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Naming Our Reality

Women in the Antigonish Area Economy



Antigonish Women's Resource Centre
Winter 1998



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Introduction

In the summer of 1997, the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) began a series of focus groups involving women in the Antigonish Area. The focus groups were part of both the AWRC project, "Naming Our Reality: Women and Economics", and the provincial Women for Economic Equality (WEE) project called "Counting Women In Community Economic Development".

At the centre of our discussions was women's current economic reality. The women who participated included women on social assistance, post secondary students currently working for low wages, women caring for a disabled child, and Aboriginal and African-Nova Scotian women.

These projects were stimulated by our awareness of women's growing concern and anxiety about the economy and the withdrawal of government supports for women and their families.

Occurring around the same time as the focus groups, there were two workshops (one sponsored by each project). In these workshops, women considered what could be done to make the Antigonish Area a well-functioning economy that really worked for women.



This booklet summarizes the observations, concerns, issues and vision of the participants in all of these processes. The booklet is intended for Antigonish Area residents who are concerned about the local economy and interested in joining with other concerned people to take control of our economy and improve the quality of life for all of us.

The main purpose of this booklet is to inform people about the issues that were identified and stimulate thought and provoke discussion about the issues. We hope that as a result of this process, local people will look for collaborative ways to improve our local economy and work together to improve the economic circumstances of Antigonish Area women and as a result, the entire community.

An advisory committee, made up of women from the Antigonish community guided this process. Some of these women are professionally involved in community economic development, or not currently working in the field, but very knowledgeable about it. Others were just beginning to cultivate an interest in this topic and were not involved in it on a day-to-day basis. Their expertise as workers, homemakers, consumers and citizens informed this work. The Antigonish Women's Resource Centre acknowledges and appreciates the contributions of these women.

Our Reality

Work/ Unemployment

Discussions with women reflected the changing nature of work in the '90s

- More women are in the workforce.
- Many jobs traditionally held by women are collapsing.
- Women's jobs tend to be low paying.
- The old logic that said "If you get a good education you'll have a good, secure job" no longer applies.
- Increasingly young women are encouraged to pursue financial independence rather than focus on marriage and family as a priority over career development. This is a significant attitude shift.
- High levels of unemployment are not new to visible minority members. Visible minority women are affected by this both because of their own unemployment and that of their partners and families.
- Job insecurity continues, as does high unemployment.

Women continue to be affected by high unemployment: Jan. 1998 official unemployment rate for the Antigonish area 12.9%.

(Statistics Canada)

In 1991, the Aboriginal unemployment rate was 25% higher than the national rate.



Our Reality...

Health

Economics and health are inseparable. Women spoke of how these factors interact.

- People are under high level of stress, which affects health.
- Single mothers on income assistance are under very high stress due to lack of control, lack of privacy, intimidation by system and workers, stigma, fear of not being able to meet basic needs. There is frustration because they see no sign of things improving and they worry that their children will end up unemployed and on social assistance. There is a need for a "bill of rights" for recipients.
- The basic health care needs of low-income people are not being met. They have to scrounge and struggle. Pharmacare co-pay fee can be quite high, and eyeglasses and dental care not funded.
- The lack of special services due to health care cuts affects people with disabilities and as a result people, especially caregivers, are very stressed. Women are the main caregivers in the family and in society, so they are very much affected by this.

*In modern societies, deprivation in social circumstances has become the major influence on health inequities. In virtually all societies, health status is directly related to social status.
(Canadian Public Health Association)*

*Every dollar spent on prenatal care can save and estimated \$3.38 in the cost of medical care for low birth weight infants.
(Canadian Public Health Association)*



"Nova Scotia could [set] in place a regional/provincial plan to include women, with all our diversities, equally in the decision-making positions of our province and our communities." (participant in "Counting Women In" workshop)



Our Reality...

Economic Development

Women were very interested in participating in local community economic development initiatives.

- There is a new emphasis in government and the community on community economic development and sustainable development. Participants saw this as a positive thing.
- People are spending less money, even on necessities – results in less money circulating in the community.
- Development programs for Native people are confusing, poorly conceived, poorly administered.
- There is a need for a rural shuttle service that is affordable, so people can get to appointments, shopping, etc
- Local women felt that our credit union is operating more like the banks and that it is still hard for women to get business loans.
- Women in business rely on family supports, less on government. This must be acknowledged and taken into account.

Our Reality...

Housing

Antigonish experiences particular housing issues due to the presence of the university, the shortage of land, the low-density style of development in the town and other factors.

- The federal government has cut funding for social housing, including new co-ops, and existing co-ops are feeling insecure as the province moves to take over federal responsibilities.
- Women have to use food money for rent because of the lack of affordable housing. The cost of land here is very high, as are rents. Many people are moving into trailer parks, which is reducing their involvement in the community.



According to CMHC, the vacancy rate for rental housing in Antigonish Town was 0% as of October 1997.

