

# Women's Poverty is an Equality Violation

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## A. INTRODUCTION

Poverty is an urgent equality issue for women all over the world. Since the Depression of the 1930s, Canada has had a history of good social programmes, and those programmes have been a central egalitarian force in women's lives. Public health care, childcare, affordable public education, unemployment insurance, and social assistance have all provided ways of ameliorating women's inequality, shifting some of the burden of unpaid caregiving to the state, and making available more opportunities for women to engage in paid work, education, and community life. Income security programs like employment insurance and social assistance have also softened women's dependence on men, ensuring that women have independent income at crucial times in their lives.

But this has changed in Canada. For some time now we have been experiencing restructuring "Canadian-style," including a race to the bottom among provincial governments to eliminate the entitlement to social assistance, narrow eligibility rules, and reduce welfare benefits. In recent years, successive governments have hacked away at the social safety net. Cuts to social programmes have hurt women.

The picture of women's poverty and overall economic inequality is shocking in a country as wealthy as Canada. Women have moved into the paid labour force in ever-increasing numbers over the last two decades,<sup>1</sup> but they do not enjoy equality there: not in earnings, in access to nontra-

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ditional jobs and managerial positions,<sup>3</sup> or in benefits.<sup>3</sup> The gap between men's and women's full-time, full-year wages is due in part to occupational segregation in the workforce, which remains entrenched, and to the lower pay accorded to traditionally female jobs. Although the wage gap has decreased in recent years, with women who are employed on a full-time, full-year basis now earning about 71 percent of comparable men, part of the narrowing of this gap is due to a decline in men's earnings, rather than to an increase in women's.<sup>4</sup>

Women's annual average income from all sources is about 62 percent of men's.<sup>5</sup> This significant difference in income is partly attributable to the wage gap, but also partly attributable to the fact that women work fewer hours than men in the paid labour force because they cannot obtain full-time work<sup>6</sup> and because they carry more responsibility for unpaid caregiving duties.<sup>7</sup> In 1999, 41 percent of women, compared to 29 percent of men, held non-standard jobs<sup>8</sup>—that is, they were self-employed, had multiple jobs, or jobs that were temporary or part-time. These jobs are unlikely to be unionized and unlikely to provide pensions or benefits.<sup>9</sup>

Some groups of women in Canada are more marginalized than others in the labour force. Aboriginal women are heavily concentrated in low-paying sales, service, and clerical jobs. They also have higher unemployment rates and lower earnings levels than other women.<sup>10</sup> Women of colour have higher education levels than other women, but not better jobs and better earnings. Instead, they too have higher unemployment rates and lower earnings than other women and than their male counterparts.<sup>11</sup> Immigrant women also generally earn less than other women and initially accept employment for which they are overqualified. They are more likely than other women to be employed in manufacturing work.<sup>12</sup> Women with disabilities earn less than their male counterparts and less than other women in most age groups.<sup>13</sup>

Even though women's earnings are substantially lower than men's, women play a significant role in keeping their families out of poverty through their earnings. Without women's earnings, poverty rates would rise dramatically and the number of poor families would more than triple.<sup>14</sup> In addition to diminished rewards for their labour, women do not enjoy an equal share of wealth, including property, savings, and other resources.<sup>15</sup>

The extreme manifestation of women's economic inequality is women's disproportionate poverty. More women than men are poor. Between 1984 and 2003, the poverty rate for women fluctuated between 22.1 percent and 15.9 percent, always higher than the rate of poverty for men.<sup>16</sup>

Even the lower rate is still extremely high. It means that, in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, one in six women is living below the poverty line. Further, the overall poverty rates mask the high rates of poverty of particular groups of women.

Single mothers and other “unattached women” are most likely to be poor. In 2003, 49.4 percent of all unattached women and 58.8 percent of single mothers were living below the poverty line. Unattached men have significantly lower poverty rates.<sup>17</sup>

The shockingly high rate of poverty among single mothers is even higher when the figures are disaggregated by race and by the mothers' ages. In 1996, 73 percent of Aboriginal single mothers were living below the poverty line.<sup>18</sup> In 1998, 85.4 percent of single mothers under twenty-five were living in poverty.<sup>19</sup>

Also, Aboriginal women, immigrant women, women of colour, and women with disabilities are significantly more vulnerable to poverty than other women in Canada. In 2000, 42 percent of Aboriginal women, 29 percent of women of colour, and 35 percent of women who are recent immigrants (those who arrived between 1991 and 2000) were living below the poverty line.<sup>20</sup> Aboriginal women and women of colour also have higher rates of poverty and substantially lower incomes than their male counterparts.<sup>21</sup> Women with disabilities had a poverty rate of 26 percent in 2000.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that women are economically unequal to men, and more likely to be poor, is not mere coincidence. It is the result of women's work not being properly valued; of women being penalized because they are the principal caregivers for children, old people, men, and those who are ill or disabled; and of systemic discrimination in the workforce which devalues the work of women, and marginalizes women workers who are Aboriginal, of colour, immigrants, or disabled. Income and poverty data not only reveal a general picture of material inequality in relation to the distribution of the society's wealth. They show the lower value that is assigned to women, and women's work, and particularly to single mothers, racialized women, and women with disabilities.

In an article published by the *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* in 2002,<sup>23</sup> we advanced the argument that a substantive approach to equality under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*<sup>24</sup> requires recognition of positive constitutional rights compelling governments to ensure that everyone has adequate food, clothing, and housing. To be clear, this is

an interpretive argument. This is not a call to amend the *Canadian Charter* to add explicit references to social and economic entitlements, such as those that appear in the South African *Constitution*,<sup>25</sup> but rather an argument that equality rights guarantees are capable of doing this work. We argued more particularly that the idea of a hierarchy between civil and political rights and economic, social, and cultural rights comes from an outmoded constitutional paradigm — one which clings to a negative rights model of constitutional rights, envisioning them only as restraints on harmful state action.

We suggested that a formal conception of equality rights fits well within such an outmoded negative rights paradigm, but that a substantive conception of equality rights does not. Rather, substantive equality, by definition, requires governments to take positive steps towards remedying group disadvantage, including the poverty of women. We put forward an analysis of women's poverty as a sex equality issue on the basis that it is a manifestation of discrimination against women, that affects women, and particular groups of women disproportionately, by exacerbating every form of social and sexual subordination that women experience. We concluded that women's right to substantive equality must be understood to encompass a basic right to income security because without that security, profound deprivations of personal autonomy, and of physical and psychological integrity — which are incompatible with women's equality — result. A shorthand way of summarizing our position might be: social and economic rights are civil and political rights.

