

# Young Women Work

BY MOLLY McCracken

Young women work in their homes, in our communities, in schools, with other youth, and in the labour force. But for young women who live in poverty, work is a struggle. Struggling to stay in school, working for low wages, confronting teen pregnancy, and lacking childcare, they find it difficult to make their lives work for them. They are working, but our economy and society are not working for them.

Facing the prospect of a future lived in poverty, and of raising another generation to do the same, however, young women want to build a better life and community for themselves and others.

These are some of the results of recent action research by and about young women in two of Winnipeg's inner-city neighbourhoods. *Young Women Work*<sup>1</sup> documents the experiences of 50 young women aged 15–24, the majority of them Aboriginal. These young women are at a critical time in their lives: receiving an education and making a transition to the labour force are vitally important to their future well-being and financial security. Yet many issues threaten to keep them from achieving their goals: neighbourhood security, unpaid and paid work, access to education, access to computers, motherhood, teenage pregnancy, and role models.

To what extent does current inner-city programming address these issues? How might it be improved? These

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matters were explored in depth by the Young Women Work project. The results have very real implications for the practice of community economic development (CED) here and across Canada.

## The Analytical Framework

Community-based organizations in inner-city Winnipeg provide programming to respond to many of the needs of young women, the study found. However, the resources that do exist focus on the women's immediate or *practical needs* (food, shelter, transportation), rather than serving their *strategic needs* (culturally-relevant education, economic literacy, supports for reproductive choice).

Addressing strategic needs offers the potential to transform gender relations, by breaking down structural barriers such as occupational segregation and the under-valuation of women's work, unpaid and paid.<sup>2</sup> Strategic approaches are required for women to achieve equality and escape from poverty. This involves change in gender divisions of labour and power, the elimination of gender-based violence, fair wages, equal division of household responsibilities and child rearing, access to credit and other resources, and reproductive choice.

In the case of our research project, many barriers are exacerbated by race, and structural economic inequality. Firstly, as racialized young women living below the poverty line, most of our participants face multiple barriers. Secondly, in this era of the "New Economy," the failure to break down barriers will effectively shut people out from a great many new employment opportunities in the knowledge and service sectors.

The present economy rewards certain skills and upholds structures that have historically excluded groups based on race and gender. However, the economy is a function of societal relations, which shift and change over time. This research project is premised on the idea that asking young women about their experiences related to the economy can help to transform prior unequal relations and develop local skills, knowledge, equity, and equality. Simultaneously, learning from current social and economic interventions can help us to develop more effective

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<sup>1</sup>Partners in the Young Women Work research project are Seed Winnipeg Inc., Andrews Street Family Centre, Wolseley Family Place, and Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence.

<sup>2</sup>Caroline Moser, a feminist development theorist, has been pivotal in conceptualizing gender equality in terms of practical and strategic needs. See "Gender planning in the Third World: meeting practical and strategic gender needs," *World Development*, 17,11 (November 1989):1799-1825.

alternatives which effectively support both practical and strategic gender needs.

This must be done with great care, however. Firstly, a significant amount of the work which women do is not paid. When asking what paid work young women aspire to do, care had to be taken not to devalue unpaid work. (Being a mother is a full-time job in itself.) Secondly, seeking out paid work should always be a choice. Policies such as workfare, that force social assistance recipients into the workforce, do not empower people. Thirdly, the research had to respect the work-life balance. Taking on paid work in addition to their gendered responsibilities for housework and childcare places women under a double or triple burden that can affect their quality of life. Any discussion of paid work for women, therefore, must also consider resources to ensure unpaid work also gets done equitably.

## Selected Results

The research blended quantitative and qualitative methods to document the interconnections between 50 young women's experiences with their peers, with community-based organizations, and with institutions designed to serve youth. Young women participated in focus groups or interviews so we could learn how they perceive their needs. A subsequent environmental scan ascertained the types of program available to young women in these neighbourhoods.

The qualitative research findings were very broad in scope. Strictly in terms of strategic needs, some of the more important findings relate to education. Young women want to learn. They appreciate educational programs that are respectful and centred on their needs, specifically Aboriginal-centred educational programs that uphold their

traditional cultures and teachings. They wanted to learn more about computers, because all agreed that learning how to use computers would be important for getting a job.

At the same time, they require significant support to go to school and do well. This includes everything from transportation and food, childcare, mentorship and encouragement. This particularly applies to young mothers, who feel dependent on social services and unable to make the transition towards financial independence.