"In Antigonish, 82% of women and 62% of men in regular market rental housing are paying more than (the CMHC recommended) 30% of their take home pay towards rent."

(No Place For Home-Antigonish Women's Association study)

Our Reality...

Poverty

Women's local experiences reflect changes in the workforce (for example, increase in non-standard jobs) and government social policy. Women living on low incomes are profoundly affected.

- There has been a shift in attitudes about poor people, (working and disabled), single parents and unemployed/under-employed. There is more victim-blaming and less compassion.
- Poverty is an on-going and long-standing issue for Native people.
- Women who have been helped by local charities and service clubs expressed gratitude to them and a fear that due to social assistance cuts, these organizations and volunteers will get overburdened and burned out. Some of these groups have begun to restrict types and frequency of assistance (e.g. one service club is funding eyeglasses for children only).

Women face a considerably higher risk of poverty than men. Since 1980, the poverty rate for women has been at least four or five percentage points higher than men. (The National Anti-Poverty Organization)

Most poor people do work full or part time – over 60% of those heading poor families, over 70% of poor unattached individuals. (The National Anti-Poverty Organization)

Our Reality...

Education

Higher education is becoming more and more inaccessible to modest- and low-income people.

At the same time, the best insurance against poverty and the best way to escape poverty is to have or obtain a good education. Meanwhile, governments and the corporate sector insist that poor training and education levels are eroding our industrial competitiveness.

- Funding for education and training for social assistance recipients is inadequate.
- Post-secondary education is funded less and less by government, so students are incurring high debt loads.
- The Province does not give bursaries anymore to post secondary students.



*St. F. X. U. Tuition and student fees for one year of full-time studies:
1983 \$1379
1997 \$3775*

Our Reality...

Social Assistance

Many issues surfaced with regards to social assistance. Some of them may be eliminated when the provincial government takes over the delivery of all social assistance on April 1, 1998. Others will remain and will need to be addressed in other ways.

- The provincial government is moving social assistance to one tiered, provincially administered system.
- There is a heavier reliance on charities because of cuts in social spending (e.g. "special needs" cut from Antigonish County's social assistance program).
- Family Benefits and Child Tax Benefit do not provide enough money to live on and to make matters worse, there can be costly financial and health crises as well as extra clothing and school needs that eat up money for daily expenditures.
- The Department of Community Services removed the shelter component from the benefits designated for disabled adults living with parents.
- Most people do not understand what it is like to live on social assistance. They can judge recipients harshly and not support improvements to the system.



Our Reality...

- Women on social assistance are feeling the stigma attached to their status as welfare recipients and single moms, but as individuals they recognize their own worth. "If you stay home and don't do anything to become self-supporting, you get blamed for being lazy, but if you go to school or work, you get blamed for being a bad mother. There's no way to do 'the right thing'." (a focus group participant)
- Because of "the fiscal dividend" the provincial and federal governments may begin to put some funding into social programs that have been cut over the past several years.
- There are barriers to getting off social assistance - mostly a lack of money and childcare. When recipients fail to achieve self-sufficiency, they get labeled as "lazy".

The Province of Nova Scotia is preparing to take over delivery of all social assistance effective April 1, 1998. This will relieve our two municipalities of this role and change the system to a one-tiered structure. No information is available yet on the new rates and policy.

Our Reality...

Governance

Women expressed a keen interest in community leadership and a need to eliminate barriers to women's participation.

- People are "having a say" on economic issues (e.g. public response to Irving Oil facility in Antigonish).
- There are few women in certain decision-making roles in this community (e.g. county council, Regional Development Authority, etc.) This can affect policy making due to lack of awareness of and support for women's circumstances and needs.

"Twenty percent of women on committees is tokenism; at thirty percent, women start having a voice; and at forty percent they can bring about change."

Gerd Engman

"If they are not present, women cannot speak. And if their voices are not heard, their concerns cannot be addressed."

Marion Lay



Our Reality...

Care giving

Women are not able to take on leadership in the community and advance careers unless care giving and other domestic responsibilities are shared.

- Care-giving demands on women are increasing because young people move away home later in life due to the high cost of post secondary education and high youth unemployment, while seniors need more care because of health care cuts.



Our Reality...

Diversity

Women spoke powerfully about unacknowledged discrimination against members of visible minority groups and people with disabilities.

- Education of Native children is not culturally relevant and generally, traditional Native culture is losing ground under the influence of the mainstream media and the school and community experiences of children. Women play a key role in the education of children and maintenance of the culture.
- "Hidden racism" is an issue here in our community.
- People with disabilities are not adequately supported. There is a lack of respite care and tax breaks for expensive equipment and for day care.
- Revenue Canada is considering doing away with the lifetime "disabled" designation. Disability would have to be proven each year in spite of the fact that many disabilities are obviously permanent (e.g. severe cerebral palsy).



Our Vision of the Antigonish Area as a Healthy Community

Women who participated in the workshops, "Women in the Local Economy: Making it Work for Us", and "Counting Women In Community Economic Development" envisioned our community as a place that would be environmentally and socially healthy.

