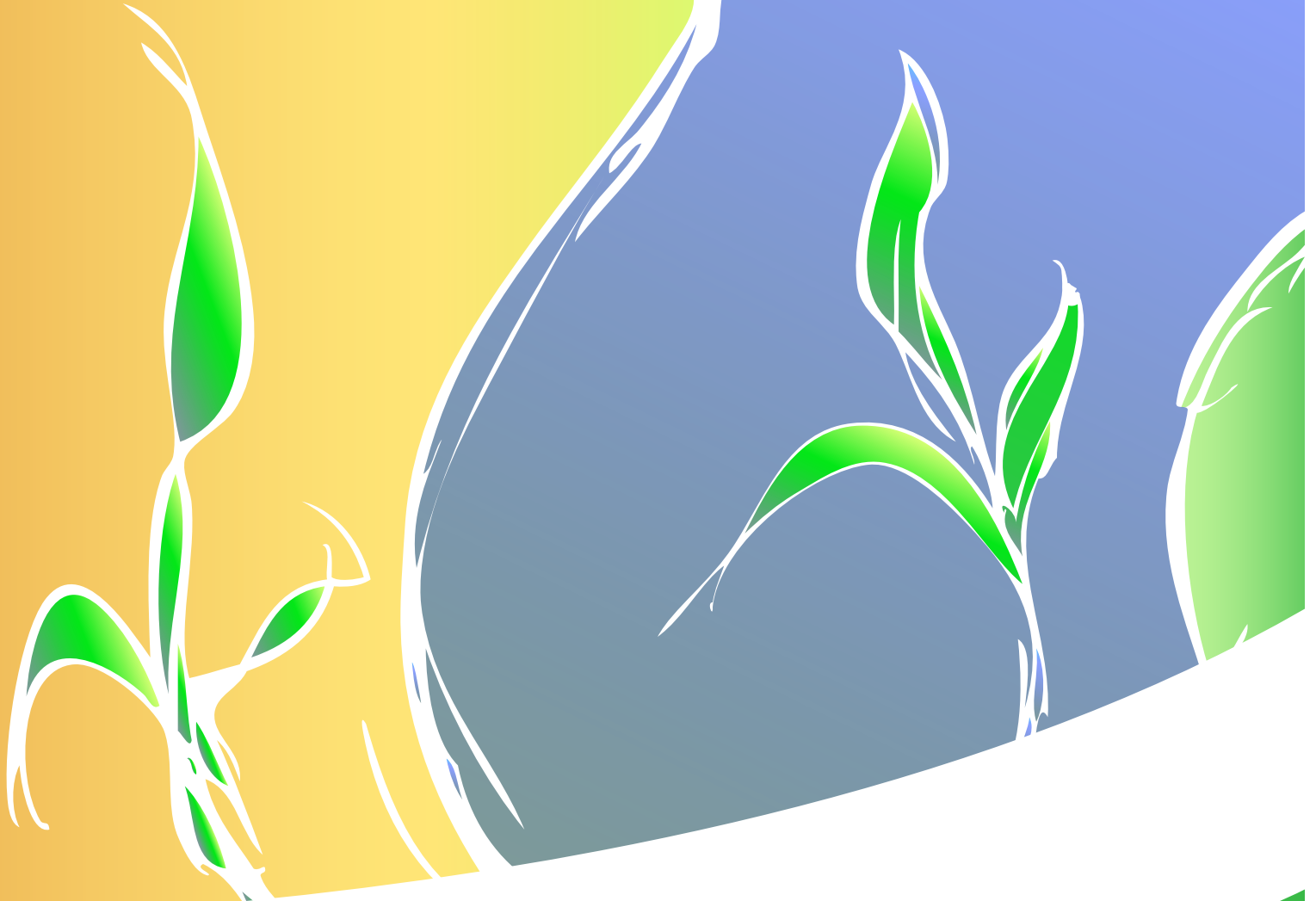


The Birth of Change: Influencing Parental Benefits Policy



Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network
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ISLAND

The Birth of Change: Influencing Parental Benefits Policy

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Introduction

Women's Network PEI (WNPEI) is a not-for-profit organization that works to strengthen and support the efforts of women living on Prince Edward Island to improve the status of women in our society. In this report we provide an evaluation of one particular area of work, conducted over the period of 2001 – 2006, through which WNPEI sought to: understand the content and ramifications of Canada's parental benefits policy and legislation; develop strategic alliances to generate consensus around recommendations to improve access to and quality of parental benefits; and influence the Canadian public and policymakers in an attempt to bring about positive change. This report documents WNPEI's experience from the inception of the project in 2001 to the end of the funded project in 2006. In following the life course of the project, one can see how it developed and grew in impressive and unprecedented ways. One gains insight into how the efforts of a small, women-centered organization on Prince Edward Island was able to influence policymaking and attain national and international recognition. We attempt to document a range of project impacts — not only impacts on the parental benefits policy-making process, but also on the participating community-based, regional and national organisations engaged in the struggle for change.

