



The Momentum Project

Reducing Barriers to Women's Economic Security

Report on Phase 1 Results: Gathering Community Input to
Create a Community Plan

PORTAGE COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION CORPORATION

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Working together we can make a real difference in the lives of women.

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Executive Summary

The Momentum: Reducing Barriers to Women's Economic Security Project was a response by the Portage Community Revitalization Corporation (PCRC) to a Call for Proposals issued by the Status of Women Canada for "Women Living in Rural and Remote Communities and Small Urban Centers." The three year project is broken into two phases: creating a community plan and implementing one priority area of the plan. This report shares the research findings of phase one: gender based research on the barriers to economic security for women between the ages 18-35 in Portage la Prairie and area.

This report presents findings on:

1. What economic security looks and feels like for women in Portage la Prairie and area
2. What is currently working for women to achieve economic security
3. What barriers women face when trying to achieve economic security
4. Recommendations to reduce the barriers women face

This report will form the basis for a community plan, to be created together with women and key stakeholders to ensure ongoing action. The next phase of the project will focus on implementing one priority area of the community plan. This priority area will be identified during a community meeting to be held in June 2013.

I. Methodology: Hearing from the voices in our community

A primary goal of our research phase was to empower women to share their stories, successes and challenges as they worked toward economic security and prosperity for themselves and their families. An asset based approach was used to keep the project focused on what was working well in our community and how to remove barriers to these assets, as opposed to focusing primarily on what was not working.

The following methods were used to gather data for this report:

- Review of existing local and national research and literature
- Focus groups with women between the ages of 18 and 35 who are facing economic insecurity
- Comparison focus groups with men between the ages of 18 and 35 who are facing economic insecurity
- Key informant interviews with representation from a large cross-section of professionals, stakeholders, and partners in the community.

In total, 47 women, 11 men and 22 key informants shared their stories and expertise through the research. Key informants included staff, management, and leaders from the areas of

education, housing, employment, justice, health care, and various levels of government. In total 47 women between the ages of 19 and 35 participated in eight focus groups. They represented a variety of women in our community:

- Three-quarters of the women had children, ranging from 1 to 6 children, with an average of two children.
- 56% of participants self-identified as Aboriginal, 34% were Caucasian, and 1% represented other visible minorities.
- Six participants indicated they had a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability.
- Almost half (47%) had not completed high school, while 27% had started or completed some form of post-secondary education.
- 43% of participants were stay at home moms and 34% were employed casual, part-time or full-time. Six participants (13%) were actively looking for work and 9 participants (19%) were students.

II. What does economic security look and feel like for women

Women in Portage are not satisfied or comfortable living paycheck to paycheck. Participants expressed a desire to not only pay their bills but have money left over at the end of the month. To them being economically secure would mean no longer being faced with the task of juggling financial priorities to provide the necessities on a daily basis.

“Economic security is being able to buy all the things on my grocery list, without having to choose between essentials”

Many participants said they felt guilty when spending money, and often went without so their children could eat or have proper winter clothing. A common occurrence they shared was the difficult task of choosing between need and want, for example food versus rent. Many wished for the challenge of having to choose between need and want.

Collectively women painted a picture of what their lives would look like if they achieved financial security:

- Living in safe and affordable housing, ideally owning their home
- Reliable transportation, including their own driver’s license
- Reliable, qualified and affordable child care
- A stable, good paying job
- Having a good education to open up opportunities
- Having time for themselves to do things they enjoy like exercise, read and rest
- Opportunities and activities for their children
- The ability to make the choice between staying home with their children or working

III. What is Working?

Women in Portage la Prairie are resilient and have found ways to cope with the stress and hardships of economic insecurity. Whether they are reaching out to friends and family for emotional support, seeking advice from a counselor or resource center, taking money management courses, or upgrading their skills and education; women in this community are working hard to create better lives for themselves and their families.

“My parents keep me afloat. They pick up my kids from school and that allows me to work.”

Key findings:

- Strong social networks of family and friends are seen by women as the key to being able to make positive changes in their life.
- Completing their Grade 12 education and taking post-secondary courses is allowing women to find better paying employment and increase their job options.
- Programs that help improve employability skills such as communication skills, computer literacy and job search skills are helping women enter and move forward in the workforce.
- Life skills training such as cooking and money management classes are helping women make ends meet and live on a limited income.
- Women are aware of and accessing many social services available in Portage la Prairie and area and are using these resources to help themselves both make ends meet and move forward with their lives.
- Family-based programming is assisting in developing skills, healthy relationships, self-esteem, and a sense of community while providing children with a healthy, nurturing, educational environment.
- Women are finding ways to manage tight budgets by seeking out financial tips, budgeting, and couponing.
- Ultimately women rely on their own self-determination to move forward, focusing on the life they want for themselves and their family.

“My education and practicum experience goes a long way and has helped me get a job.”

IV. Barriers to Economic Security

Women in Portage la Prairie are struggling with similar barriers women face across Canada; low incomes, child care, transportation, access to education, affordable housing, quality healthcare, and employment that pays well. These barriers are interconnected as women's challenges are directly linked to one another. For example, a single mother trying to get a job first needs to find child care and then find transportation to get there. If either of these pieces is missing her opportunity is lost.

This section outlines the barriers identified in the research which have an impact specific to women as opposed to the general population, and that were also directly related to economic security. After each barrier description, recommendations that could potentially be implemented in the next two years to reduce the barrier are presented for discussion.

Poverty and Meeting Basic Needs

- Low income women include the working poor, stay at home mothers, women relying on a partner's income, women on social assistance, and women in unstable living conditions. They include women who are single, married or in common law relationships, both with and without children.
- According to the 2006 Census, 17.7% of residents in the city of Portage la Prairie are defined as low-income (before tax).
- The likelihood of being low-income jumps to 32% for women living alone or with non-family members. Female lone-parent families are even more at risk, with 45% being low-income.
- Women do more unpaid work than men and have more responsibility for child rearing which impacts their ability to earn an income.
- Women face a gender wage gap: earning 83.8% of the male hourly wage. Nationally, women earn \$17.96 per hour compared to \$21.43 per hour for men.
- Many women don't have enough to cover basic needs, leaving nothing for savings, emergencies, education and retirement.
- Many women facing economic insecurity simply cannot earn enough to lift themselves out of poverty.
- Women feel trapped and isolated on systems which are designed to help them such as Employment and Income Assistance and subsidized housing.
- Many women are stuck in unhealthy, abusive or unwanted relationships because of their reliance on a husband or partner to make income.

"My husband makes more money than me so I have to stay home; I want to make enough money so that I can work too."

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create a women's leadership group that would develop the skills of lower income women in the target demographic to address the findings of this report and increase their own economic security.**
- **Continue to offer and expand training sessions on life skills such as money management and cooking or shopping on a budget.**

Employment Opportunities & Job Readiness

"No day jobs are available for single moms, only evenings and weekends."

- Minimum wage jobs, part-time jobs, casual positions and positions requiring evening and weekend work are often the only types of work that young women without education can access.
- Many employers are not sensitive to the demands on mothers, especially single mothers, which may require them to leave or miss work due to family needs.
- Women re-entering the workforce after raising children for years feel they lack necessary current skills, do not have employment contacts and do not feel they have the confidence needed for an interview.
- Findings from the 2011 Portage la Prairie Phase 3 Labour Needs Assessment Study indicated employers viewed young workers as lacking in "soft" or transferable skills such as communications skills and organizational skills. Many employers saw the need for basic literacy, numeracy, and job readiness skills.
- Paid work experience programs and employability training for every stage of learner were seen as opportunities to address employment barriers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Build relationships with business and employers to increase awareness and understanding related to gender and low-income, and promote family friendly practices to address barriers such as child care and transportation.**
- **Provide women with opportunities in paid work experience programs.**
- **Offer employability skills workshops for women which include child care and transportation supports.**
- **Provide training on entrepreneurship / home based businesses.**

Social and Emotional Supports

"I have no real friends in Portage. It's cliquey here."

- Too many women are feeling lost and alone, without the social and emotional supports they need to make positive changes in their life.
- Women new to the Portage la Prairie report having difficulty making new friends or feeling accepted.
- Stay at home mothers often feel isolated.
- Negative influences from family and friends are holding women back, and in some cases women feel sabotaged by friends and family as they try to make changes to their lives.
- Mental health concerns including depression and anxiety are stopping some women from accessing social support networks.
- A lack of mental health resources was perceived for women unless they were experiencing a crisis or had been diagnosed with a mental illness. More preventative mental health supports are needed.
- Social supports for gay, lesbian and transgendered individuals are lacking in Portage.
- Family and friends are the biggest social support network; helping with child minding, living arrangements and transportation.
- Support groups such as parenting groups and church groups, as well as issue specific support groups dealing with mental health, addictions and children with disabilities also provide women with the support they need.
- Family programming is providing an opportunity for socialization and respite from their children.
- Resource centers like Tupper Street Family Resource Centre and Portage Friendship Centre provide social supports and connect women who in turn end up as supports to one another.
- Relationships with individual staff within social programs are key to helping women move forward, and often it is the person, not the program that makes the difference in women's lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Continue to provide opportunities for women in support groups such as those offered at Tupper Street Family Resource Centre, Portage Friendship Centre, Canadian Mental Health Association (The WELL), and Youth for Christ's "The Door."**
- **Provide opportunities for women to mentor other women.**
- **Provide training for service providers on diversity and gender barriers.**

Education & Training

“I feel stuck in my job because I don’t have money to go back to school, the costs are too high and night classes take away from family time.”

- Despite the fact that 46% of focus group participants had not completed high school, further education was seen as the key factor in gaining employment and a higher income.
- The cost of education is stopping lower income women from accessing education. Unless covered by an assistance program, post-secondary education feels out of reach for many women.
- Local educational opportunities are helping women who do not have the financial means to leave the community for post-secondary or who have family commitments locally.
- However, limited post-secondary education options offered locally limits women’s choices. Travelling or relocating to Winnipeg for education is not an option for many women.
- Balancing the time commitments required for education with family and/or employment needs is challenging, especially for women who tend to have more responsibility for child rearing and household duties.
- Even with local education and training, limited child care and transportation is holding women back from pursuing educational opportunities.
- Women report the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre is helping them upgrade their literacy skills and get their grade 12 diplomas. On-site daycare and flexible classes including evening classes is allowing women to juggle education and parenting or work commitments.
- Red River College Portage Campus courses are providing post-secondary opportunities that provide specific employment skills. Women feel the education they receive at the Portage Campus directly increased their chances of finding higher paying employment. Practicum opportunities in the programs were also viewed as helping open up opportunities.
- Apart from accomplishing their Grade 12 or post-secondary achievements, women found value in parenting courses, money management, and personal development workshops.
- Women were also interested in learning a variety of skills in the areas of resume writing, budgeting, and filling out forms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Address the barriers of child care and transportation to allow more women to participate in education.**
- **Offer women led education sessions on how to access services such as housing, child care, and education.**

Child Care

“I’m basically working to put my children in daycare; I’m not getting anywhere.”

- A lack of affordable, quality child care is stopping women from accessing opportunities in employment and education which would increase their economic security.
- Waiting lists for licensed daycares can take years, and often even limited costs are too high for low-income women.
- Most daycare hours do not match the hours for jobs that are often available to entry-level positions, which are often shift work, or require evenings and weekend hours.
- Many women don’t see the point in working a minimum wage job while someone else raises their children.
- Traditional gender roles place women in the care giver role, resulting in the mother being the one who misses work due to their child being ill or having to deal with child related issues.
- Child care licensing regulations make it difficult to set up a licensed home daycare, which is required for women to access child care subsidies.
- Access to subsidized daycare spots is helping mothers become or remain employed, or access education or training.
- Services such as the Tupper Street Family Resource Center and the Portage Learning and Literacy Center which provide on-site daycare are allowing more women to participate in their programs.
- Before and after school child care offered through the Short Stop Rec Club at Crescentview School is helping working parents of school aged children and is a model women would like to see expanded to other schools.
- Many mothers are independently working out systems to rotate child care between each other or providing emergency child care for children who are too sick to go to school or daycare.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop a task force to work on increasing the number of licensed child care spaces in Portage la Prairie, including before and after school programs to address school aged child care needs.**
- **Create a model of “mom sharing” or “granny on the go” to address needs of short term or emergency child care.**

Transportation

“I cannot afford taxis or shuttles; it’s not in my budget. It’s almost \$20.00 a day after daycare and work. It’s not worth it.”