All members of the community would be accepted and treated with respect regardless of their race, income level, sexual orientation, physical appearance, or any disability they might have. Schools would actively promote this respect and tolerance by fostering and modeling positive attitudes.

There would be a high level of awareness about social and economic issues among local people, and high participation rates in activities and actions that promote good community functioning.

There would be hiking and biking trails and other nature-oriented recreational activities that are either free or involve minimal expense. People would be well aware of environmental protection and they would recycle much of their waste products.

Industry would thrive in and around Antigonish, with more value-added products being manufactured here, and women would be internally involved in the

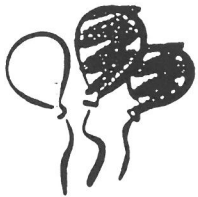


Our Vision...

development of computer technology. This activity would provide well-paid, flexible, high quality jobs for women. There would be equal access to jobs for everyone. A system that promotes the circulation of wealth locally (e.g. a Local Exchange Trading System) would be in place.

There would be an equal number of male and female elected representatives in government. These people would be responsible to the citizens, rather than to their political parties.

An equal number of women and men would be leaders in community-based organizations. Women would be freed up from caregiving responsibilities so they could participate in leadership. The care of elders, children, and people with special needs and the care of the home would be shared among members of the household. Employees would be allowed some designated time off, with pay, so they could perform volunteer work. Women's time would also be freed up by the availability of high quality, affordable, accessible childcare.



Our Priorities for Community Participation

At one of the workshops, participants created a vision of the Antigonish Area as an economically healthy community where the needs and priorities of women and our families are met. They then considered the question "What would need to be in place in order for us to move toward that vision?"

A list was generated and the top three priority items were identified. The priorities were:

- **Women in Decision Making Roles**
Women are not able to advance our objectives for economic development unless we are in key decision-making roles. To facilitate this, women will need support, access to leadership positions, encouragement, and training.
- **Affordable Housing**
Housing plays a critical role in economic, social and physical health. There is a need to address the shortage of high quality, affordable housing for women of all ages and in all phases of life.
- **Low Cost Transportation**
There is a need for a system of transportation, especially for rural residents. In order to meet the needs, the system would have to be affordable, accessible and convenient.



1920's

Time Lines - - - -

Local

- 1920's - Antigonish Movement began
- 1921 - First People's School held
- 1932 - St. F. X. Extension Department established

- 1970 - 20 Antigonish (Town) Housing Authority family homes built
- 1970-75 - Orchard Villa & JJ Carroll House built

- 1980-82 - Brierly and Lorentchia Housing Co-op built
- 1983 - St. F. X. tuition (full course-load) is \$1,379.00
- 1983 - Antigonish Coordinated Services formed
- 1983 - Birth of Antigonish Women's Resource Centre
- 1983 - Birth of Naomi Society
- 1985 - Topshee Housing Co-op and Hillside Manor built

- 1990 - 4 Antigonish Housing Authority family homes built on Martin Street
- 1992 - Antigonish Community Food Bank opened
- 1992 - Release of report, "No Place for Home: Women and Housing in Antigonish" by Antigonish Women's Association
- 1994 - Steering committee for Community-based Planning for Economic Growth established
- 1994 - Birth of Kids First Family Resource Centre
- 1995 - Special Needs allowances (County of Antigonish Municipal Social Assistance) cut off
- 1995 - 3 Antigonish Housing Authority family homes built on Viewville St.
- 1996 - Antigonish Regional Development Authority established
- 1997 - "Counting Women In" and "Naming Our Reality" projects on women and economics
- 1997 - St. F. X. tuition (full course-load) is \$3,775.00
- 1997 - "Building a Moral Economy" workshop held
- 1997 - People's School on the Economy held

1990's

A Social & Economic History 1920's

Provincial & National

- The Great Depression 1929-40

- Birth of Canada Assistance Plan, Canada Pension Plan and Medicare 1966
- Canada Student Loans program established 1967
- Federal funding for co-op housing began 1972
- Average minimum wage salary 101% of poverty line 1975

- Start of series of CHMC cuts to housing funding 1985
- Resolution to eliminate child poverty passed in Canadian Parliament 1989

- Federal funding cut for co-op housing in NS (reduced to 34 units from 300 in 1980) 1990
- Bill C-91 becomes law, extending patent protection for pharmaceutical companies 1992
- full-time minimum wage income 55%-83% of poverty line 1992
- New Child Tax Benefit 1993
- Social Programs Review (federal) 1994-95
- Compass Program (Dept of Community Services) 1995-97
- Average income of richest Canadians increased by \$2000. while average income of poorest Canadians decreased by \$500.. 1995-96
- Average minimum wage salary 77% of poverty line 1995
- Death of Canada Assistance Plan 1996
- Pan-Canadian Women's March for Bread and Roses, Jobs and Justice 1996
- Unemployment Insurance system reformed 1997
- Province of NS takes over delivery of social assistance 1998

1990's