This research is important because it addresses the ongoing disparity that women in Atlantic Canada face (compared to men) in relation to wages and, consequently, parental benefits. This issue is particularly urgent for women in low-paid and non-standard work, including those in seasonal, part-time, temporary and short term contract positions. Women dominate these types of employment sectors and therefore find it more difficult to meet eligibility requirements for Employment Insurance, and for maternal and parental benefits. The same women often find it financially impossible to take time off for a year to care for young children. These are important issues related to women's economic autonomy and the particular vulnerability of economically marginalized women.

This evaluation represents the latest step in a process that was started by Women's Network in 2001. We trace the previous project's footsteps by re-visiting some of the people, departments, and organizations that were involved, to identify how the project's information and recommendations have influenced them, and with what results.

The key questions addressed in this report are: How does the communication of policy recommendations influence public policy? Have any changes to parental benefits legislation been adopted, or are any under consideration as a result of WNPEI's communications project? Who currently has the requisite capacity to continue the struggle for more equitable access to parental benefits?

Methodology

Research for this report was conducted over the summer of 2008, by a researcher having no attachment to WNPEI, nor any prior involvement with the Parental Benefits project. The researcher conducted structured interviews with key informants identified by WNPEI Board executive, the WNPEI communications officer, and a former project evaluator. All informants were persons who either played key advisory roles in the project, or were strategic targets of the lobbying efforts undertaken. The record of their post-project activities (i.e. whether or not they continued to work for change), and their knowledge of whether and how recommendations had been taken up, were used as indicators of the impact of the project on policy advocacy and potential reform.

Each prospective informant was presented with a letter of introduction that outlined the process and goals of the research, and asked for their participation. If willing to participate, they were asked to sign a consent form. The interviews were conducted by telephone, and, with permission of the participant, were tape-recorded. Each participant was asked the same five questions, which revealed how participation in the project had influenced their thinking and activities, and what impacts they had noted that resulted from the communication and dissemination of the project's research findings and recommendations.

The interviews were transcribed, coded, compiled, and analysed to provide insights into how the project information was received, what aspects of the project were deemed effective, and what was not effective or required more work.

Additional information was extracted from the Women's Network website, project communications and reports, and articles that appeared in various print media.



Looking Beyond the Surface: An In-depth Review of Parental Benefits, 2001 - 2006

Identifying the Issue

The initial research was inspired by two related incidents: a change in public policy around parental benefits, and the recognition of the impact of this change on an individual parent. In January 2001, Human Resources Development Canada made the decision to extend the parental benefits pay-out period for eligible men and women to one year. A member of the Board of Directors of Women's Network PEI mentioned that it was too bad that she could not access the year of leave from her work, because she was self-employed. Other Board members were surprised to hear that she wasn't eligible and a conversation ensued during which they wondered how many other women were not able to enjoy access to benefits. The Board asked the WNPEI staff to look into the matter, and so the project was born, with the intent of uncovering ways in which the policy could be improved, to better serve the needs of parents.

Project Leadership

Women's Network PEI established an Advisory Committee for the project, which consisted of eight members drawn from a range of communities and organisations across Atlantic Canada:

- *Women's Issues Branch, Executive Council Office, New Brunswick*
- *Women's Policy Office, Newfoundland & Labrador*
- *Public Service Alliance of Canada, Prince Edward Island*
- *Inter-Ministerial Women's Secretariat, Prince Edward Island*
- *New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women and Urban Core Support Network*
- *PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women*
- *FFAW/CAW Research and Communications, Newfoundland & Labrador*
- *A community representative from Nova Scotia.*

The role of the Advisory Committee was to provide guidance and overall direction to the project, as well as to help disseminate the research findings and recommendations.

Phase 1: Initial Research

The research project received funding from Status of Women Canada, a federal government department that works towards the inclusion and full participation of women in the economy and society in Canada. This allowed the WNPEI to amass preliminary but very important information from people and groups across Atlantic Canada. The result was an inclusive snapshot of the reality of mothers and parents dealing with the choices available to them in terms of parental and maternal benefits. This was important material because it lay bare the consequences — intended and unintended — that policy and legislation can have. Such real life stories gave a voice to those who are most affected by inappropriate policies and programmes.

“Getting the stories is important” is something that the project Communications Officer noted early on in the research work.

Over 15 months in 2002-2003, Women’s Network PEI conducted a review of the federal parental benefits legislation; undertook Atlantic-wide consultations with parents and women’s equality seeking organizations; and disseminated the research findings. From that early research, it was quickly confirmed that maternity and parental benefits are not equally accessible to all parents.

The reports out of the Maternal and Parental Benefits project, entitled *Looking Beyond the Surface: An In-depth Review of Parental Benefits*¹, mark the first steps in a long term process of examining parental and maternity benefits legislation. Phase 1 served to explore the issues by listening to community voices throughout Atlantic Canada.