Access to the tools for finding paid work, and quality paid work itself was another challenge they identified. Knowledge about job searching techniques was limited. Young women who did not have exposure to career development supports did not know specifically what they could do to prepare for getting the job they wanted to have when they "grow up."

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What was clear is that, while young women have enthusiasm for the possibilities the future holds, they lack information of what those possibilities might be and how to attain them. They did not aspire to high earnings, possibly because, having grown up in poverty, they don't know what constitutes a living wage. In short – there is a lack of “the economic” in the community organizations and supports that young women access.

That was born out in the scan of current programming. Of 80 community-based organizations we investigated, 35 had programs and support services for young women – 54 different programs and support services in total. But only 9% of these programs and services were geared specifically for people aged 15-24. While 40 (74%) of these 54 programs and services involved community development for young women, only 6 (11%) offered employment skills and technical training development. Another 11 (20%) offered supports for pregnancy and adolescent parenting issues. Most programs deal with sexual exploitation, behavioural management, crime prevention, and health and sexuality. Although a few organizations include an economic component in community development programming, they do not make these programs and services exclusive to young women aged 15-24.

Young Women Work has found that females aged 15-24 experience poverty in a specific cluster of ways, based on their status as young mothers and their experience of gender discrimination. In response to this, the family centres involved in this study have several program components exclusively for young women. There is an emerging focus on the need for programming for girls and young women in Canada in order to ensure their physical safety, and also to provide them with safe spaces to develop confidence and try new things. In the United States, the Ms. Foundation supports gender-specific programming because “universal” programming for youth does not distinguish between the needs and strengths of girls and boys.

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## Young Women Lead

Key to this research process was the participation of young women in inner-city Winnipeg. Francine Parent was one of two young women hired and trained as community researchers in the spring of 2004. The researchers assisted in developing the questions for the participants and led the focus groups and interviews with great compassion and skill. Another young woman, Jayme Flett, sat on the projects' Advisory Committee.

The following are excerpts from an interview after the research was completed with Jayme and Francine about the project and preventing poverty among young women. We would be wise to heed their words and support them to build a more equitable, vibrant inner-city.

**Francine:** Well ... I'm a young aboriginal woman, I'm 18 years old, I work part-time and full-time [at a restaurant], my hours go up and down.... I'm planning to go to Red River [Community College] in the fall and I live with my parents at home, with my boyfriend also, and that's it.

**Jayme:** I'm 19 years old with one daughter, who is two and a half, her name is Sarah. And I don't work, I finished grade 12 last year, I just basically take care of my baby.... Believe me I work hard, it's a hard job, for sure ... it's just me and her all day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, just me and her.... Sometimes I'm just waiting to explode, it's hard. So don't have a kid, I should have waited but ... I don't do much, I don't get out much, my weekends, I have a day off here and there, I like to be out and I like to be with my friends ...

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## Learnings

**Francine:** I guess what I learned from interviewing all of those young women is that there are a lot of young women that live hard lives and it's not so easy for them to find a job just because they want to, or it's not so easy for them to come into money because to have money you have to work for it and if you're not working there's no money anywhere ... I guess just try to focus in on young women, not just aboriginal, because there are a lot of races, not only aboriginal people need help. So just basically young women need help finding work, getting out, childcare or just talking to somebody can help I guess, expressing your feelings and getting heard makes you feel a lot better.

**Francine:** ... so much more of a community centre but somewhere young women could go to look forward to getting a job, and maybe just like a female environment, like all girls because then it would be easier for them to adjust say if they haven't worked before.... I noticed a lot of young women like working with kids, so then maybe even if like one or maybe even if a couple daycares open up their doors to young women and gave them work experience in the daycare and say like gave them an honorarium or something that would keep them going back.

**Francine:** I'd say this project helped me to realize a lot of things that I didn't really see before. I just thought seeing poverty it was something that was just normal, seeing people



in houses with their windows smashed or kids running outside ... all dirty looking, I just thought it was something normal, that it was the parent's fault. And I guess it is, but if they really wanted they could help those people by just getting them involved in something as simple as ... a community event because most of their parents just want to stay in and let their kids explore the world by themselves rather than exploring it with their kids because then if you explore it with them they want to get out more often and eventually they'll start learning how to communicate better with people and by that then maybe they want to find a job or something for themselves and get involved in something.