A primary focus of our 2002 article was the case of *Gosselin v. Quebec (Attorney General)*,<sup>26</sup> which at the time was pending in the Supreme Court of Canada. Louise Gosselin's was the first *Charter* case concerning social assistance to reach the Supreme Court of Canada.

Since the publication of our earlier article, judgment in the *Gosselin* decision was rendered. Louise Gosselin's claim was unsuccessful. However, the decision was divided, and the majority decision purported to turn on the sufficiency of the evidence rather than legal principle. Because of this, its importance as a precedent may be negligible. Nonetheless, certain theoretical issues emerged that will be of enduring importance, as the struggle to address the injustices caused by cutbacks to social programmes continues. One crucial issue, which arose in the context of the section 15 reasoning, is whether discrimination is only about stereotyping. The central goal of this paper is to comment on how the Court dealt with the issue of stereotyping.

reotyping, in light of the analysis advanced in our earlier article. For the future of constitutional jurisprudence and women's equality it is critically important that there was a consensus on the Court — albeit incompletely developed or applied — that equality is not confined to protecting individuals from group stereotypes. The paper also touches upon the Court's decision concerning the section 7 rights to life, liberty, and security of the person, which confirms that the door is open for the Court to recognize that the *Charter* encompasses a positive obligation to ensure that everyone has a subsistence income.

## B. *GOSSELIN v. ATTORNEY GENERAL (QUEBEC)*: OVERVIEW OF THE DECISION

In 1984, the Quebec government altered its social assistance scheme in an effort to coerce young people into the labour force, through denial of the means of subsistence. Section 29(a) of the *Regulation Respecting Social Aid*<sup>27</sup> set the rate of welfare for adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty at roughly one-third of the regular rate paid to those thirty years of age and over. In dollar terms, the difference was \$170 per month compared to \$466 per month — \$466 per month being the amount the Quebec Legislature had defined as “the bare minimum for the sustainment of life.”<sup>28</sup> The monthly cost of proper nourishment alone was \$152 per month.<sup>29</sup>

The under-thirties could increase their rate by participating in three different “employability programs.” But the government's employability programs were structurally incapable of allowing all the under-thirty recipients to reach the regular rate of welfare, defined as necessary to meet basic needs. This was so because: not all of the programs provided participants with a full top-up to the basic level; there were temporal gaps in the availability of the various programmes to willing participants; welfare recipients who were illiterate or severely under-educated, or “over-educated,” could not participate in certain programs; and only 30,000 program places were available for 75,000 under-thirty welfare recipients.

Although some people in the under-thirty age group were able to access employability programs through which they could get themselves back to the regular rate, for the vast majority, the regular rate was out of reach.<sup>30</sup>

Living on the reduced rate had severe physical and psychological effects. The reduced rate did not provide enough income to allow the men and women in the under-thirty group to meet basic needs for food, cloth-

ing, and shelter. They resorted to degrading and criminalized survival strategies, such as begging and petty theft. They were often homeless and malnourished. They experienced psychological stress, anxiety, and despair.

The reduced rate put women at risk in specific ways. For example, as a survival strategy, some young women on the reduced rate became pregnant and had children in order to become eligible for benefits at the regular rate of social assistance. A number of young women on the reduced rate engaged in prostitution, or accepted unwanted sexual advances to try to keep their apartments, to pay monthly expenses, such as heat and electricity, or to buy food.

The appellant Louise Gosselin brought a class action on behalf of herself and approximately 75,000 other young people who were affected by the regulation between 1985 and 1989. The constitutional issue before the Supreme Court of Canada was whether the challenged regulation violated section 7 or 15 of the *Charter*. Louise Gosselin's claim was rejected on all grounds.

As we have said, the decision was deeply divided. The section 15 decision was particularly close, a 5–4 split. In its section 15 decision, the majority ruled that cutting the social assistance rate of adults under thirty to a below-subsistence rate was not a violation of section 15. The five-judge majority identified the disagreement with respect to section 15 as not being about the “fundamental approach” to section 15 but rather about whether the claimant had discharged her burden of proof. Similarly, regarding the section 7 rights to life, liberty, and security of the person, the decision was split (7–2). That decision features a particularly strong dissenting opinion by Arbour J. concurred in by L'Heureux-Dubé J. As with section 15, the explanation of the majority for refusing the section 7 claim was that the evidence was insufficient, not that there is no constitutional right to social assistance.

## C. DISCRIMINATION IS NOT ONLY ABOUT STEREOTYPES

### 1) Stereotyping

One of the traditional understandings of anti-discrimination and equality guarantees is that their purpose is to protect individuals from the evil of stereotyping. The insight that discrimination may result from reliance on stereotype is important. Women have often benefited from the norm against stereotyping, particularly in the employment context, by demonstrating

their individual competence and thereby exposing the inaccuracy of generalized assumptions (stereotypes) about what women can and cannot do.

Similarly, in rental housing situations women have also benefited from the legally established principle that landlords are not permitted to refuse housing to single mothers based on a blanket assumption that single mothers do not pay their rent. Human rights jurisprudence says that the ability of prospective renters must be individually assessed, based on financial criteria, not negative group stereotype. Although this does nothing for the woman who cannot afford to pay for housing, it does afford some measure of protection for those who can afford to pay, but face stereotypes about their reliability.

As we argue elsewhere,<sup>31</sup> the challenged legislative scheme in the *Gosselin* case was discriminatory in the very way that discrimination has most traditionally been defined. It rested on a negative stereotype of people who are reliant on social assistance, and of young people reliant on social assistance in particular. Young people are particularly subject to the generalized assumption that laziness is at the root of their reliance on welfare. They are perceived to be the “sturdy beggars” who first appeared in the Elizabethan poor laws.<sup>32</sup> “Sturdy beggars” were the ones whom the parish was to punish if they did not work, while other indigents were to be fed and housed. In the *Gosselin* decision, various judges including LeBel J. addressed the problem of stereotyping. LeBel J. explained that withdrawing social assistance from young people was not related to the needs or abilities of welfare recipients under thirty years of age, but rather flowed from and reinforced a stereotype of social assistance recipients as “parasites.” LeBel J. pointed out that young people are the first to feel the impact of an economic crisis in the labour market, and that the problem in Quebec in the economic crisis in the 1980s was not that young people latched on to social assistance because of laziness but rather that there were no jobs available.<sup>33</sup> The stereotype was disproved by numerous experts. One example identified by LeBel J. was the report of Professor Gilles Guérin in which he wrote, *inter alia* (at page 65):

[TRANSLATION] An estimated proportion of 91% of young people (counting only those capable of working) perceive their situation on social aid as temporary and have a fierce desire to work, to have a “real” job, to collect a “real” wage, and to acquire socio-economic autonomy. An IQOP study shows that young people value being productive workers, that it is

preferable in their eyes to hold a job, even one that does not interest them, than to be unemployed. *The myth of the young social assistance recipient who is capable of working and is happy with social assistance is therefore completely false; work is what is most highly valued by the people around them, their friends and family and their neighbours, and by the young people themselves.*<sup>34</sup> [Emphasis added.]