- Lack of transportation was mentioned in all focus groups as a barrier to accessing education, employment, child care, and services such as health care and recreation.
- Portage la Prairie does not have a public transportation system, and although there are numerous shuttle companies and cab services, women report these as expensive and unreliable.
- Many young women in Portage do not have a driver’s license or a vehicle.
- Although walking is a primary form of transportation for many women they are often scared to walk our streets at night.
- Lack of transportation is particularly challenging for those with young children and those who live farther away from services and employment.
- Although young women and service providers see transportation as a significant barrier to employment, many employers do not feel that transportation is a barrier to potential employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop a transportation strategy to identify creative methods for transportation including public transportation options, and shared shuttle services for employers, education or services.**
- **Develop a program to help women get their driver’s license.**

Racism and Stigma

“I feel like I’m wearing a name tag all the time. People assume I’m garbage.”

- The Social Planning Initiative Report (2009) notes a “division in the community” between the Aboriginal population and other residents.
- This was echoed in every focus group as a factor holding women back. It was a barrier to getting a job, finding a place to live, and accessing services.
- Many Aboriginal women felt judged or unwelcome when accessing services, and in the community in day to day life, because of their race.
- Other women felt the stigma of being on assistance, or being viewed as “poor.”

- Others felt that they were constantly being judged for past mistakes, which was difficult to escape in a small town.
- Feelings of being unwelcome or judged stopped women from participating in programs and seeking services.
- Those suffering with mental health issues are reluctant to seek support due to fears of being ostracized or singled out in the community.
- Some mothers fear losing their children to Child and Family Services if they admit issues related to mental health or addictions.
- Key Informants saw the value in continuing to educate the general public and employers on Aboriginal culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop a public education campaign to create community understanding of diversity.**
- **Provide diversity and cultural awareness training to employers and service providers, such as the Walk a Mile in My Moccasins program.**
- **Provide opportunities for women to build their self-esteem, such as women's retreats and workshops, including opportunities to learn about traditional aboriginal culture.**

Housing & Safety

"People gang up on me here. I'm afraid of being jumped when I walk down the street."

- In discussions with women, housing and safety were often linked.
- Low vacancy rates, maintenance issues, and lack of security were common complaints causing many women to feel unstable with their living arrangements.
- Women felt they had little options in where they live due to the limited amounts of rent they could afford. What they could afford was not in safe neighbourhoods.
- High transiency rates were seen among young women, which impact the ability of women to nurture social supports and create difficulty for service providers to connect with women.
- Many informants noted and expressed concern about the quantity of low-income housing placed in the North East End of Portage la Prairie. This area has a disproportionate amount of low-income parents, the City's lowest average median income, low rates of high school completion and high rates of government transfers as a form of primary income. The area is also located away from services, creating challenges with transportation.

- A need was seen for second stage housing for women in transitional situations such as leaving abusive relationships or addictions treatment.
- Besides feeling safe in their homes and neighbourhood, other safety related topics included being safe from an abusive relationship or protecting themselves or their children from aggressors or bullies.
- Some women do not trust police or see them as protectors, and voiced strong complaints about being discriminated against by law enforcement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Involve local women and local law enforcement in discussions about safety and develop a strategy to increase understanding and trust.**
- **Increase women's involvement in neighbourhood based safety programs such as Neighbourhood Watch.**
- **Provide education and programming on safety issues such as stalking, bullying, domestic abuse, child abuse and sexual abuse.**
- **Develop a working group to explore housing needs, including the creation of transitional / second stage housing for women.**

"There is a huge lack of affordable housing in Portage la Prairie. If you are the working poor it's very hard to find a decent place to live."

Awareness and Collaboration between Service Providers

- Both women and service providers indicated that they are not aware of all of the programs and services available that may be able to help women.
- Women are sometimes falling through the cracks either due to services not being available, or not being aware of services that are available to help.
- A lack of communication between service providers on available programs and services was a barrier to providing clients with information and resources.
- Stakeholders desire more open discussions and forums between service providers and community leaders that focus on taking action on community issues.
- Women felt they were spending too much time navigating unfamiliar waters when accessing information for daycare, housing, education, and funding.
- Centralized methods of keeping track of available services such as an online or print guide, a centralized person who could refer women to a number of needed services, or a centralized location with a number of services available were all suggestions to improve awareness of services both for women and service providers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create a regularly updated resource database showing available programming.**
- **Coordinate ongoing meetings of service providers, community leaders and women based on theme areas in this report, focused on sharing information and taking collective action.**
- **Explore a dedicated position to assist women in navigating the maze of services and assisting in removing barriers to accessing services.**
- **Explore the development of a “one stop shop” or access center that would provide multiple services under one roof.**
- **Provide education on gender based analysis to ensure programs are aware of and responsive to the unique needs of women.**
- **Take a holistic approach addressing issues related to economic security such as self-esteem, health, child care, housing, education and employment together instead of as separate issues.**

V. Next Steps: Developing and Implementing a Community Plan

It is apparent that no one issue addressed in solitude will meaningfully impact economic security. A coordinated community response with the buy in from women, service providers, businesses and community leaders is needed to make a tangible difference in our community. Women and stakeholders alike have no time or energy for a project that does not take real steps forward.

In June 2013 a community forum including participation from women and stakeholders will be held to discuss the research findings and recommendations in the report. A collaborative process will be used so the voices of women, community groups and leaders are each heard in as equal a manner as possible. The results from this meeting will inform the Community Plan. The Community Plan will identify and focus on one key priority that will be addressed over the next two years with the funds from Status of Women Canada. At the same time, other community resources and funders will be engaged to implement and address additional priority areas.

I. Introduction

The Momentum: Reducing Barriers to Women's Economic Security Project was a response by the Portage Community Revitalization Corporation (PCRC) to a Call for Proposals issued by the Status of Women Canada for "Women Living in Rural and Remote Communities and Small Urban Centers." Under the theme area of Community Planning for Women's Economic Security, the PCRC was awarded funding for up to \$300,000 for a three year project that would create a community plan to address economic security for women and then begin to implement the plan. The Momentum project has two main focuses:

1. Building the knowledge and capacity of women, community groups, businesses and stakeholders to work together on issues of economic security for women.
2. Developing and implementing a community plan to reduce barriers to economic security, as prioritized by women in our community.

Initiated in March 2012, the project's first year was focused on conducting research with a gender based lens to provide the community with the information needed to create a community plan. The project is targeted towards women in the 18-35 year age range who are experiencing economic insecurity including those living in poverty, the working poor and those in unstable living conditions. In the next two years the project will focus on implementing a priority area of the community plan. What happens in the implementation phase will be based entirely dependent on the community plan and the priorities that the community sets through that planning process. This report provides a preliminary look at key findings and will also be presented to the community as a starting point to the development of the community plan.

The report is presented in five sections:

1. A summary of local research on the topic of economic security in Portage la Prairie and area.
2. Highlights of the provincial and national picture of economic security for women in Manitoba and Canada.
3. A description of the methodology used in the Momentum project research phase, including focus groups with men and women struggling with economic security, and key informant interviews with community stakeholders.
4. The findings of the research, separated into women focus group results, men focus group results and key informant results.
5. A summary of recommendations and a description of the next steps in the project.

II. Review of Local Studies

Too many young women in Portage la Prairie are living in poverty or facing economic instability. According to the 2006 Census, 17.7% of residents in the City of Portage la Prairie are defined as low-income (before tax). Broken down further, 32% of women living alone or with non-family members aged 15 years and over are low-income. Female lone parent families are even more at risk of economic insecurity, with 45% of these families being low-income according to 2006 Census data.

In the past few years, a number of research studies have been conducted in the Portage la Prairie area, each highlighting areas of need relating to the economic security of young women in Portage la Prairie. These studies identify that barriers to economic security and prosperity include lack of child care, lack of transportation, lack of affordable housing, inability to access services or employment, lack of employability “soft skills”, and low levels of education. Following are highlights from several of these local reports.

A. The Portage la Prairie Social Planning Initiative Report

The Portage la Prairie Social Planning Initiative Phase One Report (August 2009), was prepared using a participatory and community-driven framework. The report highlights key findings related to social needs in Portage la Prairie. Key issues identified in the report include:

- Poverty – “An increasing number of households struggle with low-wages, are unable to get ahead and don’t qualify for many programs that might otherwise help them improve the quality of their lives.”
- Lack of affordable and quality housing – including “concentrations of poverty” in certain neighbourhoods.
- Inadequate access to services due to lack of public transportation, not owning a vehicle and lower-income housing being too far from needed destinations to walk.
- A division in the community between the Aboriginal population and other residents.
- Barriers to accessing employment including a need for skills building that focuses on basic literacy, numeracy and job readiness, the lack of affordable and safe child-care and a lack of public transportation.
- Need for additional collaboration and communication among social services.

The study further indicates “dramatic spatial disparities; for almost every indicator, positive and negative trends are each concentrated in certain areas.” Within the city of Portage la Prairie, advantage and disadvantage can depend greatly on where one lives. For example, on average, 60% of families in the City of Portage la Prairie have children. Of these, 36% are lone parent families, mostly headed by women. In Portage’s Central North East and North/North East neighbourhoods, the number of lone parent families outnumbers two parent families (56.4% and 51.7% respectively). These neighbourhoods also have the City’s lowest average median income,

share the second lowest rates of high school completion and have the highest rates of government transfers as a form of primary income.

B. Central Regional Health Authority Community Health Assessment 2009

The Central Regional Health Authority Community Health Assessment 2009 identifies risk factors of economic insecurity for women in Portage:

- More than 16% of Portage families with children under age 18 receive social assistance – more than double the rate of any other district in Central Region.
- 1 in 4 Portage new mothers self-reported at least 3 risk factors for new mothers and their babies. 33.7% had lower than Grade 12 education, 20.7 % were in receipt of social assistance, 14.4 % were single parents, 18.1% used alcohol and 24.0% smoked during pregnancy.
- Portage has a higher teen pregnancy rate than most of southern Manitoba and all but one Central RHA district.

The 2006 Census Income Data illustrates the disparity between the economic status of men and women. Portage's Median Individual Male Income was \$28,815 while the Median Individual Female Income was \$19,310. This is also lower than the Median Manitoba Individual Income of \$24,194 and the Median Central RHA Individual Income of \$21,963.

C. Portage la Prairie Youth with Barriers Report

In April 2011, the Portage la Prairie Youth with Barriers 5 Year Community Employment Strategy report was published. This project was aimed at identifying the strengths and barriers faced by youth-at-risk in obtaining and retaining employment in rural Manitoba.

As part of this study, two hundred and thirty youth surveys and forty-nine employer surveys were completed and respondents painted a profile of “youth with barriers”. Of the respondents, who were between the ages of 15 and 30 years old, 46% were female and 73% were aboriginal. The group was highly mobile, with only 57% having lived in Portage la Prairie only in the past year. The balance had lived in Portage la Prairie and a variety of other communities, including a high of 26 participants who had lived at Long Plain First Nation. All participants were out of school with the exception of 40 students in specialized programs for youth at risk. Only 13% had completed high school, and 86% were unemployed. Most had only a grade 9 education.

Barriers to employment reported by the youth included lack of transportation, education, qualifications and experience, with child care cited as a significant barrier for those with children. Lack of awareness and transportation were identified as barriers to participants engaging in employment programs and education beyond the public school system.

The study also indicated that 61% of employers had reported difficulty finding qualified applicants within the past year, with their top challenges cited as lack of young people willing to work, a lack of workplace skills and life style issues. Over 65% of employers did not see transportation as a barrier to employment, in direct contrast to youth survey participants who reported it as the most significant problem facing them in their quest for employment. The report also highlighted a disparity between youth self-ratings of employment skills, and employer rating of youth skills – where youth tended to overestimate their skill level in areas such as communication skills, organizational skills, and customer service. The report also identified a lack of communication and understanding between the business community and service providers.

Goals to address the barriers to employment listed in the report were:

- To raise awareness among stakeholders and the community at large of the findings of the Youth Employment study.
- To improve communication between employers and service providers.
- To reduce barriers and improve access to meaningful employment for at risk youth.
- To promote and encourage innovative programs.
- To engage in value added activities to further inform the findings of the study.

Although the project included the development of a 5 Year Community Employment Strategy that the Advisory Committee strongly supported in concept, none of these groups and agencies felt they had the capacity necessary to step forward and take a lead implementation role. Without additional resources, the recommendations in the Portage la Prairie Youth with Barriers 5 Year Community Employment Strategy report have little chance of being implemented.

D. Portage la Prairie Phase 3 Labour Needs Assessment

Central Plains Inc. undertook a Labour Needs Assessment for Portage la Prairie and area in the fall of 2011. The goal was to create updated and enhanced knowledge of the current and upcoming job market in the Portage la Prairie region. This initiative was supported by a number of stakeholders, including Central Plains Inc., the City of Portage la Prairie, Rural Municipality of Portage, and Portage la Prairie Community Revitalization Corporation. The report serves to heighten awareness and identify the need for collaboration to address labour and employment issues in the community.