**Francine:** ... make [the North End] more approachable to people who don't live there so that when they're driving through they really don't just downplay it right away and say it's just not a good place to live or to go or for their kids. Actually make like, see like the community centres or big groups of people outside actually helping out by cleaning up the community or just painting walls or maybe a big community blow out or have everyone in one place and just talk and get together and have a good time would even make a difference because like a lot of people in the north end just stay home in their houses just trapped up because there's nothing to do and if there was actually something to do then they would get out.

## Five Years Down the Line

**Jayne:** Hopefully I'll be done school and have a degree.... Probably Law, Law School, and make some money, and ya it would be great.

**Francine:** I would probably see for myself in about five years, maybe less I'd like to have already accomplished say like a teacher's aide certificate or something, and working my way towards becoming a teacher, like a full-time teacher. Have my own house, and blah blah blah ... I personally like helping people, whether it's kids or adults or whatever, so if I had that kind of job I think I would probably make a difference because I have a lot of ideas and I like to address them. ■

(above, from left): Francine Parent and Jayme Flett. Young women asking young women about their lives added to the quality of the research findings. The participants were more comfortable, and collaborating directly with local young women lent accountability in the project to the young women of inner-city Winnipeg. Photo courtesy of Young Women Work Project.

## Implications for CED Practice

The research had the following major implications for the practice of CED.

1. *A strong social safety net is essential, but currently insufficient:* Social programs such as funded childcare, social assistance, unemployment insurance, and social housing must be in place to meet the basic needs of young women. Strong social programs are a foundation that allows young women to be able to participate in CED and then be able to move out of poverty. Nevertheless, gender inequality is inextricably linked to economic equality. Thus, above and beyond meeting practical needs, greater support is needed for young women to learn economic skills, find and create meaningful work, and plan for their futures.
2. *Build safe spaces and gender equality:* Participants asked for programs specifically designed for them, offered in a way that is not intimidating. Only when young women feel welcome and safe in programs in their neighbourhoods, schools, and communities can they take risks and try new things. This also requires that the community as a whole and CED organizations in particular challenge norms surrounding gender behaviour and expectation so that young women receive every opportunity to fulfill their potential and the responsibilities of unpaid work (e.g., childraising) are shared equally.
3. *Customize CED programs to the needs of young women:* Skill development and job creation should be centred on young women's needs, and therefore provide the ancillary supports such as childcare and transportation. Young women consistently told us that without childcare they could not participate. If childcare is not provided on-site, full reimbursement is needed for childcare expenses.
4. *Build transferable skills:* Programs to support young women must consider the long-term benefits for women to improve their wages and economic security by building transferable skills that are valued in the economy. For example, many young women are already familiar with computers, creating an opportunity to augment computer literacy and support for microenterprise development.

5. *Prepare young women to lead:* Programs must focus on what young women themselves identify as their needs and priorities. Young women have their own community and youth culture. They hang out, talk, and share ideas together. Moreover, young women indicated that they want to lead the next generation of youth. More mentorship programs and youth-to-youth leadership development programs must therefore build upon the capacity and strength of young women, while at the same time develop their leadership skills. (See sidebar, “Young Women Lead.”)

## The Importance of Partnership

This list may sound like a tall order. Local family centres lack sufficient resources to provide economic programs. Very few organizations have the capacity to transform the structural

barriers that cause poverty among young women. But with sufficient resources and the right partnerships, organizations could. Another function of the research project was to help build just such partnerships.

Young Women Work benefited from many hours of dedicated attention from Andrews Street Family Centre and Wolseley Family Place, two family centres that guided the methodology to meet research needs as they defined them. The information we sought was grounded in the needs of local organizations supporting young women, and young women themselves. Young women advised the research project, and two local young women were hired as community researchers to help design, deliver and analyze the findings. A plain language version of the report in the form of a “zine” was created by young women from the photo journalism club at Wolseley Family Place, and their photos literally brought home the realities facing young women.

Through sharing information and discussing the issues involved in working to alleviate poverty with young women, this research project has stimulated dialogue between the family centres, CED organizations, and the Aboriginal community. It is essential that this work continue – because young women are ready and willing to participate in holistic programs that respect their cultural backgrounds and build strong futures for themselves, their families and their communities.



As a “young-ish” woman, and the principal investigator in the research, MOLLY McCracken found it an honour to work with everyone on the Youth Women Work research project. Contact her at 204-982-6630 or [mollym@mts.net](mailto:mollym@mts.net).

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