Phase 2: Identifying Areas for Action

To help address the issues identified by the initial research, Women’s Network PEI conducted a second phase of the project in 2004. Phase 2 started with analysis of the previous research findings, and also included further research to identify and describe particular issues of concern in regard to the parental benefits program. The research involved literature and statistical reviews, focus groups, best practices reviews, and consultations with elected MPs from all parties represented in the House of Commons. Contacts were made with the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, federal NGOs, policy think tanks, Senators, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Status of Women, and senior policy officials.

The research showed that there are serious inequities with respect to access to the current options available to parents under the Employment Insurance Act. Women are less likely than men to qualify for parental and maternity benefits. This is especially true for women who are arguably more vulnerable, such as women with low-income, aboriginal women, single mothers, teenage mothers, minority and immigrant women.

The project explored policy options through a process of international comparative review and an analysis of the Canadian context. This body of evidence was the basis for developing appropriate and feasible policy recommendations. Women’s Network was able to develop one long term and ten short term recommendations that would help to improve access to parental and maternity benefits². The recommendations were validated through initial dissemination and communications with the community of interest and with a number of appropriate officials and government policy makers.

The project then went into a third phase, whose purpose was to undertake strategic communication of the final recommendations to a wider variety of government figures and policy-think tanks.

Phase 3: Getting the Message Out

Once the first and second phases of the project had been completed, the next logical step was to communicate the findings, information and stories more broadly. The idea was to reach a variety of target audiences, from mothers to policy makers to grass-root organizations and the general public. One of the main goals was to sow the seeds of public policy changes that would increase access to parental benefits, and increase the value of maternity and parental benefits available.

Between 2006 and 2008, this third phase of the project was carried out, under the name *Improving Maternity and Parental Benefits for Canadians*³. The objectives were to:

*Work with partners toward specific change to parental benefits legislation; and
Engage the Canadian public and decision-makers in a discussion about the reforms needed in parental benefits legislation.*

The phase 3 objectives were achieved through: bringing together partners to support the process and enable the outcomes; building the capacity of those partners to communicate effectively; expanding the coalition to include other experts working in the area; developing a communications plan; developing communication tools; and carrying out the communications plan. The public communications plan explained the policy recommendations to key audiences and decision-makers using a four-pronged approach that reached government, grassroots organizations, academia, and the general public.

In this phase, Women's Network worked closely with two other organizations with the goal of making specific changes to parental benefits legislation. These organisations were the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) and the Association Feminine d'Education et d'Action Sociale (AFEAS). All three organizations (WNPEI, NAWL and AFEAS) worked together, recognizing their common goals and understanding one another's environment. Each had a relevant body of knowledge concerning the appropriate audiences to target with the parental benefits recommendations, and they understood the need for good timing and coordination of actions, and the importance of having a consistent and clear message.

The Project Coordinator for WNPEI had interacted with both NAWL and AFEAS early in the project, to introduce them to the project goals and elicit their support. Representatives from each organization subsequently met with the Project Coordinator via teleconference. As a result, WNPEI was invited to present their findings at the *Improving Maternity and Parental Benefits Outside of Quebec* workshop that was attached to the *Mothering-In-Law Conference* organized by NAWL. The Project Coordinator and Advisory Committee regularly referred other organisations to the work done by NAWL and AFEAS, and directed people to their websites.

List of organizations communicated with/ engaged in the course of the project.

Association Féminine d'Éducation et d'Action Sociale (AFEAS)

Atlantic Provinces Economic Council.

Birth Options Research Network.

British Columbia Coalition for Women's Equality and Human Rights

Caledon Institute of Social Policy

Canada Policy Research Network

Canadian Association of University Teachers

Canadian Auto Workers

Canadian Bar Association

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

Canadian Childcare Federation

Canadian Council on Social Development

Canadian Federation of University Women

Canadian Institute of Child Health

Canadian Labour Congress

Canadian Rural Partnership

Canadian Union of Public Employees

Carlton University Sprott School of Business

Children's Secretariat

Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux.

Council of Canadians

Dalhousie University Women's Centres

Equal Voice

Families First Family Resource Centre, PEI

Feminists for Just and Equitable Public Policy

GPI Atlantic

Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS) and Huairou Commission

Lone Mothers Project

Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research

National Anti-poverty Organisation

National Association of Women and Law (NAWL)

National Coalition of Advisory Councils

Newfoundland & Labrador Feminist Coalition

Nova Scotia Environmental Network

PEI Working Group for a Livable Income

Policy Link New Brunswick

Pregnancy, Birth and Infancy Network

Prince Edward Island Aboriginal Women's Association

Prince Edward Island Literacy Alliance

Prince Edward Island Reproductive Care Program

Prince Edward Island Women's Association

Queens University Law

Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network

The Victorian Order of Nurses

The Women Entrepreneurs, Research and Public Policy Initiative

Université d'Ottawa

Université du Québec à Montréal.