Four of the five judges in *Gosselin* had no difficulty in perceiving the stereotype that was embedded in the regulation, of a young person as, by definition, lazy and unwilling to work. Louise Gosselin's story of having repeatedly tried and sometimes succeeded but other times failed at employment and job training, demonstrated the inaccuracy of the generalization. However, apparently the majority did not see this.

In the majority's view, the evidence established that the government's purpose was to help young adults achieve long-term autonomy,<sup>35</sup> by creating an incentive to compel young adults to participate in training programs that would increase their employability.<sup>36</sup> According to the majority, this purpose was not based on stereotype because it "corresponded to the actual needs and circumstances of individuals under 30,"<sup>37</sup> and was "an affirmation of their potential."<sup>38</sup> Although some under-thirty individuals may have fallen "through the cracks of the system and suffered poverty,"<sup>39</sup> this fact was not, in the majority's view, sufficient to establish discrimination.<sup>40</sup> The majority found that the negative financial incentive imposed on the under thirty group "was not imposed as a result of negative stereotypes."<sup>41</sup>

This conclusion is disturbing. The majority is guilty not only of refusing to closely scrutinize generalized and overly broad assumptions about young people's needs and capacities, and of failing to distinguish theoretical employability from a *de facto* crisis in the employment market, but also of embracing and perpetuating contempt for a vulnerable and historically marginalized group. However, the main point of this paper is not to argue that the majority should have recognized and rejected both the stereotype (of young welfare recipients as parasites) and the challenged regulation because it was poisoned by that stereotype. Rather, our main point is to reconsider the sufficiency of stereotyping as an understanding of what counts as discrimination, and to suggest that discrimination has other dimensions that should be more fully considered and developed.

There are various reasons why we should not treat stereotyping as the *sine qua non* of discrimination. One important reason is that insistence



on proof of stereotyping can too easily slide into a requirement for proof of malicious intent, contrary to the well-established principle that proving discrimination does not necessitate proving bad motive. Even before the *Charter*, anti-discrimination law in Canada held that it was not necessary to prove that discrimination was intentional and ill-motivated, and acknowledged that discrimination could result from the adverse effects of a facially neutral rule. It is also settled law that discrimination may result from the adverse effects of a seemingly neutral system of rules and practices, or from a combination of seemingly neutral rules and blatant prejudice. And yet, a decision such as *Gosselin* shows that judges may have difficulty in perceiving a negative stereotype embedded in a rule that the respondent believes has been imposed for the claimant's "own good."

Further, stereotyping consists of an unfounded or mistaken generalization about a group that is applied to individual members of the group, denying their individual capacity or needs. However, some differences between groups, such as those relating to pregnancy, certain disabilities, and historic disadvantages experienced by some groups, are real and not mistaken. Nonetheless, we do not or at least should not accept those differences, which are real, and not the product of mistaken generalizations, as a legitimate basis for practices that have the effect of reinforcing and perpetuating marginalization, material inequality, and subordination.

There is an additional problem; namely, the insufficiency of the responses to stereotyping. The antidotes to stereotyping are usually thought to be facial neutrality, and where necessary, individual assessment. However, when the problem is that social programmes that are vital to women's equality are being eroded, and poverty-reducing benefits that were formerly taken for granted are being cut, facial neutrality and individual assessment are not effective responses. Neither a facially neutral welfare scheme nor individual assessment can provide any comfort to a woman, if the scheme has been eliminated or rates have been reduced for all recipients.

We are aided in our endeavour to de-centre stereotyping by the fact that in *Gosselin* the Court agreed that the identification of an underlying stereotype is not an essential element of discrimination. On behalf of the majority McLachlin C.J. said that the absence of stereotypical thinking is only one factor to be considered, and that stereotypical thinking need not always be present for discrimination to be established. Implicit in this comment is the recognition that there are other factors that can give rise to a finding of discrimination. Although McLachlin C.J. did not develop

this point further, a door has been left open for developmental work to be done.

Claire L'Heureux-Dubé J., in her judgement, addressed the point, and there was no disagreement expressed by any member of the Court with her comment.

As we have noted, Supreme Court of Canada human rights jurisprudence<sup>42</sup> has never insisted on proof of stereotyping, intentional or otherwise. Sexual harassment is one example of a practice that has been found to be discriminatory, not because it is premised on a stereotype of women workers, but rather because it is an exercise of power, and a form of abuse, that reinforces women's inequality in their workplaces. Similarly, in *Meiorin*,<sup>43</sup> also known as the women firefighter's case, the Court held that a fitness standard which excluded many women from firefighting work and which had not been shown by the employer to be necessary to job performance, was discriminatory. If one digs deeply enough and examines the assumptions underlying the fitness standard that had been adopted, a sexist stereotype of who is a competent firefighter can be found, but this was not necessary to the Court's analysis.

In *Gosselin*, L'Heureux-Dubé J. points out that support for a fuller understanding of discrimination can be found in the Court's jurisprudence. As one example, she points to the Court's unanimous decision in *Law*<sup>44</sup> and notes that discrimination may result from differential treatment that reflects stereotyping "or otherwise has the effect of perpetuating or promoting the view that the individual is less capable, or less worthy of recognition or value as a human being or as a member of Canadian society."<sup>45</sup>

L'Heureux-Dubé J. states that the Court's concern for human dignity means that the equality guarantee "is concerned with physical and psychological integrity and empowerment,"<sup>46</sup> and the severe impairment of an extremely important interest — such as physical and psychological integrity — may itself be sufficient to ground a claim of discrimination. Applying the analysis to the facts of the *Gosselin* case, L'Heureux-Dubé J. concludes that section 29(a) was discriminatory because of the harm to physical and psychological integrity resulting from the fact of poverty and the constant fear caused by poverty. She concludes that Louise Gosselin was treated as less deserving of respect. In keeping with the point that human dignity is not only about stereotyping, but also about physical and psychological integrity, L'Heureux-Dubé J. also knits together the section 15 right to equality and the section 7 right to security of the person, opining that where,

as in *Gosselin*, harm is severe enough to give rise to a breach of the right to security of the person, there will be *prima facie* grounds for a claim of discrimination.