Findings from the 2011 study indicated a shortage of employees in all skill levels in Portage and area, and a shortage of individuals to fill lower skill positions with the skill set to function appropriately in the workplace. More jobs were available than people to fill them. A significant finding in the report was that employers generally viewed young workers as lacking in “soft” or transferable skills such as communications skills and organizational skills.

III. Literature Review

A. Meaning of Economic Security

Economic security can take on different meanings to different people. As the Momentum project is focused on increasing economic security for women in Portage la Prairie and area, we were interested in how it was defined in the literature. Some definitions of the term focused primarily on financial meanings. For example, Wikipedia defined economic security as:

“Economic security or financial security is the condition of having stable income or other resources to support a standard of living now and in the foreseeable future. It includes: probable continued solvency; predictability of the future cash flow of a person or other economic entity, such as a country; employment security or job security. Financial security more often refers to individual and family money management and savings. Economic security tends to include the broader effect of a society's production levels and monetary support for non-working citizens.”

For the purpose of our project, economic security had a broader meaning. The definition we choose to use can from the Economic Security Project (ESP), a joint project of Simon Fraser University and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-BC:

“Economic security is a stable standard of living that provides people the resources to live with dignity in their communities. Security goes beyond physical survival to include resources to basic needs like health, education, housing, information, protection, as well as work-related security.”

B. The National Picture of Women’s Economic Security

i. Statistics Canada’s Women in Canada: Gender –based Statistical Report

Statistic Canada provides an excellent source of information on the national picture of women’s economic security. Women and girls comprise just over half of Canada’s population. In 2010, 17.2 million females accounted for 50.4% of the total population, continuing a slim female majority that has held for over three decades.

Women continue to have lower average annual earnings than men. In 2008, women earned \$30,200 annually—or about 65% of the approximately \$46,900 that men earned. While earnings for both sexes rise with levels of education, the difference is greater for women. Women working full-year, full-time with less than a Grade 9 education averaged less than 35% of the earnings of female university graduates. In comparison, men with less than Grade 9 averaged about 44% of the earnings of male university graduates. Also note that even with equivalent education levels, men earned more than women.

Incidence of low income has decreased for both women and men over the last three decades. In 1976, almost 15% of women and 11% of men lived on low incomes. By 2008, however, 10% of women and 9% of men lived in low-income situations. Comparing assets across family types, lone-parent families had the lowest average total assets. However, female lone-parent families had lower average total assets (\$187,000) than lone-parent families headed by men (\$282,000).

ii. Canadian Women's Foundation's Facts about Women and Poverty

The Canadian Women's Foundation presents research on gender and poverty in their Facts about Women and Poverty facts sheet. The study suggests women are more likely than men to be poor for two main reasons: Women spend more time doing unpaid work, leaving less time for paid work; and women face a gender wage gap.

Each day, men and women work about the same number of hours, but women do more unpaid work (housework, child care, meal preparation, eldercare, etc.) Women do about 4.2 hours a day doing unpaid work, while men do about 2.2 hours. In order to juggle their domestic responsibilities, many women choose part-time, seasonal, contract, or temporary jobs. Unfortunately, most of these jobs are low paid, with no security, few opportunities for advancement, and no health benefits. Most poor women in Canada are working, but can't earn enough to lift themselves out of poverty because they are clustered in these low paid and precarious jobs.

Canada's lack of affordable child care—and the lack of workplace policies such as flex-time and caregiver leave—often forces women into career choices that severely limit their earning power. Women's domestic responsibilities also make it harder for them to return to school or attend training sessions that could advance their career. Women who interrupt their career to care for children or other family members have much lower earnings: in one study, women aged forty who had interrupted their careers for at least three years for maternity leave were earning about 30% less than women with no children. The double-duty demands of home and workplace force many women to sacrifice their long-term economic security. This is a high price to pay for being a mother.

Women in Canada face a gender wage gap. Women who work full-time earn about 71 cents for every dollar earned by men. Some people argue that this gap can be explained by the fact that women can't or won't work as many hours as men. However, this wage gap persists even when hourly wages are compared: women earn an average of \$17.96 per hour compared to \$21.43 for men, meaning that women earn 83.8% of the male hourly wage. The wage gap also persists even when women have the same education and experience as men. Although more women graduate from university, they are not earning as much as men. Female graduates earn an average of \$62,800, males earn \$91,800.

iii. *The Centers of Excellence for Prairie Women's Health: Women's Health Rural, Remote and Northern Women's Health Report*

Although the City of Portage la Prairie is a small urban centre, with a population of approximately 14,000, it is considered by many to be “rural,” and is a service centre for a surrounding rural population. Economic security for women in Portage la Prairie and area looks different than in a large urban centre.

The Centre of Excellence for Prairie Women's Health's *Rural, Remote and Northern Women's Health Report* sheds some light on the differences between rural and urban women. Over 1 in 5 Canadian women live in a rural area. The report indicates that rural women have appreciably lower labour force participation rates, higher fertility rates and a higher likelihood of being poor than their urban counterparts. Women in rural Manitoba are at a higher risk of violence, economic insecurity, and Aboriginal women and senior women are particularly vulnerable. Rural women often have to travel long distances to obtain health care, and are often without easy access to transportation; as a result, they are less likely to use health services. Rural women have limited access to women-centered care. Women in rural areas of Canada often experience a triple disadvantage, because of their gender, their location, and the interactions between the two. For women facing additional barriers of racism, poverty or lack of education, the negative effects can be multiplied further.

C. Manitoba's Response to Poverty

The Momentum project is solution based, and will focus on strengthening and removing barriers to assets already existing in our community. An important consideration in our project is building on national and provincial strategies already working to address economic security for women.

All Aboard: Manitoba's Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion Strategy recognize that poverty is complex and requires long-term solutions to get at root causes. It acknowledges that certain groups of Manitobans bear a greater burden of poverty and social exclusion than others and names: women, single parents, Aboriginal Manitobans, newcomers, and persons with disabilities as groups with special consideration. Based on feedback from Manitobans, All Aboard has been developed on a framework that is supported by four linked pillars. They include:

1. Pillar One: Safe affordable housing in supportive communities
2. Pillar Two: Education, jobs, and income supports
3. Pillar Three: Strong, healthy families
4. Pillar Four: Accessible, coordinated services

Building partnerships with other governments, businesses, non-profit organizations, communities and individuals is needed to achieve these goals and the Momentum Project is committed to helping build these relationships in Portage la Prairie.

IV. Methodology: Hearing from the Voices in our Community

Entering into the research phase, it was noted that a significant amount of data related to women's economic security in Portage la Prairie and area was already available through existing research. What was missing was a rich picture of what economic security really looked like for the women in our community who experience it. What did their day to day life look like? What was helping them move forward? What was holding them back? What suggestions did they have to improve economic security for all women?

In choosing the research tools, methods were considered that would allow women to share their stories and successes and challenges as they worked toward economic security and prosperity for themselves and their families. An asset based approach was used to keep the project focused on what was working well in our community and how to enhance and remove barriers to these assets, as opposed to focusing primarily on what was not working.

In addition to reviewing existing research and literature, two primary research methods were chosen: focus groups and key informant interviews. Since a main goal of the research was to examine barriers women face to economic security as compared to men, separate focus groups were held for women and men.

A. Building Community Partnerships

From the beginning of the Momentum project, partnership building was identified as a key priority. To meet the needs of women in our community, it will take the entire community working together. Economic security is not something that can be attained in three years, therefore building strong partnerships for a collective and sustained approach to women's economic security is needed to ensure momentum remains after the end of the project funding.

To help build buy-in and support for the project an Advisory Committee was formed made up of a variety of sectors including: education, health, aboriginal culture, business, economic development, government, social services, housing, child care, immigrant services, religious organizations and women in the target population.

The role of this Advisory Committee is to:

- Be a champion of the project, making connections in the community
- Provide advice on the research methods
- Provide advice on ensuring the information gathered covers the needs of all sectors (women, community groups, social service, business, government, funders, etc.)
- Provide input into the community plan
- Assist in making partnerships to implement the community plan.

The Advisory Committee will meet three to four times a year for the entire three years of the project. The Advisory Committee also receives regular e-mail updates of the project between

meetings. New members will be added to this committee over the course of the project as awareness and interest grows.

In addition to the Advisory Committee, a working group was created to provide in-depth guidance to the project. Five community stakeholders, as well as the Momentum Project Coordinator and PCRC Executive Director sit on this committee. The time commitment for this working group is for the research phase only, as after the first year the focus of the project will change and new expertise and representation may be needed at that time.

The role of this group is to:

- Provide input into the research methods used and the research tools (surveys, focus group questions, etc.)
- Provide input into how to engage women in the community
- Provide advice on culturally appropriate methods
- Identify and make connections with key stakeholders and partners
- Provide advice on ensuring the information gathered covers the needs of all sectors (women, community groups, social service, business, government, funders, etc.)
- Review drafts of reports and provide input and recommendations.

B. Women's Focus Group Methodology

The target population for our project was young women between the ages of 18 and 35 in Portage la Prairie and surrounding area who are experiencing economic insecurity including those in poverty, the working poor and those in unstable living situations. Women in this target demographic were invited to participate in focus groups. Participation in focus groups was based only upon age, gender and economic situation and was inclusive of all races and abilities.

Focus groups were planned at various locations in the city of Portage la Prairie and included:

- The Portage Learning and Literacy Center (2)
- Tupper Street Family Resource Center (2)
- The Portage Friendship Center (2)
- Red River College
- Canadian Mental Health Association Clubhouse

Led by a facilitator, responses were recorded on a flip chart and the conversations were audio-taped. The groups were designed to not exceed more than two hours and be conversational in nature.

The methodology was designed to encourage participation from women representing a range of ages, income levels, education levels, marital statuses, and ethnicities, as well as women with disabilities and those who may or may not have children. Each woman was given a \$25 honorarium for participating.

To get a rich amount of data and allow for all voices to be heard, focus groups were planned for smaller groups of 4-10 people. The questions were open-ended, designed to start conversations and gather ideas and opinions on issues as they emerged in the groups. A copy of the questions is found in Appendix 1.

i. Engagement Plan

When designing the focus group methodology a gender-based analysis lens was used. We anticipated and planned for barriers that could potentially stop women in our target group from participating:

- **Child care:** Child care was provided onsite for five of the eight focus groups. In the other three focus groups, women requiring child care were provided with funds to pay for a babysitter. Thirty of our 47 women used the child care, a total of 53 children receiving care; with 23 in one evening focus group alone. Participants indicated that finding child care would have been a barrier to participating if the services had not been offered.
- **Transportation:** All participants were asked in advance if they required transportation. Local shuttle services were used to pick up women and bring them home after the focus groups. One third of the women requested transportation. Focus groups were held in central locations and when possible where a group was already gathering. For example, a focus group was held with the Tupper Street Parent Advisory Council after their monthly meeting, and with Red River College students between classes.
- **Timing:** To allow for various employment, education and family commitments, both evening and daytime meetings were held. Six focus groups were held during the day and two held in the evening. Both day and evening sessions had good participation.
- **Trust:** Existing research has shown that many women from lower-income households or marginalized groups have low levels of trust. To address this issue, we partnered with local organizations that already had positive connections with women. These organizations assisted in raising awareness of the project, invited women in their programs to participate, and in some cases arranged the focus groups at their location. In one case the researcher was requested to meet with the group of women and explain the process before being invited back to conduct a focus group.
- **Awareness:** The use of posters, local and social media, and word of mouth were all used to spread awareness about upcoming focus groups, along with partnerships with local organizations. Posters were not the most effective tool and most women felt comfortable participating after hearing about it from someone they trusted. It's hard to gauge how effective the use of local media was in this scenario.
- **Cultural differences:** Engaging Aboriginal women was very important to the research. To foster participation of Aboriginal women, a partnership was formed with the Portage Friendship Centre, a local organization that provides culturally based services. The Friendship Centre staff assisted in helping our researcher access women in their programs. A staff person from the Centre also participated on the Working Committee to

advise on culturally appropriate methodology. While a focus group with immigrant women was planned, arrangements were not able to be made in the required timeframe.

ii. Demographics of Participants

In total 47 women participated in eight focus groups. The women represented a diversity of ages and backgrounds.

- All participants were between the ages 19 and 35, fairly evenly distributed across the ages with approximately one third of participants ages 21 or younger, and just over one third of the participants aged 30 or older.
- Three-quarters of the women had children, ranging from 1 to 6 children, with an average of two children.
- 56% of participants self-identified as Aboriginal, 34% were Caucasian, and 1% represented other visible minorities. No participants listed themselves as recent immigrants. The other 9% chose not to respond.
- Six participants indicated they had a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability.
- Most participants (53%) were currently renting or in subsidized housing while 27% owned their homes, and 8% lived with family.
- Almost half of the participants (47%) had not completed high school, while 27% had started or completed some form of post-secondary education.
- 43% of participants were stay at home moms and 34% were employed casual, part-time or full-time. Six participants (13%) were actively looking for work and 9 participants (19%) were students.

