

IWD SPEECH 1989

This year's March 8th Coalition chose the theme of Women Against Poverty because it is the most pressing issue facing women nationally as well as globally. Poverty is an inhuman social condition which is a central feature of capitalism, a system which is built on massive exploitation of the majority by a wealthy minority. We embrace this theme because it affects most women in their everyday life. Poverty is not something far away or in the Third World, it is right here in the lives of most of the women in Canada. Whether they live in Vancouver or St. John's. Whether they live in Yellowknife or Windsor. Whether they live in Preston or Montreal. Whether they are women who live in urban or rural areas. Whether they are Native Women, Black Women, Asian women or White women, Lesbian or straight. The majority of us are poor.

We are poor because a small ruling class exploits our labour in the home and in the workplace. Not only do they exploit our labour but they regulate our sexuality and maintain the sexual division of labour, all of which makes women the poorest of the poor. No longer can we intellectualize the issue of poverty, glossing it over with words, numbers and theories. Poor people are not responsible for poverty, rich people are. Poverty is in the streets. Poverty is in the shelters. Poverty is in the projects. Poverty is on the Reserves. Poverty is in our homes. Poverty is

everywhere and we the women must fight to eliminate it. We are not talking about mere reform we are talking about revolutionary change.

The Free Trade deal has made the issue even clearer to all of us, the corporate sell out of Canada by the Mulroney government and the big capitalists has tighten the screws on working class women. The small gains of working class women over the last 10 years whether they were Latina women, Chinese women, Italian women or Asian women fighting for a better wage in the textile industries or whether they were Black women and Phillipina women fighting for better wages in the hospitals, hotels, nursing homes, private homes or whether they are Native women fighting for a wage at all. These minimal gains have been totally wiped out by the privitizaation of Canada by the Free Trade deal.

We have to start the fight all over again, women need a living wage and we demand it right now. We demand better jobs and a higher minimum wage.

It is no accident that a large percentage of welfare recipients in this country are women . 70% of poor households are headed by single women struggling to survive on social assistance. How can a woman with 4 children survive on \$800 a month in this city? \$800 which has to be

stretched over food , rent, clothing and transportation. Social assistance in Ontario is just enough to starve on. Welfare is not a handout it is not charity. It is a necessity because the government refuses to provide full employment and universal childcare. The women's movement has demanded universal childcare since the conception of the movement. Today years later we are still demanding it. We the March 8th Coalition demand that the government raise social assistance above the poverty line, and that the Ontario government implement the Transitions report submitted by the Social Assistance Review Board.

The lack of safe, affordable and low-income housing in Metro Toronto is a damn disgrace, Ruthless real estate developers and their government brown nosers have hijacked the living spaces of poor women in this city. Inner city dwellings, traditionally housing for low income people have been bought up , renovated and priced beyond the reach of poor and working class women. No woman should be in the position to take her children to hostels or leave her children and have the state care for them. Hostels are not the answer although they are an absolute necessity at ~~the~~ present.

70% of buildings in Metro Toronto are adult only bulidings , and most housing is not barrier free and therefore inaccessible to women with

disabilities. There is no reason why anyone in this country should be homeless. The land is there. The money is there. The need is there. We demand decent, affordable, accessible and low-income housing.

In these homes on the streets in the workplace women are not safe. Women are targets and men are perpetrators of violence against us. The society that we live in not only permits but encourages this. The sexual violence against women is so staggeringly high that these outrages seem the norm rather than the exception in women's lives. So many women are under siege it is as if war has been declared on us. Lesbians are harassed by the police, Blacks and People of Colour are brutalized and killed. Why is it that the police can shoot and kill a 17^{year old} Black youth with a bullet to the back of the head but cannot find a rapist in Scarborough who has repeatedly hunted and attacked women over the last several months. We demand change!

The women's community need more crisis support workers and more safe houses. We demand a judicial system which conscientiously prosecutes perpetrators of violence against women.

Poverty is the single most important factor in the continuation of ill health in our society. Poor women have much higher risks and reduced access to healthcare than do rich and middle class women. Our economic

status forces us to live and work in places that are often dangerous to our health, such as those which are pest infected, have inadequate heating and insufficient safety precautions. We are more likely to have to live near factories that produce chemical waste and other dangerous pollutants. We are also more likely to work in hazardous conditions. Often we do not have enough money for proper foods for our children risking malnutrition. We demand a more accessible healthcare system. We demand full drug and dental plan, user fee must be eliminated, cut-backs and privatization must be stopped. We demand family coverage for lesbian families. We demand more money for AIDS research, the homophobic government has proposed \$12.9 million over 5 years for AIDS research this is not enough, especially when they plan to spend over \$12 billion to buy unnecessary submarines. Our lives are worth more than submarines. Healthcare must not be a privilege for the few but a right for all.

Year after year we continue to demand full human rights for women. As the great civil rights activist Fanny Lou Hamer said, "we are tired, we are sick and tired of being sick and tired." Poor and working class women must rise up against poverty and injustice. Rise up against exploitation and oppression. Little does the Mulroney government and the corporate capitalists know that by further oppressing women with the Free Trade

deal they are strengthening women's power to struggle. They have planted the seeds for their own destruction. This is a moment of great challenge for the women's movement in this city and this country. We stand at a major cross-road between crisis and opportunity. There are many things which divide this movement. Over the last several years Racism in particular has hindered the critical progress of the movement. What it has shown is that we cannot move unless all women move together. In order to do so we must build a truly representative movement. Poor women! working class women! Native women! Black women! South Asian women! Chinese women! Latina women! white women! Lesbians! - We must rise up. Now is the time to Rise up and overturn this oppressive system. Now is the time to rise up and unite toward social equality.