By drawing out the section 15 purpose of preventing the violation of human dignity L'Heureux-Dubé J. helps us to understand why the denial of subsistence should be considered discrimination. Judging people based on group stereotype rather than individuality is only one possible manifestation of discrimination. A consideration of other ways in which essential human dignity may be violated, and other purposes of section 15, provides a leaping-off point from which to identify additional bases for recognizing that a denial of the means of subsistence should be understood to constitute discrimination.

In *Law*, the Court said:

[the] purpose of section 15(1) is to prevent the violation of essential human dignity and freedom through the imposition of disadvantage, stereotyping, or political or social prejudice, and to promote a society in which all persons enjoy equal recognition at law as human beings or as members of Canadian society, equally capable and equally deserving of concern, respect and consideration.<sup>47</sup>

Taking a purposive approach, here then are some additional reasons for recognizing that denying social assistance to women — and men — in need is discriminatory.

## 2) Equality-Constituting Benefits<sup>48</sup>

Equality guarantees are concerned with ameliorating the inequality of major groups in society, including women. This can be understood either as another dimension of what it means to prevent the violation of essential human dignity through the imposition of disadvantage, or as another section 15 purpose; namely, the pursuit of substantive equality. The Supreme Court of Canada has used the terms “dignity” and “substantive equality” interchangeably.<sup>49</sup> Regardless, substantive equality’s associations, more so than the term “human dignity,” lie with group disadvantage, marginalization, and subordination. The concept of substantive equality recognizes that certain groups in society suffer from entrenched inequality, and that members of those groups are systematically denied basic rights, freedoms, and influence in the political process that others take for granted.

Government denial of the means of subsistence engages the section 15 goal of ameliorating group disadvantage. Poverty affects disadvantaged groups disproportionately. In Canada, the group “poor people” is disproportionately composed of Aboriginal peoples, women, people with disabilities, recent immigrants, people of colour, and single mothers. These groups have higher rates of poverty than average, some shockingly high. The economic inequality, as well as the social and political inequality, of members of these groups is part of the “fall-out” from complex and deeply rooted forms of discrimination. For this reason, it is necessary to deal with poverty as an aspect of sex, race, and disability discrimination. A central cause of poverty is entrenched patterns of systemic discrimination.

But poverty also exacerbates and deepens the inequality of members of already disadvantaged groups. Poor women get sex inequality writ large. As the facts in *Gosselin* showed, poverty forces women to accept sexual commodification and subordination to men in order to survive. They engage in prostitution or “survival sex” to get by. They lose autonomy to choose freely with whom and when they will have sex, and even whether and when they will have children. They are more vulnerable to rape, assault, and sexual harassment because they live in unsafe places, and they are not free to walk away from workplaces that are poisoned. They are not free to leave abusive relationships when destitution is the alternative. Poverty perpetuates women’s under-representation in governments and in decision-making and their lack of political influence.

Laws or policies that perpetuate or hold in place the disproportionate poverty of women, Aboriginal peoples, people of colour, or people with disabilities necessarily engage section 15 because they maintain or reinforce the disadvantage of already disadvantaged groups. Effective protection of the groups who suffer social, political, and legal disadvantage in Canada requires governments to address structural or systemic forms of discrimination and their effects.

Viewed from a women’s equality perspective, the section 15 guarantee of sex equality, on its own, imposes an obligation on governments to ensure that women are not denied income security adequate to meet basic needs.

We are supported in our analysis of social assistance as an equality-constituting benefit by the comments of the South African Constitutional Court in *Grootboom*.<sup>50</sup> The South African Constitutional Court held in *Grootboom* that it was a violation of the Constitution for the government to approve a development plan which entailed the displacement of home

less people, without making reasonable provision for people with no access to land, no roof over their heads, and who were living in intolerable situations or in crisis situations. The Court explained in *Grootboom* that, "The realization of rights to housing are "a key to the advancement of race and gender equality and the evolution of a society in which men and women are able to achieve their full potential."<sup>31</sup> The logic of the South African Constitutional Court's decision in *Grootboom*, particularly as it relates to the interdependency of social and economic rights and sex and race equality is also applicable in the Canadian context.

Although the South African Constitution contains explicit guarantees to social and economic rights, including access to housing, the absence of identical provisions in the *Canadian Charter* is not a persuasive reason for reading such entitlements out of the *Charter*. On the contrary, our argument is that in the name of realizing women's rights to equality, governments in Canada must provide social programmes, and that the obligation to do so is necessarily incidental to women's rights to equality, and to life, liberty, and security of the person.

A corollary is that an equality analysis is always relevant to poverty, even though there may be other rights that also apply. Seeing the group dimensions of poverty, and the layers of rights infringements it both causes and reflects, strengthens the claim that there is a societal obligation to address it. When we look at poverty through a group-based equality lens we open up new opportunities to see that poverty is more than an individual problem, because the patterns of who is poor are entrenched and reflect long-standing discrimination in the society. The analytical risk of failing to take account of the particular effects on disadvantaged groups is that the nature and extent of the harm of poverty-producing measures and their potential to reinforce pre-existing disadvantage and compromise fundamental interests may not be fully appreciated. Purely individualistic and gender-, race-, and disability-neutral explanations of poverty are just too simplistic. Commentary about group-based effects tells more of the truth of what is happening; it can show that there are qualitatively different impacts on certain groups; it may implicate a range of different constitutional rights and treaty provisions; and it can help to call into question the validity of the thesis that poverty is all about individual irresponsibility.

### 3) Equal Concern, Respect, and Consideration

Notwithstanding poverty's group dimensions, we do not suggest that the denial of the means of subsistence is an issue of discrimination only because the group, poor people, is disproportionately composed of members of historically disadvantaged groups, such as women.

Embracing the normative value of equality means that each person is understood to be inherently equal in dignity, equally worthy of respect, and equally entitled to share in the decision-making, responsibilities, opportunities, resources, and benefits of their society. Conditions that have the effect of obstructing equal participation by groups and individuals in the political, economic, and social life of their society, and equal enjoyment of widely agreed-to rights, including the rights to life, liberty, and security of the person, contravene the equality principle.

Poverty is one of the conditions that impedes equal participation in society, and puts people at greater risk with respect to the maintenance of life, health, and physical and psychological integrity.

In Canada, social assistance has been the established means of ensuring that even the poorest people are not deprived of the means of subsistence and totally banished from society. Social assistance is a fundamental social institution.

In a country as wealthy as Canada, for a government to refuse adequate social assistance to meet basic needs to a person in need is a blatant signal that that person is not regarded as equal in worth and dignity.

## D. THE RIGHTS TO LIFE, LIBERTY, AND SECURITY OF THE PERSON

Section 7 of the *Canadian Charter* reads:

Every person has the right to life, liberty and security of the person, and the right not to be deprived thereof, except in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice.