Université Laval

University of Manitoba

Women in Cities International

Women's Centres, Newfoundland & Labrador

Women's Institute PEI

YWCA

Breadth of Public Engagement

Over the years, the project has engaged with many organizations whose mandate is to promote women's participation in the economy and society (see list below). The Project Coordinator and Advisory Committee members communicated the key messages and shared the research findings and recommendations with local, regional and national organizations, sometimes by way of face to face meetings that had important spin-off effects that will be discussed below. In addition, WNPEI worked on developing collaborative relationships with as many of these organizations as possible.

Some of the contacts that were made proved especially fruitful. For example, the Project Coordinator attended the Grassroots Women's International Academy and the World Urban Forum in Vancouver, British Columbia in 2006. Women's Network PEI's work to improve maternity and parental benefits for Canadians was recognized by GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission for its best practices, and was part of the display at the World Urban Forum III. During the Grassroots Women's International Academy, the Project Coordinator participated in small group activities and whole-group discussions on the cross-cutting themes that emerged from their experience-sharing. During the Women's Program of Activities attached to the World Urban Forum, the Project Coordinator participated in the daily women's caucus, team meetings, networking events and the women's reception. Attending these events allowed the Project Coordinator to establish networks and share the project research and recommendations. In addition, the work on maternity and parental benefits was featured in the Fall 2007 edition of the GROOTS newsletter.

The Project Coordinator also had the opportunity to meet with researchers working on the Lone Mothers Project, which focused on researching the current situation of lone mothers, and promoting policies to improve the health of lone mothers in Atlantic Canada. During the meeting, the Project Coordinator discussed the issues and shared the preliminary maternity and parental benefits research findings and recommendations. This meeting led to a subsequent meeting with the Prince Edward Island Minister Responsible for Status of Women, the Chair and Director of the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women, and the Director of the Inter-Ministerial Women's Secretariat.

Several of the contacts made developed into funding partnerships. Women in Cities International provided the Project Coordinator with financial support to join the women's delegation at the World Urban Forum III. The Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network provided funds for the Phase 3 proposal development, and also supported WNPEI's participation in an international conference. As a member of this network, WNPEI had many opportunities to discuss the issues and share the research findings and recommendations with other NGOs and their academic research partners.

In other cases, the organisations used the WNPEI research products to support their own work. For example, the Women Entrepreneurs, Research and Public Policy Initiative used the maternity and parental benefits research in one of their projects, which identified and summarized research pertaining to Canadian women business owners.

After the Project Coordinator sent the Prince Edward Island Reproductive Care Program

briefing notes on the fact that maternity benefits go to mothers who have lost a child at birth, their Coordinator had the briefing notes published in the *Medical Society Journal*, and also sent them to two hospitals in Prince Edward Island where babies are delivered.

The Prince Edward Island Literacy Alliance contacted the Project Coordinator to learn more about the project, and to access the notes and agenda from the Communications Workshop, to help them organize their own communications workshop. Policy Link New Brunswick reported sharing information on the WNPEI project with their membership.

Employing Existing Networks

In some cases, project staff used their positions on the boards of other organisations as a route for dissemination. For example, a Project Coordinator was also a member of the Children's Secretariat, which is a network of networks that links groups and coalitions working on behalf of young children and their families. Sitting on the Secretariat provided the Project Coordinator with the opportunity to speak about maternity and parental benefits at one of their meetings.

A Project Coordinator was appointed Chair of the Pregnancy, Birth and Infancy Network which includes representation from community and provincial government departments that focus on key areas of action for healthy child development. Through this network, she was able to share information on the project, and host an information booth on maternity and parental benefits at the 'Island Baby Fair'.

One Project Coordinator worked with the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income. This is a coalition of individuals and community organizations who promote the belief that PEI workers are entitled to an income that will allow individuals and families to meet their financial needs with dignity. Through this group, the Project Coordinator was provided with the opportunity to present information related to maternity and parental benefits, child care, and compassionate care benefits at a forum in Montague, PEI.

A Project Coordinator also volunteered as a resource mother with Families First Family Resource Centre in PEI, and was therefore available to answer any questions staff or parents had on maternity and parental benefits.

Advisory Committee Efforts

Members of the project Advisory Committee played key roles, individually and collectively, in disseminating the project's recommendations. One active subcommittee created a project summary for dissemination, and also developed a document that provided an overview of international best practices in parental benefits policy.

The community member from Nova Scotia organized an event to celebrate International Women's Day, where the documentary *Who's Counting: Marilyn Waring on Sex, Lies and Global Economics* was shown. A discussion on women's roles in society and the importance of women in government ensued, during which the project's research and recommendations were presented. Since this event, the community member has continued to keep a number

of organizations who attended the event up-to-date on the project work. She also attended NAWL's *Mothering-In-Law Conference*, sent out an email update to her networks that included information on maternity and parental benefits, co-wrote an editorial about the project work in 2007, and wrote a follow-up article for Mother's Day in 2008.