A complete demographic breakdown can be found in appendix 2.

C. Men's Focus Group Methodology

Men's focus groups were conducted to allow a comparison of the differences to economic security between men and women. The methodology and questions used for the men's focus groups were the same as the women's focus groups. Eleven men participated in two focus groups. One focus group was held in the evening at the Portage Library and one was held in the afternoon at the Portage Friendship Center.

i. Engagement Plan:

In arranging the focus groups, we planned for the same barriers we had anticipated for women, to allow us to compare if men also faced these barriers.

- **Child care:** Although we arranged for the provision of child care, none of the men in the focus groups used this resource, although 6 of the 11 men had children in their household.
- **Transportation:** As we did with the women's groups, transportation was offered as a resource to attend. Only one of 11 participants needed us to provide transportation.

- **Timing:** To provide opportunities for men who have varying employment, education and family commitments we offered one day and one evening discussion. Both sessions were equally well attended.
- **Trust:** While we were able to engage many women through organizations and groups they were already comfortable in, this was more of a challenge for arranging focus groups with men. Less men-focused groups or services are available in the community. Men also seemed more reluctant to speak about money as opposed to women. To address this, the researcher actively sought out men she thought would participate through her personal network and through the women who had participated in previous focus groups.
- **Awareness:** The use of posters, local and social media, and word of mouth were all used to spread awareness on upcoming focus groups. As with women, hearing about the opportunity from someone they trusted or a friend who was participating was most effective. Social media was also an asset to the success of these discussions.
- **Cultural differences:** As with the women's focus groups, the Portage Friendship Centre staff served as a liaison to reach aboriginal men. Several men accessing the Friendship Centre's services were eager to participate.

ii. Demographics of Participants

In total 11 men participated in two focus groups.

- The men who participated were older on average than the women participants, with 9 of the 11 over the age of 30.
- 5 of the 11 men were single (45%) and the rest were either married or living common law (55%).
- 6 of the 11 men had children, ranging from 1 to 4 children in their home.
- 8 of the 11 participants self-identified as Aboriginal, the other 3 were Caucasian.
- 4 of the 11 participants indicated a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability.
- 4 of the 11 participants had not completed high school; 3 had graduated from high school and 3 had some level of post-secondary experience. 1 chose not to respond.
- 5 of the 11 were unemployed while 3 were employed full time. Others included a stay at home dad, student and an individual unable to work.

A complete demographic breakdown can be found in appendix 3.

D. Key Informant Interview Methodology

In addition to focus groups with the target populations, key informant interviews were used to supplement existing research and provide a systems perspective on the topic of women's economic security in Portage la Prairie and area.

Key informant interviews targeted representation from a large cross-section of professionals, stakeholders, and partners in the community. Conversations were held with staff, management, and leaders from the areas of education, housing, employment, justice, health care, and various levels of government. Twenty interviews were completed.

Participants were provided with the questions in advance to help them prepare for the interview. The interviewer audio-taped and transcribed the interviews to ensure the quality of data collected. Participants were assured that all responses would be confidential and reported only in aggregate format, to encourage open and frank discussion.

A copy of the questions asked in the interviews can be found in appendix 4.

E. Lessons Learned

Through the research process, we learned several lessons that we will apply to the next phase of the project and future initiatives we undertake with this target group.

Overall the research process used worked well and helped us to identify supports, barriers, areas needing improvement, and suggestions for improving economic security for women. The knowledge and experience the Working Group provided was very beneficial in the planning process.

The response to both female and male focus groups showed the need for incentives and arrangements to support their participation. Providing the following proved instrumental to the success of the research:

- Honorariums for focus group participants
- Child care onsite
- Assistance with costs such as transportation
- Food and beverages that were appropriate for meetings times (providing meal for evening and lunch meetings)

Using locations that the participants were already familiar with helped encourage participation. It also provided an environment where participants felt comfortable expressing themselves. Groups of women who already knew each other also helped breakdown some of the reluctance to share their thoughts, although it could have also stopped some women from sharing personal information they did not want their friends to know about. Locations that generally provided child care as part of their programming made it easier to make child care arrangements, as finding neutral locations that would allow for on-site child care was difficult.

An evening focus group was interrupted by an unexpected male who had entered the building. He had come to check up on his girlfriend, but pretended he was “lost”. It was scary and also dangerous for the researcher and the women participating. In the future, steps must be taken to ensure safety.

The language used in forming the focus group questions was very important. Although the facilitator had a planned question list for consistency, the language of the questions was a barrier and each focus group required different wording and vocabulary to explain the questions. This could be due to factors such as varying literacy levels or past experiences.

Recent immigrants was a demographic missing in our study as engaging and connecting with the immigrant population in Portage la Prairie proved to be difficult. Attempts were made to contact organizations with established connections to immigrant women but scheduling and availability became barriers to holding successful conversations. In the future we will begin these conversations earlier in the process.

Connecting with the male population was much harder than reaching women in the community. The researcher had a difficult time engaging groups of men who were already established or meeting in the community, leading to a delay in data collection. An observation of this barrier to engaging men is the lack of male programming and resources in the community; also indicated by key informant and focus group participants.

A gap was noted in the ability to connect with Aboriginal leaders in the community. While relationships were pursued and conversations initiated, there is a noticeable lack of Aboriginal perspective and representation in the key informant data. Building relationships with Aboriginal organizations, programs and leaders must be a priority moving forward with the project.

Participants from both the male and female focus groups expressed their appreciation for the project and were engaged by the conversations. Working group members also regularly voiced positive feedback during the planning process and feelings of optimism looking forward. Women want to improve life not only for themselves and their families, but for the entire community.

V. Consultation Results

A. Results of women's focus groups

The 47 women who participated in the focus groups shared their experiences, concerns, and suggestions regarding economic security for themselves and their families. They identified child care, housing, education, employment, safety, and transportation as both positive factors in obtaining economic security, as well as barriers they face when striving to provide a better life for themselves.

i. What does economic security mean to women?

Women in Portage are not satisfied or comfortable living paycheck to paycheck. Participants expressed a desire to not only pay their bills but have money left over at the end of the month. To them being economically secure would mean no longer being faced with the task of juggling financial priorities to provide the necessities on a daily basis.

“Economic security is being able to buy all the things on my grocery list, without having to choose between essentials.”

Economic security was described by many participants as not just surviving but thriving. Many participants said they felt guilty when spending money, and often went without so their children could eat or have proper winter clothing. A common occurrence they shared was the difficult task of choosing between need and need, for example food verses rent. Many wished for the challenge of having to choose between need and want.

“Economic security means having constant savings, money for the future, and money for emergencies.”

Women expressed being financially independent allowed for more options, a better life for their children, and sustainability into their retirement years.

Women were asked to paint a picture of what an economically secure life would look like for them. The collective picture of what their lives would look like if they achieved financial security included:

- Living in safe and affordable housing, ideally owning their home.
- Reliable transportation, including their own driver's license.
- Reliable, qualified and affordable child care.
- A stable, good paying job.
- Having a good education to open up opportunities.
- Having time for themselves to do things they enjoy like exercise, read and rest.
- Opportunities and activities for their children.
- The ability to make the choice between staying home with their children or working.

Economic security was more than just money in the bank account; women also shared how they imagined economic security would feel:

“Living without constant worry.”

“Not having to feel guilty about spending money.”

“Not feeling judged by others.”

“To be proud of myself.”

“Living comfortably, happy and healthy.”

Women also saw and were motivated by the impact being economically secure could have on their children.

“Being able to pass on good lessons and tools to my children for their futures.”

“Teaching the next generation about responsibility so they are not in the same boat I am.”

ii. What is Working for Women?

Women in Portage la Prairie are resilient and have found ways to cope with stress and hardships. Whether they are reaching out to friends and family for emotional support, seeking advice from a counselor or resource center, taking money management courses, or upgrading their skills and education; women in this community are working hard to create better lives for themselves and their families.

Social, Emotional and Mental Health Supports

Women credit strong social networks as being one of the biggest supports in allowing them to move forward and welcome new opportunities. Family and friends are typically the first place women turn to when needing support. Women indicated that family and friends were often helping them with child minding, living arrangements and transportation.

“My parents keep me afloat. They pick up my kids from school and that allows me to work.”

Some women who were missing a family and friend support network are using support groups such as parenting groups and church groups to provide them with the support they need. Without the feeling of support from other people, women did not feel capable of making positive changes in their life. In fact, negative influences from family and friends were often seen to be holding them back. In helping women move forward, providing them with positive supports is one of the most important factors to their success.

Education & Employment Opportunities

Conversations pertaining to education and employment seemed to dovetail in all the focus groups during discussions about what is helping women gain economic security. Despite the fact that 46% of focus group participants had not completed high school, gaining a better education was seen as the key factor in gaining employment and a higher income.

“Going back to school is really important to me.”

Participants seeking to upgrade their literacy skills or get their grade 12 diploma spoke positively of the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre. The fact that the Centre provides on-site daycare has helped women with children be able to participate in the programs. The flexibility of classes, including evening classes, was also viewed positively.

Red River College courses were also seen as opportunities for gaining further education and specific employment skills. Participants felt that the education they received directly increased their chances of finding employment. Practicum opportunities in the programs were also viewed as helping open up opportunities.

“My education and practicum experience goes a long way and has helped me get a job.”

Apart from accomplishing their Grade 12 or post-secondary achievements, women found value in parenting courses, money training, and anger management development as a way to succeed.

“Learning is giving me more choices and tools to deal with stress”

Programs and Services

The women participating in focus groups were able to list a number of programs and services that were helping them move forward. Participants who regularly participate in resource programming feel they have gained a variety of skills, healthy relationships, self-esteem, and a sense of community. Not only were these positive steps in their own lives, but they felt it was providing their children a healthy, nurturing, educational environment. Often having someone there supporting them is all they need to strive for better.

The number of programs listed by women are too numerous to list in this report. Most frequently listed organizations and services were the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre, Tupper Street Family Resource Centre, Portage Friendship Centre, Employment and Income Assistance (including the Job Connections Program), the Portage Regional Library, and Youth for Christ (including services at The Door). It’s interesting to note that the three organizations perceived as helping the most provided child care and transportation in their programming. Often specific staff members were referred to, as opposed to the program name, showing the importance of personal relationships in helping women succeed.

As well as education programs, the Portage Learning and Literacy Center was noted for their help with money management, welcoming environment, employment services and child care.

Tupper Street Family Resource Center was seen as a great resource for cooking classes, parenting classes, and their clothing store. The Portage Friendship Centre was frequently noted by aboriginal participants as a place they feel comfortable.

Money Management

Managing tight budgets was seen by participants as important to their financial security. Some participants had taken it upon themselves to seek out financial tips or money management resources. Budgeting, couponing, and flyer shopping were all listed as tools to deal with a tight financial situation. School funding, cash advances from work, and Income Assistance were also mentioned as ways to get by. The Money Management class at the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre was listed by several participants as being very helpful.

Self determination

Many women indicated that it was their own self-determination that was needed to help them move forward. They indicated that in the end they needed to rely on themselves and take positive action. Several mothers indicated that it was focusing on being a good mother, and providing a good example for their children that motivated them.

iii. What is Holding Women Back?

The barriers facing women in Portage la Prairie are similar to what many women are facing across Canada; low incomes, child care, transportation, education, racism and stigma. One of the most important observations is the interconnectedness of these barriers. Women noted that many of their challenges are directly linked to each other. For example: a single mother trying to get a job first needs to find child care and then find transportation to get her child to daycare and herself to work. If either of these pieces is missing her opportunity to work is lost or diminished.

Low incomes

Although this may seem redundant, low incomes are holding women back. They feel “stuck” in their current situation and unable to move ahead. Many did not even have enough funds to cover necessities, let alone saving for education, a home, or their children’s future. They felt isolated and helpless, and dependent on systems such as Employment and Income Assistance and subsidized housing that were supposed to be helping them, but rather made many of them feel trapped.

Child care

A lack of affordable, quality child care is stopping women from accessing opportunities in employment and education. Waiting lists for licensed daycares can take years, and often even limited costs are too high for low-income women. Most daycare hours do not match the hours for jobs that are often available to entry-level positions, which are often shift work, or require evenings and weekend hours.

“I have a small window without child care coming up. It could lead to losing my spot with school and cause another year of waiting.”

Many women feel stuck, isolated, exhausted, and don't see the point in working a minimum wage job while someone else raises their children.

“I'm basically working to put my children in daycare; I'm not getting anywhere.”

Transportation

Lack of transportation was mentioned in all focus groups as a barrier to accessing education, employment, child care, and services such as health care and recreation. Although Portage has transportation options through numerous shuttle companies and cab services, participants indicated that these options were too expensive and not reliable.