The Court's handling of section 7 of the *Charter* was also significant in *Gosselin*. The majority chose not to apply section 7 in this case, not because section 7 does not include positive obligations, but rather because, in the majority's view, the evidence was insufficient to warrant the application of section 7. The majority left the door open for future section 7 challenges based on government inaction, saying that "it would be a mistake to regard

section 7 as frozen, or its content as having been exhaustively defined in previous cases,” and stated that “[o]ne day section 7 may be interpreted to include positive obligations.”<sup>52</sup> McLachlin C.J. said, “I leave open the possibility that a positive obligation to sustain life, liberty, or security of the person may be made out in special circumstances.”<sup>53</sup>

Arbour J., with the concurrence of L’Heureux-Dubé, went much further. Even though her decision regarding the application of section 7 is a dissent and even though it is about section 7 rather than section 15, it is relevant to our topic, and it is a resource for future litigation because it “deconstructs the various firewalls”<sup>54</sup> that are said to preclude the courts from finding that there is a legal obligation on the state to provide basic protection for life, liberty, and security of the person. Much of the analysis is just as applicable to section 15 as it is to section 7 of the *Charter* because Arbour J. addresses centrally the question of negative versus positive rights and the requirement of state action. Here lies a terrain of dispute that is vital not only to section 7 jurisprudence but also to section 15 and to the *Charter* as a whole. Thus, Arbour J.’s comments have helpful implications for the interpretation of section 15.

Arbour J. acknowledges that it is commonly said that section 7 contains only negative rights of non-interference and therefore cannot be implicated, absent any overt state action. However, she examines this common view, framing the question this way:

One should first ask, however, whether there is in fact any requirement, in order to ground a section 7 claim, that there be some affirmative state action interfering with life, liberty or security of the person, or whether section 7 can impose on the state a duty to act where it has not done so. (I use the terms “affirmative,” “definitive” or “positive” to mean an identifiable action in contrast to mere inaction.) No doubt if section 7 contemplates the existence only of negative rights, which are best described as rights of “non-interference,” then active state interference with one’s life, liberty or security of the person by way of some definitive act will be necessary in order to engage the protection of that section. But if, instead, section 7 rights include a positive dimension, such that they are not merely rights of non-interference but also what might be described as rights of “performance,” then they may be violable by mere inaction or failure by the state to actively provide the conditions necessary for their fulfillment. We must not sidestep a determination of this issue by assuming from the start that

section 7 includes a requirement of affirmative state action. That would be to beg the very question that needs answering.<sup>55</sup>

Arbour J. points out that it is often not clear whether the theory of negative rights underlying section 7 is intended to be one of general application, extending to the *Charter* as a whole, or one that applies strictly to section 7. She concludes that as a theory of the *Charter* as a whole, any claim that only negative rights are constitutionally protected is “patently defective.”<sup>56</sup> She points to other *Charter* provisions that all impose positive obligations of performance on the state, including but not limited to: rights to vote (section 3), to trial within a reasonable time (section 11(b)), to be presumed innocent (section 11(d)), to trial by jury in certain cases (section 11(f)), to an interpreter in penal proceedings (section 14), and minority language education rights (section 23). She also points to leading sections 2 and 15 jurisprudence, noting that the Court has found there to be a positive dimension to the section 2(d) right to associate,<sup>57</sup> and that decisions like *Schachter v. Canada*<sup>58</sup> and *Friends*<sup>59</sup> confirmed that “[i]n some contexts it will be proper to characterize section 15 as providing positive rights.”<sup>60</sup>

Arbour J. also notes that in *G.(J.)*<sup>61</sup> the Court held that section 7 provided a positive right to state-funded counsel in the context of a child custody hearing. Arbour J. points out that Lamer C.J. put the proposition quite baldly saying: “The omission of a positive right to state-funded counsel in s. 10 ... does not preclude an interpretation of section 7 that imposes a positive constitutional obligation on governments to provide counsel in those cases when it is necessary to ensure a fair hearing.”<sup>62</sup> Arbour says, “It is in the very nature of such obligations that they can be violated by mere inaction, or failure to perform the actions that one is duty-bound to perform.”<sup>63</sup> Arbour J. emphasizes that it is important not to dilute the obvious significance of *G.(J.)* by attempting to locate the threat to security of the person in state action. She notes that Lamer C.J. said that it was not the *action* of the state in initiating the proceedings *per se* that gave rise to the potential section 7 violation, but rather the *failure* of the government to provide the appellant with state-funded counsel after initiating child protection proceedings.

Arbour then turns to *Dunmore*,<sup>64</sup> and points out that in that case, the Court held that “exclusion from a protective regime may in some contexts amount to an affirmative interference with the effective exercise of a protected freedom.” Arbour J. finds that *Dunmore* confirms that state inaction — the mere failure of the state to exercise its legislative choice in



connection with the protected interests of some societal group, while exercising it in connection with those of others — may at times constitute “affirmative interference” with one’s *Charter* rights. Thus in certain contexts, Arbour J. reasons, the state is under a positive duty to extend legislative protections where it fails to do so inclusively.

Arbour J. says further that,

... it may well be that in order for such positive obligations to arise the state must first do *something* that will bring it under a duty to perform. But even if this is so, it is important to recognize that the kind of state action required will not be action that is causally determinative of a right violation, but merely action that “triggers,” or gives rise to, a positive obligation on the part of the state. Depending on the context, we might even expect to see altogether different kinds of state action giving rise to a positive obligation under section 7. In the judicial context, it will be natural to find such a state action in the initiation by the state of judicial proceedings. In the legislative context, however, it may be more appropriate, following cases like *Friend* and *Dunmore*, to search for it in the state’s decision to exercise its legislative choice in a non-inclusive manner that significantly affects a person’s enjoyment of a *Charter* right. In other words, in certain contexts the state’s choice to legislate over some matter may constitute state action giving rise to a positive obligation under section 7.<sup>65</sup>

Arbour J. acknowledges that justiciability issues regarding the allocation of scarce resources may arise in some cases, but finds that this does not preclude consideration of the claim in this case; namely, that the state is under a positive obligation to provide basic means of subsistence to those who cannot provide for themselves. On the facts of this case, finds Arbour J., the Court does not need to determine what would satisfy a basic level of welfare because that determination had already been made by the legislature.<sup>66</sup>

Arbour J. concludes that “any acceptable approach to *Charter* interpretation — be it textual, contextual, or purposive — quickly makes apparent that interpreting rights contained in section 7 as including a positive component is not only possible, but necessary.”<sup>67</sup>

Regarding the application of section 7 to the facts of the case, Arbour J. says,

[A] minimum level of welfare is so closely connected to issues relating to one’s basic health (or security of the person), and potentially even to one’s

survival (or life interest), that it appears inevitable that a positive right to life, liberty and security of the person must provide for it.<sup>68</sup>

Arbour then explains that what is at stake in *Gosselin* is not exclusion from the *particular* statutory regime but, more basically, the claimants' fundamental rights to security of the person and life itself.<sup>69</sup> She finds that there was ample evidence that the "lack of government intervention 'substantially impeded' the enjoyment of their section 7 rights."<sup>70</sup> Government intervention was necessary to render their section 7 rights meaningful.