The Women's Policy Office in Newfoundland & Labrador had a representative on the Advisory Committee who briefed staff at the Women's Policy Office on the research and recommendations, and updated them on the project process during their monthly teleconferences. She also advised the Newfoundland & Labrador Minister responsible for Status of Women on the issues and research, and, together with the representative of the FFAW/CAW, facilitated an opportunity for the Project Coordinator to speak at two round table discussions in a conference of the Newfoundland & Labrador Organization for Women Entrepreneurs.

The Advisory Committee member from the FFAW/CAW in Newfoundland sent an email to all the Women's Centres in Newfoundland and Labrador and briefed staff of the Women's Policy Office on the project's recommendations. The Women's Centres expressed interest in hearing more. The Policy Office has monthly teleconferences with the Women's Centres, and has indicated that it will keep the parental benefits issue in view. Women's Centres will be an invaluable resource in helping to raise awareness about the issue, and in assisting with future communication efforts.

The representative of the Women's Issues Branch of New Brunswick advised the New Brunswick Minister responsible for Status of Women on the issues and research, and helped the Project Coordinator connect with the past president of the Moncton Business and Provincial Women's Club. This Club (as well as the Saskatoon and Montreal Clubs) are advocating for employment insurance benefits for self-employed people/business owners, and requested a copy of the project research and recommendations. They also showed interest in collaborating on future events, to raise awareness of the need for increased access to maternity and parental benefits for self-employed people/business owners.

The Public Service Alliance of Canada's representative arranged for the Project Coordinator to speak to a meeting sponsored by the PSAC and the Canadian Union of Public Employees. She also had copies of the communication documents translated into French and included in a conference package that went out to participants of the Maritimes Regional Women's Conferences held in Greenwood, Nova Scotia and Halifax, Nova Scotia in 2007.

The Prince Edward Island Advisory Council on the Status of Women had a representative on the Advisory Committee who formatted a one-page communication document, and regularly included information on the project in their weekly electronic newsletter. In addition, she presented to the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry on the subject of Rural Poverty, speaking specifically about maternity and parental leave and highlighting the project's one-page communication document.

The New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women and Urban Core Support Network had a representative on the Advisory Committee who presented the project recommendations to the Urban Core Support Network, provided a copy of the one-page

communication document to the New Brunswick Advisory Council members at their International Women's Day event, reported on the Communications Workshop at the New Brunswick Advisory Council quarterly meeting, co-wrote an editorial about the project work in 2007 which was printed in newspapers in all three Maritime Provinces, and referred to maternity and parental benefits and the need for change in various features on women's issues that were printed in the Times and Transcript newspaper.

The Inter-Ministerial Women's Secretariat of Prince Edward Island representative advised the Prince Edward Island Minister responsible for Status of Women on the issues, research and recommendations.

Dissemination through Public Presentations

Many individuals and organizations were introduced to the project's work via conferences, workshops, and training sessions. These included:

2007 Atlantic Summer Institute on Healthy and Safe Communities in Charlottetown, PEI: The Project Coordinator presented a poster board on the project during the four-day Institute, which provided an opportunity to network and discuss the research and recommendations with individuals working in the fields of health promotion, crime prevention, social development, economic development and injury prevention.

Community Action Program for Children/Canadian Prenatal Nutrition Program Atlantic Canada Conference: Supporting Families – Foundations for the Future: This conference provided an opportunity to network and share the research and recommendations with representatives from all of the Community Action Programs for Children, and from the Canadian Prenatal Nutrition Program resource centres in Atlantic Canada.

Influencing Public Policy and Mobilizing Change on PEI: A Workshop for Researchers, Students and Social Economy Organizations: The Project Coordinator attended this workshop where she shared the research and recommendations and established contacts with academics, social economy organisations and funding agencies..

International Association for Feminist Economics Conference in Bangkok, Thailand: The Project Coordinator presented the research paper from the 'Looking Beyond the Surface: An In-Depth Review of Parental Benefits' project to participants from over 35 countries. She also chaired a session on Political Participation and Empowerment, met with a number of people interested in the research, networked with other Canadians, shared information about Women's Network PEI, gathered information on other organizations, and shared the parental benefits research and resources with academics working on papers in other countries.

Mothering-In-Law Conference: The Project Coordinator attended this Conference which was hosted by NAWL, and presented research findings and recommendations during the *Improving Maternity and Parental Benefits Outside of Quebec* workshop.

National Anti-Poverty Organization 'Fair Shake for Families Fair' in Charlottetown, PEI: The Project Coordinator manned a booth during the event and provided information on the project research and recommendations to attendees.