“I cannot afford taxis or shuttles; it's not in my budget. It's almost \$20.00 a day after daycare and work. It's not worth it.”

Many of the women did not have a driver's license or a vehicle and walking was their primary form of transportation. They relied on family or friends for rides when walking was not an option, which was not always a reliable option for getting to school, work, and appointments. Several indicated they would like to get their driver's license but are having difficulty with this. The topic of transportation also brought comments on safety as many women were scared to walk our streets at night.

Accessing Education

Although women felt education was key to getting a good paying job and providing a better life for themselves and their families, they face barriers to accessing educational opportunities. The cost of education was most commonly mentioned. Other barriers were not having desired courses offered locally, or the inability to balance the time commitments required for education with family and employment needs. Child care and transportation also held them back from pursuing educational opportunities.

“I feel stuck in my job because I don't have money to go back to school, the costs are too high and night classes take away from family time.”

Racism and Stigma

Racism was discussed in every focus group as a factor holding women back. It was a barrier to getting a job, finding a place to live, and accessing services. Many Aboriginal women felt judged when accessing services because of their race. They also felt judged by “white people” in the community in day to day life. They talked about experiences of discrimination when trying to access housing and employment.

“What is holding me back? Being Aboriginal.”

Other women felt the stigma of being on assistance, or being viewed as “poor.” They shared that they often did not feel welcome and they felt judged, which stopped them from participating in programs or seeking services such as child care. Others felt that they were constantly being judged for past mistakes, which was difficult to escape in a small town. Some felt specific services such as Manitoba Housing and Child and Family Services were “out to get them”, adding to building a deep distrust of reaching out for help. Women said they were having difficulties finding trustworthy caregivers or a center where they felt welcomed, without being judged.

“I feel like I’m wearing a name tag all the time. People assume I’m garbage.”

“I’ve been stuck with labels my whole life.”

Mental Health, Lack of Social Supports and Isolation

Many women in Portage la Prairie are feeling lost and alone. Mental health was a frequent concern raised by focus group participants that was difficult to separate from other barriers including self-esteem, lack of social supports and isolation. Women admitted feelings of depression and low self-confidence, they felt stressed and isolated. Many did not have family backing them up and shared that their friends were not always supportive or good influences. They wanted to make changes in their life but did not feel like they had any one to help them.

“I have no real friends in Portage. It’s cliquey here.”

When asked what was holding them back participants responded they felt a lack of emotional supports, lived with feelings of depression and anxiety, were quietly suffering with a mental disability, or felt discriminated or labeled by the community. Mothers at home with their children often felt isolated. Some shared they attend family programming primarily for respite from their children and the opportunity to socialize.

Inability to access quality health care was a concern by women in Portage, often linked to mental health concerns. Not having a family doctor and long waits to make an appointment or to see a doctor at the walk-in were mentioned.

“The medical system is horrible. I can’t get an appointment. I can’t see my doctor, I feel like a number not a patient.”

“I cut myself. It is a release and allows me to show my pain on the outside. I asked for help but was told to deal with it on my own; they told me it wasn’t that bad.”

Feeling Safe

The topic of safety was raised more than we anticipated during the focus groups as holding women back. Feeling safe was a key to having the security to make changes in their life. Safety included a number of meanings and concerns to different women in Portage. For some it was feeling secure in their homes and in the community. Others felt safety meant protection from an

abusive partner. One focus group was even interrupted by an unexpected male checking up on the whereabouts of his girlfriend. For others safety was protecting themselves or their children from aggressors or bullies.

“My insecure partner doesn’t trust me, he stalks me”

“People gang up on me here. I’m afraid of being jumped when I walk down the street.”

A number of women raised concerns about policing in Portage and voiced very strong complaints about being discriminated against by our law enforcement. Over half of the focus groups raised this issue and had specific reasons why they do not trust police or see them as protectors.

“Police play favorites. If they know you its ok, if not you’re in trouble and blamed for everything.”

“My son was hurt but he asked me not to call the police because he was scared of them. He said they would cause more damage and he’s right.”

Housing and safety were linked. Slum landlords, maintenance issues, and lack of security were common complaints causing many women to feel unstable with their living arrangements. Women felt they had little options in where they live due to the limited amounts of rent they could afford. What they could afford was not in safe neighbourhoods. Manitoba Housing was mentioned numerous times while on the subject of housing and safety, and while many were satisfied with their experiences others felt the subsidized housing they were in was unsafe. Some also felt they were being discriminated against because they were Aboriginal.

Employment Opportunities

The type of employment opportunities available was a barrier to women in our focus groups. Minimum wage jobs, part-time jobs, casual positions and positions requiring evening and weekend work were not sufficient or equal to what they needed to reach economic security. Others felt the job market did not match their skills or that employers were not flexible enough for them to be able to meet their family needs.

“No day jobs are available for single moms, only evenings and weekends.”

Finding employment posed its own set of barriers. Some women felt they were out of the loop after raising children for years; they lacked necessary skills, or didn’t have the confidence needed for an interview.

Balancing Family Needs

Participants talked about feeling conflicted between staying at home and raising their children or going back to work or school.

“I want to stay home and raise my son. I did not expect to be a single mother. I feel guilty about going to work, but I have no choice.”

“My husband makes more money than me so I have to stay home; I want to make enough money so that I can work too.”

“I’m waiting for my kids to go to school so I can work. I can’t be a mom and work.”

Mothers, especially single mothers, expressed that all their energy went into looking after their children, leaving them with little energy for anything else or time for themselves. They wanted the best for their children but saw a lack of programs and activities for their children, including a lack of safe places such as parks close to where they lived. They linked this to their children getting into trouble due to isolation and boredom.

“I feel like my children are isolated. Adults don’t like my energetic children. What are they supposed to do?”

Awareness

Although most groups listed a fairly broad and lengthy list of resources and organizations in Portage, there was also a desire for further awareness and advertising of resources.

“There’s a lack of advertising for grants, programs, and opportunities. I always hear about them after.”

Other Barriers

Other barriers holding women back identified in the focus group included:

- Drug and alcohol addictions
- Not receiving child support payments, and paying for lawyer fees related to custody and child support
- Having a criminal record
- Dealing with disabilities
- Unplanned pregnancies
- Having high needs children and children with disabilities
- Bad relationships
- Bad credit

iv. Suggestions from Women to Improve Economic Security

The women participating in the focus groups had many suggestions on how to improve economic security for women. Their suggestions focused on the themes of educational supports, transportation, child care, social supports, children’s programs, food, employment opportunities and safety.

Educational Supports

- Classes on how to access opportunities in the areas of daycare, housing, education, and applying for funding
- Classes in resume writing, budgeting, and filling out forms
- A resource database, online and offline, with advertising in various organizations
- Educational grants for those wanting to return to school, with a focus on single mothers
- Mother-child programs that focus on life skills such as cooking, sewing, and reading
- More options in courses at Red River

Transportation

- Public transportation such as shuttle busses or vans with a fixed schedule. Participants suggested a route with stops within walking distance of all areas in the city, including stops at the walk-in and doctor's office
- Transportation to and from school for children in all areas of the city
- Free taxis for Red River College students
- Improvements to shuttle services to increase reliability and response times
- Shuttle discounts for frequent users, like single mothers and fathers. A "mommy discount."

Child care

- More affordable and available daycare
- Child care for sick children who can't stay at school or go to daycare. The model "Granny on the go" would access retirees who are available to step in on short notice, allowing mothers or fathers to not miss work or school.
- On-site daycares like Short Stop Rec Club in every school
- "Mom Sharing" to rotate child care

Mental Health and Social Supports

- More women's support groups and opportunities for women to connect
- Resource centers like Tupper Street Family Resource Centre and Portage Friendship Centre spread throughout the city
- Issue specific groups including increased prenatal support groups, and groups for parents with high needs
- Supports for gay, lesbian, and transgendered individuals
- Opportunities like the focus groups for women to feel heard and valued, with a group to lobby for women's issues
- Anger management classes
- More female doctors and pediatricians

Children's Programs, Recreation and Arts

- Affordable or free music classes for children
- More parks, particularly in the North End of Portage
- Opening school gyms in the evenings to allow children to play, especially in the winter months
- Sports programs or teams that allow children from low-income homes an opportunity to be active and socialize. Having an option to fundraise instead of paying fees would allow for more involvement.
- More programs for teenagers
- More skate-parks for youth
- Huge indoor jungle gym, complete with snack bar
- Affordable tutors for children
- Teddy Bear Picnic

Food and Shopping

- Healthy food programs such as the Good Food Box
- Community Gardens and Collective Kitchens
- Cooking groups that focus on healthy options and how to afford them on a budget
- Grocery shopping assistance
- Discount produce stores
- Flea markets or indoor garage sales all year round
- More food banks

Employment Opportunities

- Paid work experience programs
- Program that matches women with employers
- Increased flexibility by employers to allow for child care barriers
- More job training, for every stage of learner

Safety

- Supports and programs for abused men
- Programs to address bullying
- Education on safety and early intervention
- More housing and shelters for abused women
- Safe housing for low-income families, single mothers especially

Other Suggestions

- Free publication for women; written by women
- Free financial consultants

- Programs that educate the general population about multi-culturalism and racism

v. *Women's Top Priorities*

Women were asked if they could wave a magic wand, what one thing would they change in their life. Responses varied, but fit into seven theme areas that helped show what would make a tangible difference in women's lives. The areas are listed below in order of frequency they were mentioned:

- Having a safe, affordable home that fit the needs of their family
- To be happy, stress free, confident and supported by friends and family
- To have a good paying job with good hours
- To be financially stable, with money in savings
- Affordable programs and activities for their children
- Going back or finishing school
- Supports to increase feelings of safety

B. Results of men's focus groups

The findings of the men's focus groups showed many similarities to the women's focus group responses. Themes emerging from these conversations included obtaining financial stability, availability of health services and social programs, child care, housing, education, employment, and transportation. Unique to the women's responses was the desire to see the community of Portage la Prairie economically strong as a whole.

i. *What does economic security mean to men?*

Maintaining their own financial stability and financial stability of their family was a key to economic security for men. The ability to balance their income versus their expenses, manage their bills, support their children, and provide the necessities was essential.

"If something happens to me, what will happen to my girls?"

For men economic security was strongly linked to employment. Participants displayed dissatisfaction working part-time or casual hours and placed priority on finding a stable full-time job with benefits. As with women, men saw finishing school or seeking higher educational opportunities as a way to economic security through gaining better employment. Men also expressed economic security as a feeling.

"Economic security equals positive mental health."

Something unique noted in the men's focus groups was the link between Portage la Prairie's economy and an individual's economic security. The first male focus group was particularly concerned with the state of the local economy and saw a direct correlation to their ability to succeed and access opportunities in the community. This was not mentioned during any of the women's focus groups as a priority or concern.

“Security is living in a community that’s forward thinking with people who aren’t relying on handouts. That isn’t afraid to get its hands dirty and is progressive.”

ii. What is working for men

Like the women in Portage, men are relying on supports of family and friends when facing hard times. They are also seeking out educational and employment opportunities and are invested in their futures. Many said their family and children are what is motivating them to succeed. While the number of men we spoke with is much lower than the women, the responses were similar. What is working for women also seems to be working for men.

Similar to women’s focus groups, men who participated in the focus groups are leaning on family and friends for support. Less emphasis was placed on formalized support services than in the women’s focus groups, and more discussion took place on informal supports such as asking for advice from an elder, getting involved in the community, or engaging in religious practices, like meditation.

“My mental health improved when I got out and interacted with people. I am less stressed and depressed.”

As in the women focus groups, education and upgrading and expanding skills was seen as very important to improving economic security. One participant was taking a computer course to increase his employability. Another participant shared he came to Portage la Prairie to capitalize on its training opportunities, and he now intends on moving to Winnipeg to access a better job market and wages.

Unique to the men’s focus groups was the acknowledgement of the development of Portage’s business sector as a way to provide more product options and diversity to employment. They noted new businesses are allowing for healthy competition, which drives down prices and provides families with more products and services to choose from.

“Easy Home allows low-income families to have things like washers and dryers. It beats washing your clothes in the bath tub.”

One focus group also noted the impact of the look of the community on economic security and noted that recent park improvements and beautification efforts have brought improvements to the community.

iii. What is holding men back?

Similar to the women’s focus groups, men are feeling a lack of social, mental and emotional supports. They too are feeling discriminated against and judged. The lack of transportation and housing are barriers to independence. While child care wasn’t as big a barrier for men as it was for women, they expressed concerns about how children were being raised and the effects it had on the community as a whole.

Social and Emotional Supports, Mental Health and Isolation

As in the women's focus groups, men expressed stress, fear, marital issues, and mental illness are taking a toll on their ability to function in day to day life. They relied on family and friends for help. As opposed to women's focus groups, men noted a lack of resources for men in the community. They said while there are many supports in place for single mothers and women, there isn't much to help for struggling men in Portage la Prairie.