Arbour J. concludes that the state does have an obligation to address basic needs relating to the personal security and survival of indigent members of society.

Arbour J.'s opinion is a well-reasoned argument grounded in the Court's own jurisprudence, holding that there is a positive obligation on the state to provide a minimum level of assistance to persons in need. The state action requirement was satisfied by the existence of the *Social Aid Act* which was directed at addressing basic needs, but Arbour J. did not make the existence of the *Social Aid Act* a precondition for her decision. Rather, she said, "It is almost a cliché that the modern welfare state has developed in response to the obvious failure of the free market economy to provide these basic needs for everyone."<sup>71</sup>

There is a significant cross-over in logic between L'Heureux-Dubé J.'s section 15 opinion and Arbour J.'s section 7 opinion in *Gosselin*. Both judges are concerned to ensure that *Charter* rights are understood to have positive content so that the rights are capable of giving effect to the values that underlie the rights.

Arbour J.'s insights about the potential for section 7 rights to be violated by state inaction are more than a potential source of enrichment for section 7 of the *Charter*. They also provide a trajectory for equality jurisprudence, to move beyond stereotyping, to contend with women's inequality of conditions that cannot be properly addressed unless governments are understood to have positive obligations to act, and equality rights are understood to have positive content.

## E. CONCLUSION

The decision in *Gosselin* provides clear openings for equality jurisprudence to move beyond the limitations of a conception of discrimination as consist-

ing only of stereotyping, and of constitutional rights generally as consisting only of negative restraints on governments. The Court was unanimous in its agreement that discrimination may exist without the presence of a stereotype. In addition, the majority agreed that the door should be left open for a claim that governments have a positive obligation to sustain life, liberty, or security of the person. In the opinions of L'Heureux-Dubé and Arbour JJ. lie some particularly useful resources for the consolidation of an understanding of equality rights as imposing a positive obligation on governments to take measures to ensure that everyone has access to a subsistence income.

However, the story of *Gosselin* is not only a story of these agreements. It has also been felt as a direct insult to poor people, and few of those who are familiar with the record accept the majority's view that it was insufficient to support a finding of discrimination. The decision has caused great concern in Canada that the Court has decided to turn its back on the stark realities of the poorest residents, preferring to back away when equality guarantees raise distributive issues. Concerns about the divisions on the Court that *Gosselin* reveals, the underlying conceptual tensions, and the unsettled jurisprudence are also intensified by the fact that the composition of the Court has changed very significantly since *Gosselin*. Four of the judges who sat on *Gosselin*, including L'Heureux-Dubé and Arbour JJ., who wrote most imaginatively, are no longer on the Court. L'Heureux-Dubé J. has retired and Arbour J. is now the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations.

The newly-composed Court is positioned at a crucial crossroads. Will it revert to a narrow, negative, formalistic conception of equality that is indifferent to material conditions of inequality and deprivation, or move forward with a substantive conception of equality? That choice will determine whether Canadian women's constitutional rights can speak to poverty. Should our Court choose the narrow, formalistic course, it will betray the inherent logic, and promise, of those rights.

This paper is primarily about equality theory rather than institutional relationships between courts and governments. However, in closing, a word about institutional responsibilities may be in order. The purpose of having constitutional equality guarantees is not only to establish a mechanism for judicial review. The point is to set a standard that governments agree to live up to, whether or not they are taken to court. In Canada this is declared by section 32 of the Constitution, which states that the *Charter* applies to

the Parliament and the government of Canada, and to the legislature and governments of the provinces and the territories, in all matters within their authority.

The result of adopting a constitutional guarantee of equality, in any country in the world, should be that governments monitor and assess their own legislative programmes and decisions about resource allocation, to ensure that they do not make women worse off, but rather improve their situation.<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately, women in Canada have not been able to count on governments to engage in voluntary compliance.<sup>73</sup> On the contrary, governments in Canada have persistently refused to reverse the train of neo-liberal economics and social programme cutbacks, even though they are well aware of the implications of their conduct for women's equality, and even though they have been criticized for the harms caused by these policies by United Nations treaty bodies.<sup>74</sup> In such a circumstance of blatant government refusal to live up to their rights obligations, women should without doubt be able to turn to the domestic constitutional human rights framework for a principled determination of their rights and remedies, and for assistance in recalling governments to the equality-promoting tasks that governments agreed to when they made the commitment to women's equality.

As Canada implements neo-liberal economic formulas, distributional fairness is out of fashion. At such a time, courts, which should have a longer view, have a heightened obligation not to turn their backs on the human rights of the most vulnerable groups. However, recently, Louise Arbour, speaking in Canada in her new role as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed her concern about the "timidity" of the Canadian judiciary in tackling the claims emerging from the right to be free from want.<sup>75</sup> We share her concern.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Statistics Canada, *Women in Canada 2005: A Gender-Based Statistical Report* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2005) at 103 [*Women in Canada 2005*].
- 2 *Ibid.* at 113. *Women in Canada 2005* notes that “[t]he majority of employed women continue to work in occupations in which women have traditionally been concentrated. In 2004, 67 percent of all employed women were working in teaching, nursing and related health occupations, clerical or other administrative positions and sales and service occupations.” The report also notes that “women continue to account for large shares of total employment in each of these occupational groups. In 2004, women made up 87 percent of nurses and health-related therapists, 75 percent of clerks and other administrators, 65 percent of teachers, 57 percent of those working in sales and service.” The report also notes that “women tend to be better represented in lower-level positions as opposed to those at more senior levels. In 2004, women made up only 22 percent of senior managers, whereas in 1996, the figure had been 27 percent” (at 113).
- 3 *Ibid.* at 279. *Women in Canada 2005* states that in 2003 private employment-related retirement pensions provide 26 percent of the income of senior women, as opposed to 41 percent of the income of senior men. While payments from public pension plans provide about the same percentage of the income of senior women and men, since benefit amounts are tied to earnings senior women receive less per year than senior men. Monica Townson also notes in *Independent Means: A Woman's Guide to Pensions and a Secure Financial Future* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1997) at 98–100 that pension rules in the 1970s and 1980s that discriminated against women by requiring them to work longer to be eligible for a pension or to retire earlier than men, still have a lingering effect both on the amount of women's pension benefits and on access to a pension because when the rules were changed those changes were not retroactive.
- 4 *Women in Canada 2005, ibid.* at 139. See also Isabella Bakker, “Introduction: The Gendered Foundations of Restructuring in Canada” in Isabella Bakker, ed., *Rethinking Restructuring: Gender and Change in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) at 13–14; Pat Armstrong, “The Feminization of the Labour Force: Harmonizing Down in a Global Economy” in Bakker, *Rethinking Restructuring* at 29–54. See also Katherine Scott & Clarence Lochhead, *Are Women Catching Up in the Earnings Race?* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, 1997) at 2. Scott & Lochhead state that “[p]reliminary analysis shows that the women who made wage gains over the last decade were the beneficiaries of a pool of good jobs in the health, education and social service sectors. However, as the structure of the economy continues to change, with the continuing polarization of job opportunities, there is a real danger that women's economic advances will be halted. And such a situation would herald greater economic insecurity for all Canadians.”
- 5 *Women in Canada 2005, ibid.* at 133.
- 6 In 2004, 26 percent of part-time women workers indicated that they wanted full-time work but could not find it. See *ibid.* at 109.