Newfoundland and Labrador Organization for Women Entrepreneurs (NLOWE) Conference: The Project Coordinator took part in two round-table interactive discussions which allowed her to speak to the research and recommendations regarding self-employed workers' maternity and parental benefits.

The Atlantic Waves Conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Project Coordinator conducted a workshop at this conference which focused on the fact that women incur economic losses in the decision to have a child. The Conference focused on women's challenges in the Atlantic Provinces, and how they compare with their female counterparts across Canada.

The Maternal Health and Well-Being Conference, Toronto, Ontario: This Conference was hosted by the Association for Research in Mothering (ARM) at York University. ARM's mandate is to provide a forum for the discussion and dissemination of research on motherhood, and establish a community of individuals and institutions working and researching in the area of mothering and motherhood. The Project Coordinator presented the research findings and recommendations, and chaired a session on work/family balance.

Women in Business Symposium in Charlottetown, PEI: The Project Coordinator attended the Symposium to network and shared the research and recommendations with the attendees.

Reaching Key Constituencies and Decision-Makers/Policy-Makers

Many political constituencies and policy-makers were made aware of WNPEI's policy recommendations (see table below). Although impacts on policymakers are difficult to assess, evidence of some concrete follow-up of these contacts was documented. For example, after the Project Coordinator attended a meeting with members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women, she was able to speak informally with Maria Minna, a Member of Parliament who was sympathetic to the message.

The project's Communications Workshop facilitator met with the Committee Researcher from the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, and took the opportunity to share the research and recommendations. The Committee Researcher noted that she was impressed with the research, and might use it to help put questions together for Members of Parliament to use in the Committee.

Kathleen Rothwell of the Liberal Research Bureau heard about the research and contacted the Project Coordinator for more information. The Project Coordinator sent her a copy of the research and recommendations, together with a number of questions to forward to Members of Parliament during Question Period.

After an Advisory Committee member and a staff person met with Senator Percy Downe and shared information on the project research and recommendations, the Senator wrote a letter of support for the recommendations to the Liberal Leader, Stéphane Dion.

Senator Callbeck was also approached personally, and she indicated her interest in moving forward with a Senate Review on maternity and parental benefits legislation in Canada.

The Project Coordinator took part in a consultation process of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on the Government of Canada's Child Care Spaces Initiative. The WNPEI research and recommendations were subsequently used to help create a report entitled *Supporting*

Key political constituencies and decision-makers/policy-makers introduced to the research and recommendations.

<i>Atlantic Caucuses of the Senate and Parliament</i>	<i>New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women</i>
<i>Atlantic Liberal Caucus</i>	<i>New Brunswick Executive Council</i>
<i>Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada</i>	<i>NDP Caucus</i>
<i>Dr Carolyn Bennett, Liberal MP and Liberal Critic for the Social Economy</i>	<i>Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development</i>
<i>Federal/Provincial/Territorial Work Group on Access to Benefits</i>	<i>Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Status of Women</i>
<i>House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women</i>	<i>Policy Directorate of Status of Women Canada</i>
<i>HRSDC's Monitoring and Assessment Unit for Employment Insurance</i>	<i>Prince Edward Island Minister Responsible for Status of Women</i>
<i>Irene Mathysen, MP and NDP Housing and Status of Women Critic</i>	<i>PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women</i>
<i>Joe McGuire, MP</i>	<i>Inter-Ministerial Women's Secretariat of PEI</i>
<i>Lawrence MacAulay, MP</i>	<i>Premier of Prince Edward Island</i>
<i>Liberal Biennial Convention in Montreal, Quebec (representatives from all four Atlantic Provinces, the Regional VP, and various MPs)</i>	<i>Senator Catherine Callbeck</i>
<i>Liberal Caucus</i>	<i>Senator Libby Hubley</i>
<i>Liberal Research Bureau, Ottawa, Ontario</i>	<i>Senator Percy Downe</i>
<i>Martha Hall Findlay, MP, Outreach Chair for the Liberal Party of Canada</i>	<i>Standing Committee on the Status of Women</i>
<i>Ministerial Advisory Committee on the Government of Canada's Child Care Spaces Initiative</i>	<i>Status of Women Canada</i>
	<i>Women's Caucus of the Senate and Parliament</i>
	<i>Women's Policy Office, Nfld & Labrador</i>

Canadian Children & Families: Addressing the Gap Between the Supply and Demand for High Quality Child Care. The report focused on two possible ways of reducing demand for infant daycare spaces. One was to change access criteria for Employment Insurance, maternity and parental benefits.

It was noted that when Prince Edward Island's Minister Responsible for the Status of Women attended the 26th Annual Federal/Provincial/Territorial meeting in Nunavut, she championed the modernization of parental benefits, and stated in a press release that she was very pleased with the results of the widely accepted research conducted by Women's Network PEI.