"There's not much helping me."

Men expressed that getting ahead has placed additional stress on them as the more money they make, the more expectations are placed on them. One participant said since he and his wife have made positive steps in their life, their extended family places higher expectations on them to help out financially.

Mental health was discussed in each focus group and references to specific traumatic events that have impacted participants mental health. The men discussing the traumatic events noted that there was little help in Portage to get people back on the right track. They noted that when people are not helped get back on the right track it has negative consequences such as bullying and violence, and that intervention needs to take place early.

"Mental illness is huge here. Bullies need help too; it's how they were raised."

Racism and Stigma

As in the women's focus groups, racism and stigma were felt to play a major role against attaining economic security. Two participants shared instances of being discriminated against in the workplace and said it directly affected their ability to work.

*"I'd like to find a job where my boss doesn't treat me like garbage.
Everywhere I go people are racist and I end up quitting."*

Participants indicated past mistakes, criminal records, and stigma were holding them back. One participant shared that his criminal record has been a huge barrier to finding employment and feeling accepted by society.

*"My criminal record is making life difficult. It's really hard to get a pardon
and the system isn't fair at times. Why can't society accept my apology and see
I have changed? Why can't people see past my previous life?"*

*"Dealing with the old school mentality of Portage. People are not comfortable
outside their norms. They won't try new things and are afraid of change."*

Housing

Low vacancy rates and the condition of available housing were concerns for the participants. Housing arrangements such as having to live with family or share a small space is affecting

privacy, personal space, and the ability to have their children stay with them for long periods of time.

“[What is holding me back is] living with family; my mom and sister are always asking me for money.”

“Single dwelling units [are needed], so people aren’t stuck in toxic relationships”

Transportation

The lack of affordable or public transportation was seen as a barrier to employment, education, and economic growth by the male focus groups. The unreliability and high cost of shuttles were added as additional barriers to mobility. The men were less interested in discussing this topic than the women’s focus groups, many feeling it was never going to change and there was no point in staying on the issue. Lack of reliable transportation is making it difficult for men to get to work on time, find the job they want, and access resources.

“What is stopping the city from having a few public buses? It could provide more employment opportunities, a way to get to employment and shopping opportunities.”

“We need a bus or better cabs that show up on time. I can’t afford to wait. We need cheaper transit options.”

Child care and supports for children and youth

Concerns raised about child care were different from those raised in the women’s focus groups. While one participant did cite the expense of child care as a barrier to himself, more concern was raised about the inability for women to parent children as they are forced to enter the working world to make ends meet. The men felt it was important for women to be able to stay home and nurture their children, but indicated the cost of living has pressured mothers to leave the home to assist with the cost of living. It was clear men in our community care for their children and want the best for them.

Fathers in the group were concerned about providing for their children and setting a good example. They also saw activities and opportunities for children and youth to be important.

“We need to set a better example for our children. Both parents are too busy with work.”

“There is no recreation for youth in the North End. My kids always end up getting into trouble.”

iv. Suggestions to Improve Economic Security

Men also had suggestions to improve economic security. Some of the suggestions were:

- Increased recreation opportunities such as a gym with a daycare attached, a family fun centre, youth activities and more recreational activities in the North End.
- More affordable housing options for families as well as single dwelling units.
- Programs to teach people trades while building additional housing for the community.
- More policing and resources to combat stalking, child abuse, and sexual abuse.
- Neighbourhood Watch and Block Parent programs.
- Additional higher education programs offered locally.
- More advertising and emphasis on raising awareness of services.
- An addictions treatment centre.
- Building a more caring community where people help one another.

v. ***What were the main priorities***

Men were also asked if they could wave a magic wand, what one thing would they change in their life. Due to the limited number of participants, no clear themes emerged. Priorities ranged from personal goals such as finding stable employment, getting help with addictions, criminal records and depression, to improving housing and providing public transportation, to suggestions for businesses to improve the local economy.

C. Results of key informants interviews

Key informant interviews presented a different perspective on women's economic security and the community's response to the issue. The key informants consisted of staff, management, and leaders from the areas of education, housing, employment, justice, health care, and various levels of government. Two key trends that emerged were the need for a collaborative approach to the issue, and the need to increase awareness and usage of resources in the community. There was optimism that, once these two issues were addressed further, women's economic security in Portage could improve greatly.

i. *What is working in our community?*

Key informant responses to what is working to increase economic security for women in Portage la Prairie and area centered around three themes: programs and services which provide social supports while increasing life skills, educational opportunities and a collaborative approach to service provision.

Social Supports and Life Skills

Tupper Street Family Resource Center, the Portage Friendship Center and Youth for Christ were commonly cited as being valuable social resources and supports to women and families in Portage la Prairie. These services are seen to provide women opportunities to learn, foster social interaction and inclusion, build capacity, and encourage deeper connections within the community. It was broadly felt that once women made the connection with a specific center or agency, the social supports they received there allowed them to take the next steps to improving their economic status and take positive strides in their lives. Services which offered child care and transportation as part of their programming were perceived as the most beneficial to women in Portage, as they helped to reduce barriers to participation.

"I also like Tupper Street [Family Resource Centre]. Parents are able to meet, and kids are socializing; not being stuck in their homes isolated. It's an opportunity to meet, and learn from other families. Those who have moved here such as immigrants, they have a chance to meet people. This is a great place to start."

"It's hard to know what's working but what I see happening is people going places that offer basic life skills, so they can get over those hurdles. Those things from the very core are serving people in tangible ways. We assume they know how to boil water and read directions. Its basic life skills partnered with someone who can help them by listening and asking them to share more. Anything focused on that is helping people."

"Relationship is key. This is central to all that happens. When we look at a family that struggles because they are low income or homeless, I believe so much of that is from the loss of home. They lost home before they lost a place

to live. This started the slippery slope to where they are now in their lives. If my house burnt down today I am not worrying about where I am going, I have friends. A lot of people don't have that, they have no help. So if something basic happens they have nowhere to run as relationships have been hurt. That's why we need to mentor them, but before that, we need to find a way to make people feel comfortable with asking for help. They need to allow us to help them."

Although key informants focused on programs and services, they also recognized that many women are relying on each other for support. Building the skills and capacity of women and instilling them with the confidence to help other women will have a trickle effect as they reach out to each other through their own social networks.

"If anything is working, it's the families working together and helping each other. Some of them might watch the kids for appointments or for school. Families are living together. Families helping families is working"

Education

As with women and men in the focus groups, key informants saw the importance of education in improving economic security. The Portage Learning and Literacy Center and Red River College were listed by every key informant as positive supports for citizens in the city of Portage la Prairie. These organizations are appreciated as the starting point to going beyond social services and important building blocks to get them beyond their low-income jobs.

"The expansion of Red River moving into Portage is great. I see the increase in individuals going into education, and recently the practicum opportunities. That experience is important. To get ahead they need that. Going out and putting out resumes isn't working for them. I think an employer seeing their skills is working."

Collaboration amongst Service Providers

Key informants sensed agencies are working harder nowadays to encourage collaboration and share resources; which is leading to more preventative work rather than crisis management scenarios. They acknowledged that no one issue facing an individual can be solved in isolation, and indicated that a holistic approach must be taken to make real changes in people's lives.

"What's working well with some individuals and families is there's a more collaborative approach. So it's more like a circle of care and support. Everybody's got their own little piece they can do or are mandated to do but go that extra step in collaborating with other care providers. I see situations with people I know where it's a collaboration of self-esteem, parenting, education... and it just branches off from there. That's where we are changing lives."

Relative to collaboration was the acknowledgement of more frequent communication between service providers. Knowing what is happening, and where, helps service providers meet more of their client's needs.

ii. Gaps and Barriers

Key informants were provided with a list of barriers that previous local research identified as the main hurdles facing women in Portage and asked how they saw these barriers impacting the women they worked with. Transportation, child care, racism, housing, education, employment opportunities, and mental health supports saw the most responses. Respondents also noted that the hurdles women face are interconnected and the barriers are cyclic in nature.

“And it becomes so complicated when the financial income piece becomes the base for all these other issues. It’s the chicken and egg. It’s slowly working through the pieces one at a time. There needs to be prioritization about where you start. I think it’s counterproductive to look at what’s causing what. Who cares? That’s where we need collaboration from other services. People need more than one person helping them.”

Transportation

Transportation issues appeared to relate to every other barrier stopping people from gaining economic security. Prohibiting employment, education, child care or access to shopping; lack of mobility is a huge hurdle for people trying to get ahead.

“There is no transportation system in Portage, so how are we supposed to get people from the North End to Red River College to get an education? If someone wants to get an education there should be supports in place to assist them.”

“What happens when you live in the North East corner, your child gets sick, and you have no ride to the hospital or the clinic? Do you keep them home?”

“Transportation is that big elephant in the room. I wonder what would happen if we actually sat down, looked at it and the problems it’s causing. Why do we always look at the list and jump over it because we don’t know what to do. We need to do something. How can we build relationships with people that can’t get to us? How can we give people passes to the PCU center if they can’t get there? Can we share a vehicle? The red tape I went through to get information on this, I finally gave up. It’s too big to bite off. They need to study it, then study their study, and then study that.”

Child care

Key informants shared how lack of affordable and adequate daycare was impacting women and how it was associated to many other barriers facing women. Without child care mothers can’t get

into education, gain employment, or have time to themselves. One informant said even if a mother doesn't need child care to work or attend school, it's important for children to socialize and be exposed to other people.

One key informant made an interesting observation, that some women feel uncomfortable putting their children in daycare, afraid they will be reported to Child and Family Services. This could be due to a feeling of paranoia, discrimination, and stigma related to their economic and racial status.

Racism and Discrimination

Nearly every key informant brought up the topic of racism, adding we cannot ignore this problem. Whether it's affecting opportunities to gain employment, take part in social groups, or trust service providers; racial divide is stopping many Aboriginal people and immigrants from getting ahead or reaching out. Informants have the impression that racial lines have been drawn in this community and something needs to be done.

"We have a lot to learn here as far as embracing and valuing multi-culturalism. There are two sides to that coin; some say it's too much some say it's not enough."

"People's levels of comfort with services can be an issue. Many aboriginal people do not feel comfortable or welcome. This is obviously caused by racism, stereo-typing, and false perceptions. Why would they subject themselves to that? Some of this can also be caused by their families who aren't comfortable with outside help. This can be because of multi-generational trauma or lack of trust. The problem is these ideas become normalized even if they are false or inaccurate."

Some key informants suggested that educating people and employers about the aboriginal population will help solve this issue. Aboriginal people are the fastest growing and youngest population with 50% of the Aboriginal population under the age of 25. Young aboriginal workers were seen to be a valuable resource to the future workforce, and steps need to be taken now to build the relationships and skills of both youth and employers to capitalize on this resource. It was felt that if employers are serious about hiring Aboriginal people, they need to be serious about getting to know about them, getting rid of their preconceptions and building positive relationships.

Housing

Lack of affordable housing was recognized as a barrier for women working to improve their economic situation. One key informant felt it was the first obstacle we should be tackling in regards to combating poverty in this city. Having a safe and affordable home was seen as a requirement before being able to work on other barriers. The lack of affordable living conditions was seen to impact on transiency rates, with women moving frequently within the city and to

other communities. Keeping women in programs was perceived as difficult because the transiency rates in Portage are so high. This also impacts the ability of women to make connections and social supports.

"If you tell someone to wait [for housing] they will move on or go back into that abusive relationship. It happens so much. They move to Winnipeg, to the reserve, and back. Portage is very transient due to the housing situation."

"There is a huge lack of affordable housing in Portage la Prairie. The vacancy rate is effectively zero; people will be waiting for years. You almost have to be in a crisis situation. Then you have the slum landlords who are preying on these individuals. If you are the working poor it's very hard to find a decent place to live."

"Quality housing. I mean Portage is good at building fancy condos but what about affordable housing. Whatever it is, we need it."

"I know we have no land but we need to start getting housing for people in better areas of the city. Creating these ghettos on the corner of town is not working. Especially if we will not provide transportation."

It was also noted that there is nowhere for women to go once they leave emergency housing. This forces many of them back to an abusive partner or unsafe living conditions.

"I was surprised to know there isn't a second phase for people to go to after emergency housing. Somewhere for people to pull their marbles together for a few months not just 28 days. They can't go figure out their life, and kids in that short of time. That doesn't make sense and how can we expect them to have a chance."

Many informants noted and expressed concern about the quantity of low-income housing placed in one area of the city; the North End. This played into community perceptions and stigma. One informant went as far as saying Portage has physically separated itself into the rich and the poor.