- 7 Women's care of children affects their participation in employment and, consequently, their incomes. Women with pre-school-aged children are less likely than those with school-aged children to be employed. In 2004, 67 percent of women with children under age six were employed, compared to 77 percent of women with children aged six to fifteen. *Ibid.* at 105. Single mothers are less likely than women in two-parent families to be employed. In 2004, 68 percent of single mothers with children under sixteen were employed, compared to 73 percent of women in two-parent families with children the same age. *Ibid.* at 106.
- 8 *Ibid.* at 110-11.
- 9 Monica Townson, "Non-Standard Work: The Implications for Pension Policy and Retirement Readiness," report from the Women's Bureau, Human Resources Development Canada, 1996 at 1 & 3 [unpublished].
- 10 *Women in Canada 2005*, above note 1 at 198-99.
- 11 *Ibid.* at 223-28.
- 12 *Ibid.* at 224-25.
- 13 *Ibid.* at 296.
- 14 *Ibid.* at 142.
- 15 Bakker, "Introduction: The Gendered Foundations of Restructuring in Canada," above note 4 at 18-19; Lisa Philipps, "Tax Policy and the Gendered Distribution of Wealth," in Bakker, *Rethinking Restructuring*, above note 4 at 141-62.
- 16 Statistics Canada, Persons in low income before tax, by prevalence in percent. Source CANSIM table 202-0802 and Catalogue no. 75-202-XIE, online: [www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/famil41a.htm](http://www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/famil41a.htm) (accessed: 15 December 2005).
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Women in Canada 2000: A Gender-Based Statistical Report* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2000) at 259.
- 19 National Council of Welfare, *Poverty Profile 1998* (Ottawa: National Council of Welfare, 2000) at 32.
- 20 *Women in Canada 2005*, above note 1 at 201, 252, & 226.
- 21 *Ibid.* at 200, 199, 253, & 252. In 1996, 43 percent of Aboriginal women were living in poverty, compared to 35 percent of Aboriginal men and 20 percent of non-Aboriginal women. Wherever their place of residence, the incomes of Aboriginal women were less than those of Aboriginal men. In 2000, 29 percent of visible minority women were living in poverty, compared to 28 percent of visible minority men, and 16 percent of other women. In 2000, the average incomes of visible minority women were 90 percent of their male counterparts.
- 22 *Ibid.* at 297. See also G. Fawcett, *Living with Disability in Canada* (Ottawa: Human Resources Canada, 1996) at 131. Similar documentation of this pattern of women's poverty can be found in Shelagh Day & Gwen Brodsky, "Beyond the Social and Economic Rights Debate: Equality Speaks to Poverty" (2002) 14:1 *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law/Revue Femmes et Droit* 185 at 190-93 ["Beyond the Social and Economic Rights Debate"] and in the 2004 report of the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action entitled *A Decade of Going Backwards: Canada in the Post-Beijing Era*, online: [www.fafia-afai.org/docs/B10\\_shadow\\_10CCE.6.doc](http://www.fafia-afai.org/docs/B10_shadow_10CCE.6.doc) (date

accessed: 30 September 2005). That report was authored by Shelagh Day & Natalie McMullen.

- 23 "Beyond the Social and Economic Rights Debate," *ibid.*
- 24 *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Part I of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, being Schedule B to the *Canada Act 1982* (U.K.), 1982, c. 11.
- 25 *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.*
- 26 *Gosselin v. Quebec (Attorney General)*, [2002] 4 S.C.R. 429 [*Gosselin*].
- 27 *Regulation Respecting Social Aid*, R.R.Q., c. A-16, r. 1, s. 29(a).
- 28 *Gosselin*, above note 26 at paras. 251 and 285, Bastarache J. Similarly, at para. 334, Arbour J. put it this way: "This is the amount that was deemed by the legislature itself to be sufficient to meet the 'ordinary needs' of a single adult." At para. 372, Arbour J. stated:

On \$170/month, paying rent is impossible. Indeed, in 1987, the rent for a bachelor apartment in the Montreal Metropolitan Area was approximately \$237 to \$412/month, depending on the location. Two-bedroom apartments went for about \$368 to \$463/month. As a result, while some welfare recipients were able to live with parents, many became homeless. During the period at issue, it is estimated that over 5,000 young adults lived on the streets of the Montreal Metropolitan Area. Arthur Sandborn, a social worker, testified that young welfare recipients would often combine their funds and share a small apartment. After paying rent however, very little money was left to pay for the other basic necessities of life, including hot water, electricity and food. No telephone meant further marginalization and made job hunting very difficult, as did the inability to afford suitable clothes and transportation.