Reaching the Public through the Media

As part of the communications plan, a media kit was created which included a one-page overview of the research and recommendations, a press release and the international comparison document. In addition, other publications were created and sent to media contacts as needed. The media kit was sent to key newspapers and to all CBC radio stations in all four Atlantic Provinces, as well as to Breakfast Television, Atlantic Voice Magazine, and Parenting Magazine. Articles about the recommendations subsequently appeared in newspapers across Atlantic Canada. Some of the other results can be seen in the table below.

A report on the consultation held by the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income was printed in The Guardian newspaper, quoting the Project Coordinator.

A report of Women's Network PEI taking part in the International Association for Feminist Economics Conference in Bangkok, Thailand was printed in the iPEI newspaper, The Guardian.

A short documentary about the project recommendations and research was aired in July 2007 on CBC Radio's Maritime Noon.

An article on maternity and parental benefits was written by a member of the Advisory Committee and printed in a newsletter in Nova Scotia.

An op-ed piece was written by Advisory Committee members and printed in several newspapers across the Atlantic Provinces in 2007, with a follow up article printed for Mother's Day in 2008.

During the National Anti-Poverty Organization 'Fair Shake for Families Fair' in Charlottetown, PEI, the Project Coordinator was interviewed for CBC Radio's Island Morning program, where she spoke about the research and recommendations.

The New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women and Urban Core Support Network representative referred to maternity and parental benefits, and the need for change on various women's issues, in several features that were printed in the NB Times and Transcript newspaper.



Project Accomplishments

Satisfaction with the Process and Outcomes

All Advisory Committee members and the Project Coordinator expressed satisfaction with the communications plan and the communications activities carried out. They felt that they were very successful in increasing awareness of the issues and promoting the research and recommendations. They noted that the number of individuals, organizations, and decision-makers/policy-makers reached was far beyond what they initially expected. Advisory Committee members stated that the Project Coordinator was very dedicated and took advantage of every opportunity to share the research and promote the work.

“...we did a great job with the communications...we reached a lot more people than I thought we would...” (Advisory Committee Member)

“The [Project Coordinator] went away above what I expected...she really took advantage of every opportunity and got the work out there...” (Advisory Committee Member)

“...we were able to achieve everything in the plan plus more...I’m very happy with this piece...” (Project Coordinator)

Based on the evaluation findings, it would appear that the project as a whole was well planned and organized, and that the activities carried out were appropriate. All Advisory Committee members and the Project Coordinator were very satisfied with how the project unfolded. The evaluation findings clearly show that the project was successful in developing collaborative partnerships with key groups, particularly the National Association of Women and Law (NAWL) and the Association Féminine d’Education et d’Action Sociale (AFEAS). NAWL and AFEAS staff were introduced to the maternity and parental benefits research and recommendations and worked with the project staff and Advisory Committee to develop a collaborative partnership, create and deliver the *Improving Maternity and Parental Benefits Outside of Quebec* workshop for the *Mothering-In-Law Conference*, and move the work forward to address the issues. Unfortunately, the project was unable to partner with NAWL to the extent hoped for, because, during the project timeframe, NAWL had to close due to funding issues. The partnership with AFEAS functioned primarily as an exchange of information and ideas — keeping one another in the loop so to speak, rather than working together as co-coordinators of the work. The Project Coordinator and Advisory Committee members still feel, however, that the partnerships were beneficial and helped move the work forward.

In addition to those two important partnerships, there were eight individuals from women’s groups across Atlantic Canada who worked together in the Advisory Committee to guide the

project work, develop a communications plan, and carry out the communications plan. Each Committee member made significant contributions, and the impacts of having the support of such an effective and hard-working committee were significant.

The Consensus-building Approach

A consensus-building approach was used when working with the Advisory Committee, and in the communications workshop a sincere effort was made to ensure that the needs of all partners were taken into consideration. Consensus building led to the determination of which recommendations to focus on, and to the development of the communications plan. In the end, all Advisory Committee members who participated in interviews noted that they were very satisfied with the approach used to guide the project work. They felt that they had ample opportunities to provide input, that their input was respected and used, and that their needs were always taken into consideration. Two Advisory Committee members expressed their belief that the parental benefits work was one of the best projects that they have ever been involved with.

Capacity Building

The evaluation showed that the project was very successful in increasing capacity among Advisory Committee members, in terms of their communications ability. They felt they had picked up some tools or knowledge that enabled them to effectively communicate the recommendations to key audiences. All respondents noted that, as a result of the communications workshop, they had a better understanding of many aspects of the project, including:

The scope of the project

Their roles within the process

The recommendations to be communicated

The basic theories of communication

The elements and processes involved in developing a communication plan

The need to identify who to direct a message to and why

The need for different messages for different audiences

The different methods of communicating to target audiences

Various key strategies/tips for communicating with policy makers and the media

The elements of various types of media

In addition, six out of seven Advisory Council members interviewed also noted that they had gained a better understanding of the current social, political and fiscal context of Canadian public policy.

