

*Poverty is the Most Pressing  
Human Rights Issue in Today's Quebec*

Statement  
Issued by the  
Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse  
On the occasion of the  
World March of Women  
Against Poverty and  
Violence Against Women

October 2000

On the occasion of the *World March of Women*, the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse considers it is the organization's duty - within the scope of its mandate - to reiterate its deep concern at the extent and the acuteness of poverty in modern Quebec.

The Commission is of the opinion that poverty constitutes a major obstacle against the use and enjoyment of human rights and freedoms, including fundamental rights. Furthermore, the Commission is of the opinion that exclusions caused by such poverty are incompatible with the effective use and enjoyment of the right to equality, as spelled out in the *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*.

### **Realities**

In spite of problems or variations concerning the measuring of poverty, the Commission is well aware that our society is affected by some harsh realities:

- An important and substantial proportion of the Quebec population finds itself in a state that cannot be described by any other word than *poverty*.
- Women, and more specifically women who are heads of single households, younger families, children, and elderly persons living in isolation, are particularly affected by such poverty.

It is important to realize that such a situation is happening in a general context where:

- Economic growth over the past decades has not ended poverty.
- Job uncertainty in general has considerably increased over that same period, both in terms of conservation of existing jobs in all sectors of the economy, and in terms of increasing numbers of new intrinsically precarious jobs. Consequently, labour force participation does not necessarily guarantee economic autonomy for an important number of workers, male and female.
- The various government support benefits have been set at levels that are often inferior to the most basic needs of recipients and of their dependants.
- Inequality in the distribution of wealth collectively created has increased in a disproportionate way over the same period.

By themselves, such facts do not fully explain the poverty problem, but the connection between them and poverty is obvious and underlines the fact that such poverty is unacceptable. We must never forget that this poverty does exist and does develop in one of the richest communities in the world, a society where the various powers do coexist with such hardship and seem willing to tolerate it.

### **Consequences of poverty**

The consequences of such poverty in modern society have been extensively examined and documented. Here is a short reminder<sup>1</sup>. They do affect the **health** of persons, to the point of diminishing their life expectancy. Children in particular are affected and will suffer serious and long-lasting consequences. In the field of **education**, such consequences cause learning retardation, dropping out, illiteracy (1 Quebecer out of 8 is considered to be a functional illiterate.). The combined effects do affect the **employability** of persons, thus diminishing their potential for autonomy and for the development of their capacity to contribute to life in society. Such effects can be expected to become even more serious, given the technological development and the important changes affecting our economy. It is however recognized that low-income persons must overcome major obstacles in the field of **justice**, whether it be for access to relevant information or for access to professional services.

In conjunction with the World March of Women, we must also realize that economic dependency affecting a large proportion of women too often causes them to tolerate **spousal abuse**.

For Quebec society as a whole, immediate and future costs of such poverty are important. However, over and above statistical and economic data, the impacts of poverty are most cruelly felt in daily life.

### **Poverty and rights and freedoms**

Over the past years, on several occasions, in the course of investigations, legal proceedings in the courts (especially when invoking illegal discrimination based on the social status of a person), or comments concerning proposed legislation or research work, the Commission has indicated that poverty was a threat against the recognition and enjoyment of rights and freedoms:

- Insufficiency or uncertainty of income erodes the protection of fundamental rights to life, physical and psychological integrity, as well as freedom of expression and mobility rights.
- Material and cultural deficiencies are threatening the rights to health, education, justice, information concerning rights, participation in the political process and citizenship.
- Stigmatization of homeless and income safety recipients.
- Various forms of discrimination and violation of the right to private life, access to housing and to public services, especially in the case of income safety recipients.
- Job uncertainty is threatening the right to work, the right to fair and reasonable working conditions, and the right to organize.

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<sup>1</sup> For a short and recent reminder of all such undeniable consequences, the Commission refers the reader to the document entitled « *Une société qui se tire dans le pied* », Centraide Quebec, September 2000, 31 pages.

Furthermore, poverty is an aggravation and a complication of specific discriminations affecting especially women, handicapped persons, as well as natives and visible minorities.

This year, Quebec is celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*. The preamble of this Charter states that all human beings are equal in value and dignity, possess intrinsic rights and freedoms, aimed at guaranteeing their protection and their fulfilment, as well as the recognition that such rights and freedoms constitute the basis of justice and peace.

Poverty – which does affect an important proportion of the Quebec population – is a denial of the ideals, values and commitments contained in this Charter.

Poverty is especially a denial of a person's right to effectively enjoy, in conformity with section 10 of the Charter, all of its rights and freedoms, without any discrimination based on social status. Poverty also ignores one of the basic features of the Quebec Charter: the recognition of economic and social rights. The Quebec Charter is indeed the only document of its kind, in Canada, that does recognize the right to measures of financial assistance and to social measures provided for by law, susceptible of ensuring such person an acceptable standard of living (section 45). An acceptable standard of living should mean a standard that does not threaten the enjoyment of other fundamental rights, and especially the right to integrity and the right to equality.

Finally, poverty is incompatible with Quebec's international commitments. When it did accept the ratification, by Canada, of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, Quebec did commit itself to proceed, as quickly and as efficiently as possible, in order to guarantee, progressively, the full use of economic and social rights, which includes the obligation to take strong initiatives against poverty.

**Consequently, the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse states that:**

- . Poverty is the most pressing issue concerning Human Rights and Freedoms in today's Quebec;
- . None of the various political or economic theories can diminish the responsibility of the State to the population it must represent and serve;
- . Global competition, however severe, can never be an excuse allowing corporations to forfeit their own social responsibilities;
- . The State, first and foremost, as well as the community must consider the fight against poverty as a major and necessary priority.