- 29 *Ibid.* at para. 130, L'Heureux-Dubé J.
- 30 *Ibid.* at para. 130, L'Heureux-Dubé J. Similarly, at para. 371, Arbour J. stated that [t]he various remedial programs put in place in 1984 simply did not work: a startling 88.8 percent of the young adults who were eligible to participate in the programs were unable to increase their benefits to the level payable to adults 30 and over. In these conditions, the physical and psychological security of young adults was severely compromised during the period at issue." At para. 254, Bastarache J. stated that "any reading of the evidence indicates that it was highly improbable that a person under 30, with the best intentions, could at all times until he or she was 30 years old be registered in a program and therefore receive the full subsistence amount."
- 31 Gwen Brodsky, "*Gosselin v. Quebec (Attorney General)*: Autonomy With a Vengeance" (2003) 15 *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 194. See also Shelagh Day, "Majority Embraces Stereotype of Poor" in *Jurifemme* (Newsletter of the National Association of Women and the Law) vol. 22, Winter 2003, online: [www.povertyand-humanrights.org/html/centrepubs/gosselinopfinal.pdf](http://www.povertyand-humanrights.org/html/centrepubs/gosselinopfinal.pdf) (accessed: 15 December 2005).
- 32 *The Poor Law* of 1601 placed every English parish under an obligation to relieve the aged and ill and to provide work for the able-bodied poor. See *An Act for the Relief of*

*the Poor, 1601*, 43 Eliz., ch. 2 (Eng.) reprinted in 7 Stat. At Large (Eng. 37-37) (Danby Pickering ed., 1762). A 1697 amendment to the English poor laws aimed to distinguish the “genuinely deserving” recipients from “the idle, sturdy, and disorderly beggars.” See *An Act for Supplying Some Defects in the Law for the Relief of the Poor of This Kingdom, 1696-97*, 8 and 9 Will. 3, ch. 30, § 2 (Eng.), reprinted in 10 Stat. At Large (Eng.) 106 (Danby Pickering ed., 1762) amending *Poor Relief Act, 1662*, 14 Car. 2, ch. 12 (Eng., reprinted in 8 Stat. At Large (Eng.) 94-95 (Danby Pickering ed., 1762). A provision of the Act required all people who received poor relief to wear the letter “P” in red or blue cloth on the right shoulder of their clothing. Refusal to wear the badge resulted in a reduction or elimination of relief, or imprisonment with hard labour for up to twenty days. This amendment introduced the notion, that still has currency today, that it is legitimate to subject beneficiaries of public relief to stigmatizing and humiliating treatment, both as a means of deterring the poor from relying on public relief, and in order to ensure that the non-deserving poor do not receive it.

33 *Gosselin*, above note 26 at para. 407, Lebel J.

34 *Ibid.* at para. 405.

35 *Ibid.* at paras. 27, 43-44, and 65.

36 *Ibid.* at paras. 41-42

37 *Ibid.* at para. 38.

38 *Ibid.* at para. 19.

39 *Ibid.* at para. 54.

40 *Ibid.* at paras. 55-56.

41 *Ibid.* at para. 52, McLachlin C.J.

42 By “human rights jurisprudence” we mean case law arising under both statutory human rights instruments and the equality provisions of the *Charter*.

43 *British Columbia (Public Service Employee Relations Commission) v. BCGSEU*, [1999] 3 S.C.R. 3.

44 *Law v. Canada (Minister of Employment and Immigration)*, [1999] 1 S.C.R. 497 [Law].

45 *Gosselin*, above note 26 at para. 116, L’Heureux-Dubé J.

46 *Ibid.* at para. 121.

47 *Law*, above note 44 at para. 88.

48 In “Dignity, Equality and Second Generation Rights” in *Poverty: Rights, Social Citizenship, and Governance*, eds. Boyd, Brodsky, Day, & Young, forthcoming from UBC Press, 2006, Denise Réaume argues that social assistance is a “dignity-constituting benefit.” She asserts that the underlying s. 15 value of human dignity grounds an entitlement to social assistance because poverty is so profoundly threatening to identity and autonomy. Dignity can be dishonoured in different ways. But, importantly, the dignity of a person is dependent on material conditions that permit her to participate in social, political, and economic life in her society as an equal member; and to make choices about her life, including sexual and reproductive choices, as an autonomous creature. About social assistance, Réaume writes:

Social assistance recognizes that those unable to find adequate employment nevertheless need a roof over their heads and food on the table. The alternative



is life on the streets, having to beg or pilfer, exclusion from most social activities, subjection to the constant risk of violence and disease, the waste of one's talents, and the likelihood of premature death. Someone confined to a hand-to-mouth existence can form no meaningful life plan; she is driven by necessity. The impairment of autonomy is comprehensive and extreme. The additional psychological toll of living such a life, including constantly dealing with the misunderstanding and prejudice of others, is staggering. The need created by poverty is ... urgent; its alleviation is ... integral to human dignity.

Our thinking about "equality-constituting benefits," and our adoption of this term, is influenced by Réaume's work.

49 See, for example, *Nova Scotia (Workers' Compensation Board) v. Martin; Nova Scotia (Workers' Compensation Board) v. Laseur*, [2003] 2 S.C.R. 504 at para. 85.

50 *RSA and others v. Grootboom* (2001) (1) South African Law Reports 46 (Const. Ct.).

51 *Ibid.* at para. 23.

52 *Gosselin*, above note 26 at para. 82.

53 *Ibid.* at para. 83.

54 *Ibid.* at para. 309.

55 *Ibid.* at para. 319.

56 *Ibid.* at para. 320.

57 *Dunmore v. Ontario (Attorney General)*, [2001] 3 S.C.R. 1016 [*Dunmore*].

58 *Schachter v. Canada*, [1992] 2 S.C.R. 679 [*Schachter*].

59 *Vriend v. Alberta*, [1998] 1 S.C.R. 493.

60 *Schachter*, above note 58 at 721.

61 *New Brunswick (Minister of Health and Community Services) v. G. (J.)*, [1999] 3 S.C.R. 46.

62 *Gosselin*, above note 26 at para. 324.

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Dunmore*, above note 57.

65 *Gosselin*, above note 26 at para. 329.

66 *Ibid.* at para. 334.

67 *Ibid.* at para. 335.

68 *Ibid.* at para. 358.

69 *Ibid.* at para. 368.

70 *Ibid.* at para. 370.

71 *Ibid.* at para. 383.

72 Ken Norman, "The Charter as a Barrier Against Welfare Roll Backs: A Meditation on the 'Difference Principle' as a 'Bedrock Value' of the Canadian Democratic Project" in *Poverty: Rights, Social Citizenship and Governance*, above note 48.

73 This is a point that Mary Eberts has made in various meetings of equality-seeking groups and lawyers in Canada, including at the 2003 annual meeting of the Court Challenges Programme in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

74 See *Concluding Observations of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Canada*, 1998, UN CESCR, UN Doc. E/C.12/1/Add.31 at paras. 23, 28,

and 54; *Concluding Observations of the Human Rights Committee: Canada*, UN Doc. CCPR/C/79/Add.105 (1999) at para. 20; *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Concluding Observations of the Committee: Canada* (A/58/38), 2003, at paras. 357–58.

- 75 Louise Arbour, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, LaFontaine-Baldwin Symposium 2005 Lecture, online: [www.lafontaine-baldwin.com/lafontaine-baldwin/c/2005\\_speech\\_1.html](http://www.lafontaine-baldwin.com/lafontaine-baldwin/c/2005_speech_1.html) (accessed: 15 December 2005).

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