

the POVERTY and HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

The Poverty and Human Rights project is an initiative of the Canadian Human Rights Reporter Inc., in collaboration with the Centre for Feminist Legal Studies (CFLS) at the University of British Columbia.

Project Goal

The goal of this Project is to strengthen the rights of the poorest people, by fostering recognition of rights to social and economic security, and by increasing the capacity of legal and community advocates to argue for the realization of those rights.

Canada is a signatory to international human rights treaties which oblige governments to address conditions of poverty, and the social and economic inequality experienced by disadvantaged groups. For example, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* commits governments in Canada to take positive measures to ensure that everyone has an adequate standard of living.

However, government social programmes are often not understood to be a fulfillment of the rights set out in these international human rights instruments. Consequently, changes or cuts to social programmes which threaten the social and economic security of the most disadvantaged groups in Canada are not easily understood as potential rights violations.

There is also a lack of understanding of the connection between rights to social and economic security and the right to equality. The group: “people living in poverty” is predominantly composed of women, Aboriginal people, people of colour, older people, and people with disabilities. Various forms of discrimination contribute to the poverty of these groups, and the realization of rights to social and economic security is essential to their achieving equality. Unfortunately, attempts to assert rights to social and economic security are often expressed in gender-, race- and disability- neutral ways which do not take into account the diversity or needs of poor people.

In recent years United Nations bodies that monitor compliance with human rights treaties have expressed concern about the need for enforcement of international human rights commitments within the domestic law enforcement regimes of State parties. The Supreme Court of Canada has affirmed that domestic law must be interpreted consistently with international human rights law.

However, there are significant obstacles to be overcome if courts and tribunals in British Columbia and the rest of Canada are to become effective venues for the enforcement of rights to social and economic security and to substantive equality.

poverty is a human rights violation

This is a central, but neglected area of law, and it is an important moment to devote resources to its development. An infusion of energy, research, analysis and community collaboration is needed to meet the challenges.

Activities of the Poverty and Human Rights Project

The Poverty and Human Rights Project undertakes research, writing, and education on poverty as a human rights issue. The discussion, analysis, research and information generated by the Project is intended to contribute to efforts in legal fora to promote interpretations of the *Charter* and other human rights instruments that will give life to rights to social and economic security. Activities include:

- Developing inventive, well-researched approaches to addressing the current barriers to domestic enforcement of rights to social and economic security;
- Developing methodologies most appropriate for advancing the realization of rights to social and economic security within different legislative frameworks, such as the B.C. *Human Rights Code* and the *Charter*;
- Compiling information on emerging case law related to rights to economic and social security; and data to support submissions about the social and economic disadvantage of particular groups in B.C. society;
- Holding think tank consultations with community advocates, law students and interested academics to develop approaches for addressing particular challenges that B.C. legal and community advocates are facing;
- Holding seminars on the right to social and economic security in conjunction with the Centre for Feminist Legal Studies and with community organizations;
- Providing stipends for law students and community advocates to support their involvement in the Project's research and other activities;
- Maintaining a website that provides links to Internet-available information for those working on rights to social and economic security;
- Providing access to a repository of materials for those doing research or advocacy in this area;
- Disseminating the research through academic and community conferences;
- Conducting local community workshops to explain and promote understanding rights to social and economic security.

Project Personnel

The Project has two half-time Directors, Gwen Brodsky and Shelagh Day. They are assisted by a part-time Project Co-ordinator and Senior Researcher, Angela J. Cameron, and by Student Research Associates. The Project also has Community Associates. For more information about the project, email phrp@telus.net.