Broad Engagement of Local, Regional and National Organizations

Throughout the course of the project, the Project Coordinator and Advisory Committee were able to increase awareness of the project and share the research findings and recommendations with more than 60 local, regional and national organizations across Canada. In addition, the research findings and recommendations were shared with more than 1000 individuals who were exposed to conference and workshop presentations.

Where possible, the Project Coordinator and Advisory Committee developed collaborative relationships with the organizations they contacted. All Advisory Committee members and the Project Coordinator were very satisfied with the number of organizations reached and they feel that the project was very successful in increasing awareness of the issues and of the research.

“...I definitely think we raised awareness of the issues...I’m impressed with how many people we reached...it was a lot of work but the [Project Coordinator] was very dedicated and did great work...” (Advisory Committee Member)

Awareness and Uptake of the Policy Recommendations

In addition to communicating the research findings and recommendations to various local, regional and national organizations, the project successfully increased awareness among the general public and among decision-makers/policy-makers. Articles on the project were printed in newspapers and newsletters throughout Atlantic Canada and two interviews were aired on CBC radio programs. The Project Coordinator and Advisory Committee were also able to connect with and share the research and recommendations with more than 100 politicians, government representatives and decision-makers/policy-makers. A number of these showed support for the research and recommendations, and have since made an effort to move the recommendations forward (See conclusions below).

The evaluation revealed a number of critical factors that contributed to the project’s success (see right).

Critical Factors that Contributed to the Project's Success

Having a dedicated and efficient Advisory Committee. The Project Coordinators noted that Advisory Committee members worked well together and contributed a significant amount of time and expertise to the project work.

Having skilled and dedicated staff. The Project Coordinators provided strong leadership and did a good job of guiding the project work. The Advisory Committee noted that they were very satisfied with the work done by both Project Coordinators and felt they did an excellent job of moving the work forward.

Having training in communications. Training was provided by a skilled and professional communications facilitator. The evaluation revealed that the facilitator did an excellent job of guiding the Advisory Committee and preparing them to guide the project, coordinate project work, deal with issues and challenges, and provide support and leadership.

Having a committed and reliable lead organization. The Advisory Committee noted that Women's Network PEI did a good job of planning and organizing meetings, and supporting the project work.

Using a consensus/shared decision-making process. This helped ensure that work stayed focused on the interests and needs of all partners involved. This approach also helped strengthen relationships among the Advisory Committee members.

Having a supportive funder. Status of Women Canada provided the flexibility needed to develop and adapt the project approach as required, to achieve the desired outcomes.



Conclusions: the Current State of Parental Benefits Policy Development

Owing to a lack of funds available for advocacy work, Women's Network is no longer working actively on maternity and parental benefits issues, but they do continue to monitor the progress of policy development.

Since the end of the project, Senator Libby Hubley (PEI) has launched a Senate inquiry into increasing access to maternity and parental leave. As well, during the 2008 Federal election, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made an election promise to increase access to benefits by allowing self-employed women to become eligible, much as had been adopted in Quebec. Since that time, Minister Diane Finlay began to work within the policy unit of HRSDC (Service Canada) to look at implementation of this election promise.

Although the evaluation has demonstrated many signs of a successful communications project, many barriers to timely policy and legislative change still exist. One barrier that affects social economy organisations such as Women's Network was demonstrated when WNPEI was recently (winter 2009) invited to testify at a second hearing of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Status of Women — ostensibly to give updated statistics on maternity and parental leave. Women's Network, not having core funding, can only dedicate human resources to maintaining expertise on particular issues when there is sufficient access to funds for related project work. Given that Status of Women Canada no longer funds research and advocacy activities, it is exceedingly difficult to maintain expert status.

It is vitally important for social economy organisations to be able to access funding to continue work in areas in which they become recognized as experts. These groups not only bring expertise to an issue, but also channel grassroots perspectives, bringing the community voice to the policy table.

Given the unstable and often insufficient funding environment for the social economy's non-profit sector⁵, it is important for community groups that take on policy issues to plan for the time when they will no longer be able to continue the work. In the case of their maternity and parental leave project, Women's Network PEI worked hard to engage a broad coalition in their efforts. They now feel confident that a number of other organisations, in particular the Canadian Bar Association and the Federal/ Provincial/ Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women, have taken up the torch and are continuing to actively advocate for change.

(Endnotes)

1 Lund Kirstin, (2004) “Looking beyond the Surface: An In-depth Review of Parental Benefits, Interim Report”, Women’s Network PEI

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2 Lund, Kirstin (December 2004), “A Principled Evaluation of Maternity and Parental Benefits in Canada”, Women’s Network PEI

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5 Groome-Wynne, B. (January 2008) “ Bridging Public Investment and Social Value: An examination of the supports for the Social Economy on Prince Edward Island”, Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network, PEI

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