Job Readiness and Employment Opportunities

When women in our target population are seeking jobs, a number are lacking the necessary ability to promote their skills or they simply don't have the education and skills required for the job. Informants noted a gap in computer and technological skills which can cause barriers for finding employment in today's world. Informants saw many women who have gotten an education and want to re-enter the workplace, but barriers like lack of daycare or transportation can stop them. Those entering the workforce for the first time have a steep learning curve, which can be frustrating and stressful.

Mental Health Supports

Key informants saw the impacts of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety on the women they work with. A lack of mental health and counseling resources was perceived for women who had not been diagnosed with a mental illness, unless they were undergoing a crisis. More preventative mental health services were seen as required.

“Mental health is huge. I think that challenges like depression impact so many areas. It has to be a conscious part of this, as far as services. It’s so relational based feeling confident in your doctor, community. So to access mental health through the RHA, you’re waiting, unless you’re in a crisis. It takes a real crisis for anything to happen. That’s a huge gap.”

“And lack of understanding of mental health in this city is huge as well. Denial is huge because it’s easier to put blame or stereo-type. And that cuts a wide swath, mental health is huge but so is emotional health. Even women with a higher economic status have difficulty dealing with mental health issues because half the time they aren’t believed.”

iii. Gender and Opportunity

Key informants were asked to identify policies or systems that unintentionally impacted women differently than men, or impacted specific sub-groups of women such as single parents, aboriginal women, or immigrants. Impacts of gender were noted in relation to division of labour regarding child rearing, access to employment and competitive wages and single mothers leaving social assistance. Key informants also held differing views on gender, race and perceptions of privilege.

Child Rearing Division of Labour

Expectations related to child care and child rearing was noted by key informants as a societal norm that was impacting women’s economic security. Women face barriers to employment and education simply because the mother is expected to handle the majority of child rearing and the hurdles that come with it. This impacts women, as they are more likely to need time off to look after sick children or deal with any issues arising with their children.

“I think in the workplace there are definite policies and systems that unintentionally impact women as they are often regarded as nurturers, or the ones who are going to look after the children if there’s a problem. It’s not intentional but it is just a social norm that’s been built and it definitely impacts women. If you are a young woman you may not get the job over a man who applied, as you’re the one who’s going to have the babies and leave the workplace. It’s insidious as men are entitled to maternity leave as well. And if a woman takes time off for sick leave to take care of her family she may not get the promotion in a job because she’s had more sick days compared to the guy

who didn't have to worry about it. You see it happen. As long as child care and domestic care is seen as they are now, women will never get a leg up. There's an undervaluing of child care and domestic work. I say it's a huge issue in that women are penalized for having children in the work world."

Access to Employment and Competitive Wages

Key informants noted that men are still being paid more than women for the same job. They also noted a difference in the type of wages women can access even with the same education as men. More than one key informant said men who haven't gained their Grade 12 can go a lot farther than a woman, simply because they can get into trades or construction work, which pays good wages. Those types of jobs are still seen as "man" work and women are not likely to be considered. An undervaluation of "women" work such as Early Childhood Education was also noted by some key informants.

"There's man's work and then there's women's work."

Single Mothers Leaving Social Assistance

Policies in the social assistance system were seen to impact women, in particular single mothers, differently than men. Single mothers on assistance may face additional barriers trying to leave the system. Upon gaining employment she would face a reduction in health benefits, her rent would go up, and she would have to pay for daycare, putting her and her family at risk of greater economic instability. In many cases this was seen to lead to women staying in the system.

"I encourage women to stay on assistance. There's no way you can survive or earn enough to look after 5 children on minimum wage, it doesn't cut it. By the time you pay for a shuttle it's an outing just to go to work. It's not being economically independent. And then when you have a child that reaches grade one you are made to go look for work, so they just have another child. I wish they [social assistance] would just encourage education; women aren't encouraged to get off the system at all. Having another child is the most feasible thing to do."

Gender, Race and Perceptions of Privilege

Perceptions of which groups have advantages or disadvantages differ from person to person. Some key informants saw a Caucasian woman having greater advantages in our community over any other group, including Caucasian males. Others perceived that Aboriginal women had more access to help and services than any other group. This inconsistency in perception of advantage or disadvantage can result in stigma and resentment towards particular groups.

"So it depends on what way you are looking at it. I'm thinking strictly Aboriginal vs. white, and I will say Aboriginal people have way more options for help than other groups. But if an Aboriginal woman accepts help with

school or funding she will be trashed for taking advantage of this opportunity, which isn't fair."

iv. *Suggestions to Improve Women's Economic Security*

Key informants were asked to share their suggestions to improve economic security for women in Portage la Prairie and area. Themes included greater collaboration amongst service providers, raising awareness of available programs and services, tackling the transportation issue and addressing low-income housing.

Partnerships and Collaboration amongst Service Providers

Most of the suggestions put forward centered on programming, communication, and additional sharing of resources. In terms of programming several key informants wanted to see a one stop shop or access center that could directly link services and provide an ability to coordinate efforts. This idea had numerous suggested names which included access center, clearing house, and drop in center; but they all appeared to provide a very specific purpose of bringing agencies together under one roof.

"7th Street Access Center is great in Brandon. Doctors, Mental Health, and housing in one spot. They have voicemail, free. How can you get a job if you don't have a phone? That's an amazing space and it's not rocket science."

"We need an intake for social services, a one stop shop program; that's drop in. Basically advise them on where to take the next step."

"We need a multi-agency building that can address everything or send people in the right direction. Somewhere where we can all go to share, someone to figure out whose responsibility is what, where the focus should be. Networking has been tried but workload is too huge. We need a wraparound approach to issues without red tape."

Closely related was the issue of communication between service providers, which many indicated as a barrier to providing clients with information and resources. Many respondents said they were simply too busy to know what others are doing and that can lead to a lot of overlap in services. Information sharing through the Network of Non-Profits Luncheons and e-mail list was one of the ways service providers keep track of what's happening in the city, but it was not enough.

"We need to sit down with each other often and educate ourselves. We worry about helping others but what about helping us be better. We need to learn this stuff too. I need to sit across from someone from the PCRC or Tupper Street and talk. It will help trigger what I need to know the next time I see someone. The only way I will know what's happening at your building is by communicating and connecting."

There was a desire for more open discussions and forums between service providers and community leaders that focus on what really needs to be done in the community.

Awareness and education of services

Finding a way to educate the public on available programs and services could significantly reduce the amount of confusion and people falling through the cracks. Informants said their clients are severely lacking when it comes to knowing where to go and how to access resources. The most frequent suggestion to combat this issue was the creation of an online database. Clients and the general public could access this from almost anywhere and they wouldn't depend so heavily on service providers to help them navigate the system. Workshops and frequent meet and greets were correspondingly mentioned as a great way to advertise resources available in the community and make connections with the general public.

Transportation

Informants suggested a transportation strategy is the first step in tackling the issue of access to services and employment in the city of Portage la Prairie. It was acknowledged as a huge undertaking but if other communities like Selkirk and Brandon were making it happen, the city of Portage could find a way to make it work. Another suggestion was to collaborate and purchase vans that could be shared between services.

“This city has proven we can find a way to do what we want to do by building that PCU center. So transportation shouldn't be that big of an issue for this city. And the excuse that people won't ride the bus is stupid, we don't know that. We could do it like Brandon does it where there is a bus that comes by every half hour. Let's give it a year, if people don't use it we will cancel it, but at least try, and maybe create a few jobs in the meantime. How about that?”

Housing

Many suggestions were brought forward on ways to address affordable housing in Portage la Prairie. A common suggestion was to ensure that low-income housing was not clustered in the same area but distributed throughout the community. This would place low-income families in areas where people could help each other and build a more diverse community. Housing First was also mentioned as a great model to combat poverty, that has already seen success in other parts of the country. The premise of Housing First is that finding people safe and appropriate housing should be the first priority, before tackling other issues such as addictions or mental health issues.

Other

Other suggestions to improving economic security for women included:

- De-centralize services. Bring services to every neighbourhood, bring them to people. Bring back community halls.

- More food banks, recruit volunteers to run them.
- Reduce fees in the school system so more children can participate in sports.
- Hold an open forum, inviting service providers and the community to speak out on real issues facing Portage la Prairie.
- More services for youth in Portage la Prairie.

D. Gender Related Observations

While gender, race and social status can all be looked at with a separate lens, the research collected indicates how intertwined these elements actually are. Looking at data from the focus groups and key informant interviews, it is apparent that each of these factors plays a part in opportunities and access to resources.

A key part of the Momentum project is to raise awareness of how gender, race, age, and culture impacts economic security. The data shows a lack of awareness of how these factors affect the dynamics of a community. For example, a majority of key informants interviewed could not give an example of policies or systems that unintentionally impact women differently from men. The same gap in awareness of gender related barriers was noted in responses from focus groups.

i. Employment Opportunities and Income Levels

Lack of employment was noted by both men and women in the focus groups as a barrier to economic security, but it can be questioned whether men are at a greater advantage when pursuing employment opportunities.

In relation to gaining employment, women listed balancing motherhood and work expectations as a major hurdle. Women, more than men were concerned with finding suitable hours that enable them to be at home with their children outside of school or daycare hours. Most women said they aren't able to work shift work or evenings and weekends. Single mothers in particular found this as a significant barrier to employment. As well, many women are torn between being a stay at home mother and helping provide for their families, and often do not feel they have a choice in the matter. Men in our focus groups weren't as concerned with finding work with suitable hours or balancing work and family life, but rather were concerned with finding a job that pays well and can provide benefits.

In terms of employment, women are making less money than men, even when employed full-time. This is a national trend that is echoed here in Portage la Prairie. In Portage la Prairie, the average median yearly earnings for men over 15 was \$29,986 compared to \$19,249 for women in 2006. It has been noted that men are also more able to get a higher paying job than women with little or no education as the types of jobs traditionally filled by men such as physical labour pay higher than the types of jobs available to women with little or no education, often in customer service.

Another piece to consider is the barriers women face when and if they do find outside work. It is shown that mothers face an added difficulty in the workforce, often having to leave or miss work due to child sickness, pregnancy, or unexpected events related to children. This can hold women back from receiving higher pay or gaining a promotion, compared to men or women who aren't parents.

ii. Education and Training

According to the 2006 Census, provincially 14% of women ages 25 to 34 do not have their high school diploma, and in Portage and area (City and Rural Municipality) the number jumps to 23%. In contrast men in this age group are more likely to not have a high school diploma; 18% of men ages 25 to 34 in Manitoba do not have their Grade 12 and in Portage that number rises to 32%. This shows a distinct gap in educational levels between men and women provincially and in the city of Portage la Prairie.

A gender disparity is apparent as men in Portage la Prairie have higher income levels, despite the fact that women have a higher education levels. As noted previously, women are less likely than men to get a well-paying job without higher levels of education.

It is interesting to note that the majority of students enrolled in local adult education and post-secondary programs at the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre and Red River College were female. Obviously, local women are working towards furthering their education. Key informants in the sector note barriers facing women such as child care and transportation are impacting access to local educational programs, and must be addressed to help women get ahead.

iii. Child care

More female than male focus group participants described the lack of child care in Portage la Prairie as a major barrier. Women are doing more un-paid child care than men and society has a predisposed expectation on women to do the majority of child rearing. While men in our focus groups showed concerns surrounding the lack of child care spots available and the economic pressures on mothers to work, they did not see this as a barrier to themselves personally. Not one of the male participants required daycare to attend the focus groups while 70% of female participants did. Lack of affordable, available and flexible child care is very much a barrier that predominantly impacts women and their ability to work or get an education.

iv. Transportation

Portage la Prairie does not have a public transportation system, a barrier which impacts both men and women. While both genders reported transportation as a barrier, women seemed to have a more difficult time with this particular hurdle. For example, in our focus groups one out of eleven men needed to utilize our transportation resource while one third of the female participants did. Many of the women in our focus groups attended with their children, which could explain some of the difference. Obviously, travelling with children is an added difficulty.

Although our research did not delve into the detailed explanations of why women were more impacted by lack of transportation, it appears that ability to travel without children and feeling safe walking the streets were factors. Many of the women in our focus groups also indicated that they lacked a driver's license, while this did not come up in the men's focus groups. It would be interesting to find if women in our community are in fact less likely to have their driver's license than men.

v. *Social Supports and Programming*

While conducting the research an unexpected barrier emerged which hints at a lack of resources for men in Portage la Prairie. This lack of male specific support was noted in both male and female focus groups as well as several key informant interviews.

In setting up focus groups, we encountered difficulty reaching male participants but the researcher was able to connect with female participants much more easily. This was largely due to women already having established connections within groups or programs offered by service providers such as the Tupper Street Family Resource Center and the Portage Friendship Center. When attempting to connect with men, the researcher was not able to find one group of established men who were meeting regularly. This evidence supports the theory that there is a lack of male focused support groups in place in our community.

