ontario Housing benefit available to social assistance recipients who are tenants, without any claw back of OW or ODSP benefits.

Good Jobs with Livable Incomes for Women

Many YWCA Toronto participants are trapped in precarious jobs – low-wage, part-time employment – often without the benefit of child care. Studies from United Way Greater Toronto highlight the disproportionate numbers of racialized women trapped in these jobs in the GTHA region; research out of Ryerson University has linked precarious work to negative health outcomes for racialized and immigrant women.¹⁵ The women who access our skilled trades and employment services come from diverse backgrounds – what they have in common is a desire to gain a better future for themselves and their children.

Good jobs with livable incomes that allow women to save money and plan for the future offer a promising path out of poverty. For this reason, YWCA Toronto offers specific employment and training programs that prepare women for entry into the skilled trades. We have partnered with the Finishing Trades Institute (FTI), the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD), the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT), Terrazzo, Tile and Marble Training School (TTMTS), and Seneca College to offer three free, women-only training programs in support of women’s entry into the skilled trades and IT field.

Despite program success, funding agreements are on a yearly basis. It is difficult to respond to community needs, plan for the future, and recruit and retain staff when it is unknown whether funding will be renewed. What would be helpful are three-year, five-year, or longer-term funding models that allow us to provide a continuity of service and build meaningful relationships with training institutes, employers and unions.

In terms of the transformation framework for Employment Ontario, we urge the government to ensure women are recognized as a group of clients with distinct employment service needs so that funding can be targeted and outcomes can be tracked.

We believe women need specialized support from women-specific employment service providers in order to address gender-based inequities. We urge the provincial government to increase and annualize funding for women-specific skilled trades and employment services, and to ensure such services are offered by women-led organizations.

The provincial government can also play an increased role in creating employment and apprenticeship opportunities for equity-seeking groups, including women, Indigenous people, Ontarians with disabilities, racialized workers, LGBTQ2S+ communities, and newcomers. We call on government to leverage the province's infrastructure commitments to push businesses to implement equity-based hiring practices.

\$15 Minimum Wage

Raising the minimum wage is good for the economy. After the minimum wage increased from \$11 to \$14 in 2018, Ontario's unemployment rate dropped to the lowest level since 2000, with a net creation of 13,900 jobs annually.¹⁶ Racialized women, who are concentrated in minimum wage work, stand to gain the most from a \$1 p/h increase in their wage. We encourage the provincial government to raise the minimum wage as this is a gender equality issue. Employment income is key to reducing poverty.

Invest in Safe, Affordable Housing for Women and their Families

Access to safe, affordable, quality housing is a human right. In Toronto, more than 1 in 5 tenant households are spending 50% or more of their income on rent, leaving many one paycheck

away from homelessness.¹⁷ Over the last ten years, the social housing waitlist has grown by more than 50% and stands at more than 110,000 households today. The use of family shelters has more than tripled.¹⁸

For women, access to housing is a safety issue. Women need a continuum of housing supports, including funding for shelters, transitional housing, and permanent housing options – recognizing that violence is the main cause of women’s homelessness.

We urge the provincial government to ensure National Housing Strategy (NHS) investments prioritize the needs of women and children fleeing gender-based violence and safeguard the 25% slated for women-specific housing options. Stable, affordable, and safe housing for women is paramount to gender equality in our province and helps lift women, and their children, out of poverty.

Budget 2020 must also include investment to support staffing and funding models for shelters that deal with the complexity of trauma and the mental health and addictions issues that women experience, including case management, specialized services and partnerships, community-based counselling and women’s programs. These changes are critical to ensuring that all women and families have a safe, affordable place to call home.

Combat Racial Disparities

As a recent report by United Way Greater Toronto points out, the racial divide in the GTA has reached a historic high.¹⁹ Racialized groups in Peel and York regions earn less today than 35 years ago. On average, for every dollar earned by a white person in Toronto, a racialized person earns 52.1 cents. Racialized women, particularly Black, South Asian, Middle Eastern and Indigenous women, face even larger gaps compounded by factors related to race and gender. Given the rising cost of living and stagnating wages, it is harder than ever before for newcomers to build a life and prosper in our city.²⁰ Eliminating racism must be a priority for the provincial government, and for all Ontarians.

We urge the provincial government to ensure the Anti-Racism Strategy is implemented in full, and that the Anti-Racism Directorate is properly resourced to combat racial discrimination in our province. The elimination of sub-categories in Ontario’s anti-racism directorate — anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous discrimination, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism — is harmful in

combatting racial discrimination. Without the collection and tracking of disaggregated data, it is unclear how much progress has been made in reducing racial inequities in our province. We call on government to reinstate the full budget of the Anti-Racism Directorate and re-instate the \$200,000 of funding cut for the 2019/2020 term.

Greater government action must be taken to combat racism in our province and to ensure the safety, livability and prosperity of all Ontarians.

Fund Affordable Public Transit

Women rely heavily on public transit and often make multiple trips throughout the day to meet work and family responsibilities. Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) fares have risen roughly 42% over the last ten years, approximately three times the rate of inflation.²¹

Financial barriers to public transit for low income communities have increased while real wages have stagnated or declined. Additionally, given that women experience higher rates of poverty, women are more deeply impacted by increasing fare rates. To help improve TTC affordability and ridership in Toronto, we urge the provincial government to increase its per-rider subsidy and to re-examine capital investments from a gender equity lens.

Safety on transit is also an important issue for women and LGBTQ2S+ people. According to the Toronto Police, there is one sexual assault every three days on the TTC yet very little is being done to address this issue.²² We urge the government to create an action plan to make transit safer for all riders, especially women.

Improve Access to Mental Health Support for Women

Violence against women is a well-established cause of mental health problems.²³ Gender-based violence can traumatize and deeply impact a woman's psychological, emotional and physical well-being. Critical supports for women experiencing mental health and addiction concerns need to be strengthened, both to prevent and address violence. This includes access to free, long-term counselling; team-based care for women with specialized and complex needs; culturally-responsive, holistic healing programs; and, support-groups for women and children who have experienced violence.

The mental health sector is chronically underfunded compared to physical health services. Across many YWCA Toronto programs, including our Girls' Centre, we have observed an increase in the incidence of mental health challenges. As noted in Children's Mental Health Ontario's 2020 pre-budget presentation, wait-times for basic youth mental health services are up to two years long.²⁴ We urge the government to increase provincial funding for mental health services, including gender-responsive adult and youth services. We support the recommendations by the Alliance for Healthier Communities to publicly fund social prescribing and increase funding for team-based care for community members with complex needs.²⁵

Conclusion

YWCA Toronto remains committed to working with government to ensure girls, women and their families thrive in our province. Gender equity will lift women and families out of poverty, enhance safety across communities, and support Ontario's economic growth. Through substantial gender-responsive investments, we believe a better future is possible for all Ontarians.

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End Notes

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