At the same time, many of the support programs available centered on parenting, an area traditionally focused on women. Although many of these programs did not exclude men, and would happily serve males in their program, men were not comfortable participating as they perceived the service as only for women. An unexplored topic in the focus groups was whether men would attend support programs for men only.

The impact of limited resources for men impacts the women in Portage la Prairie. Many of these men are struggling along with their partners to make ends meet for themselves and their children. This has an impact on women as many are relying on their partners to help them provide economic security for themselves and their families. Support for men is also needed to create healthy relationships and strong parenting role models. If men are not able to link with resources in our community, how are they able to provide needed support to women and their children?

vi. *Housing and Safety*

Although lack of affordable housing impacts both men and women in our community, women have unique challenges related housing. For example, more women than men are living in social housing developments. For women in our focus groups, conversations on safety and housing went hand in hand. Women strongly felt the need for adequate housing to satisfy their feelings of safety while both women and men wanted better affordability and living conditions. Women also noted that they were more likely to be the ones who needed to leave housing due to abusive relationships.

Although safety issues were raised by both men and women, women were more likely to report feeling unsafe walking down the streets at night. Women are also more likely to be victims of domestic abuse. Safety looks and feels different to women in our community than it does to men, and a gender lens needs to be applied to safety initiatives in our community.

VI. Next Steps & Recommendations

It is apparent that no one issue addressed in solitude will meaningfully impact economic security. A coordinated community response with the buy in from women, service providers, businesses and community leaders is needed to make a tangible difference in our community. Women and stakeholders alike have no time or energy for a project that does not take real steps forward. The findings in this report, along with an accompanying report on promising practices will be used to provide the community with information needed to create a community plan to address economic security for women.

In June 2013 a community forum including participation from women and stakeholders will be held to discuss the research findings and recommendations in the report. A collaborative process will be used so the voices of women, community groups and leaders are each heard in as equal a manner as possible. The results from this meeting will inform the Community Plan. The Community Plan will identify and focus on one key priority that will be addressed over the next two years with the funds from Status of Women Canada. At the same time, other resources and funders will be engaged to implement and address additional priority areas.

At the community forum, participants will review the following recommendations to collectively decide on a top priority area and discuss specific objectives for the next two years. A detailed action plan will be based on the results of this day's discussion.

Recommendations

Poverty / Life Skills

- Create a women's leadership group that would develop the skills of lower income women in the target demographic to address the findings of this report and increase their own economic security.
- Continue to offer and expand training sessions on life skills such as money management and cooking or shopping on a budget.

Employment Opportunities & Job Readiness

- Build relationships with business and employers to increase awareness and understanding related to gender and low-income, and promote family friendly practices to address barriers such as child care and transportation.
- Provide women with opportunities in paid work experience programs.
- Offer employability skills workshops for women which include child care and transportation supports.
- Provide training on entrepreneurship / home based businesses.

Social and Emotional Supports

- Continue to provide opportunities for women in support groups such as those offered at Tupper Street Family Resource Centre, Portage Friendship Centre, Canadian Mental Health Association (The WELL), and Youth for Christ's "The Door."
- Provide opportunities for women to mentor other women.
- Provide training for service providers on diversity and gender barriers.

Education & Training

- Address the barriers of child care and transportation to allow more women to participate in education.
- Offer women led education sessions on how to access services such as housing, child care, and education.

Child care

- Develop a task force to work on increasing the number of licensed child care spaces in Portage la Prairie, including before and after school programs to address school aged child care needs.
- Create a model of "mom sharing" or "granny on the go" to address needs of short term or emergency child care.

Transportation

- Develop a transportation strategy to identify creative methods for transportation including public transportation options, and shared shuttle services for employers, education or services.
- Develop a program to help women get their driver's license

Racism and Stigma

- Develop a public education campaign to create community understanding of diversity.
- Provide diversity and cultural awareness training to employers and service providers, such as the Walk a Mile in My Moccasins program.
- Provide opportunities for women to build their self-esteem, such as women's retreats and workshops, including opportunities to learn about traditional aboriginal culture.

Housing & Safety

- Involve local women and local law enforcement in discussions about safety and develop a strategy to increase understanding and trust.
- Increase women's involvement in neighbourhood based safety programs such as Neighbourhood Watch.
- Provide education and programming on safety issues such as stalking, bullying, domestic abuse, child abuse and sexual abuse.
- Develop a working group to explore housing needs, including the creation of transitional/ second stage housing for women

Awareness and Collaboration between Service Providers

- Create a regularly updated resource database showing available programming.
- Coordinate ongoing meetings of service providers, community leaders and women based on theme areas in this report, focused on sharing information and taking collective action.
- Explore a dedicated position to assist women in navigating the maze of services and assisting in removing barriers to accessing services.
- Explore the development of a "one stop shop" or access center that would provide multiple services under one roof.
- Provide education on gender based analysis to ensure programs are aware of and responsive to the unique needs of women.
- Take a holistic approach addressing issues related to economic security such as self-esteem, health, child care, housing, education and employment together instead of as separate issues.

*Together we can move toward economic security and prosperity for all women
of Portage la Prairie.*

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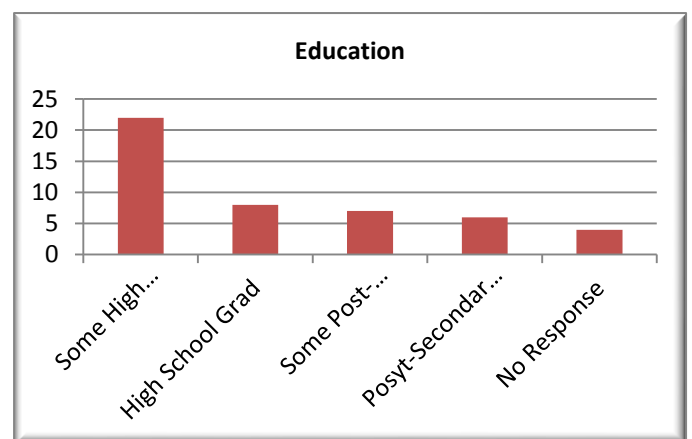
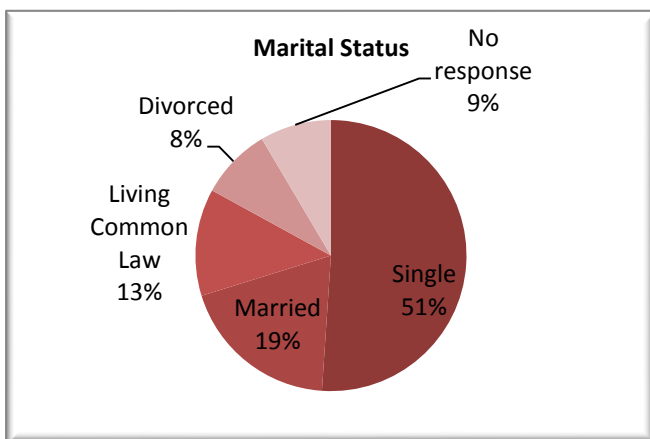
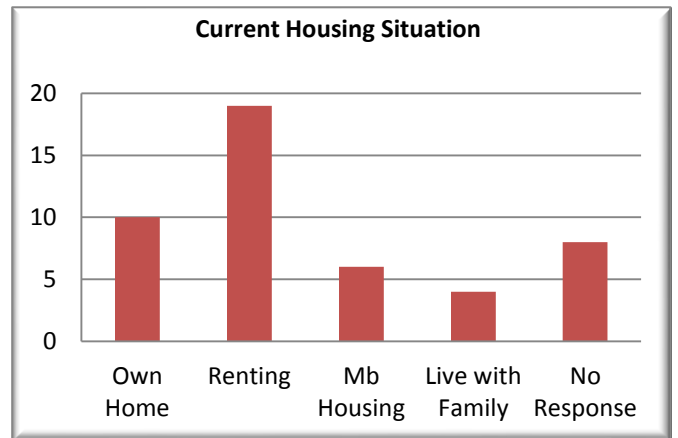
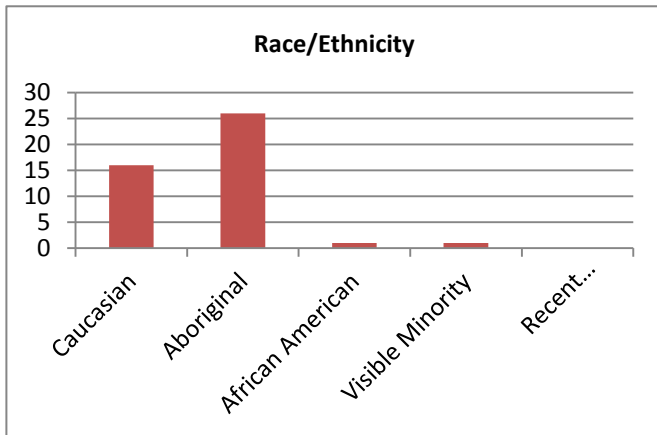
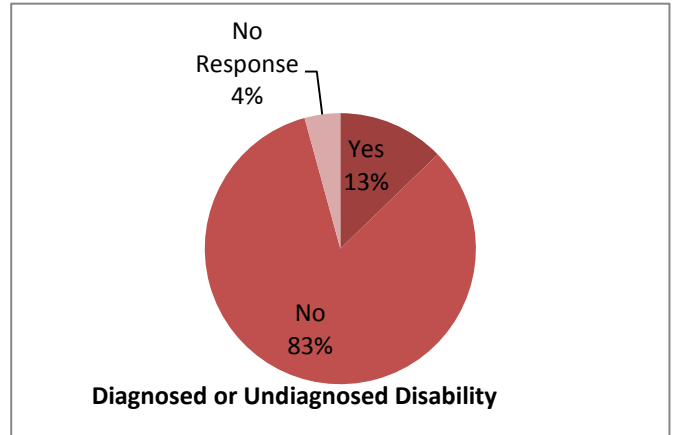
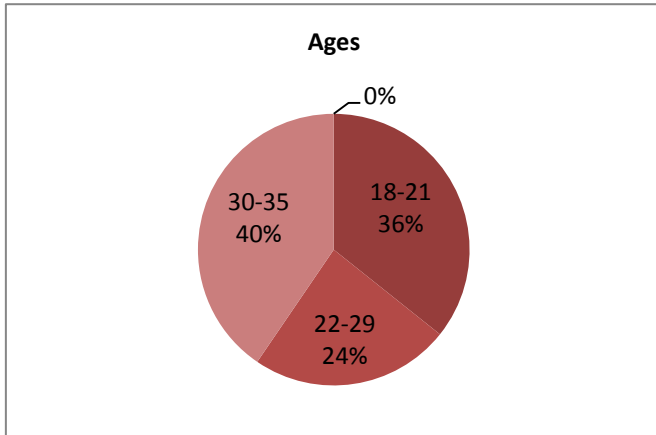
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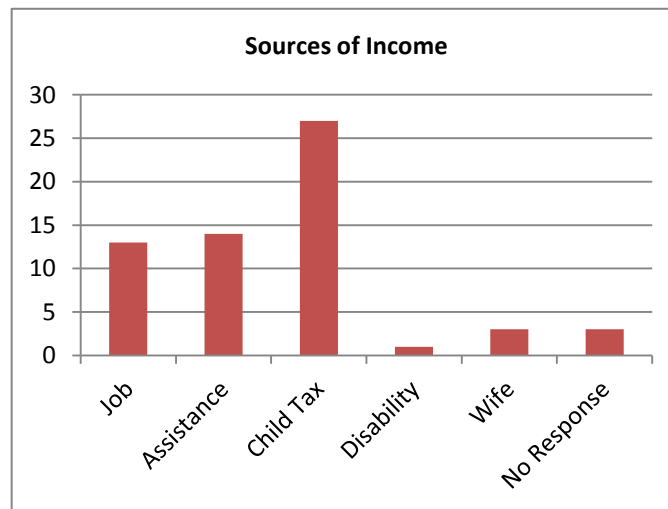
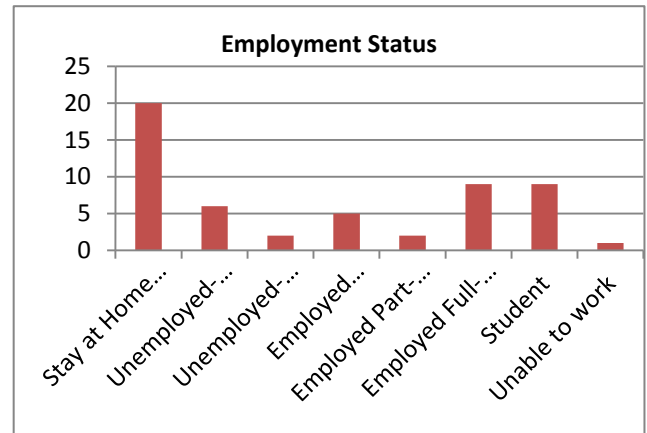
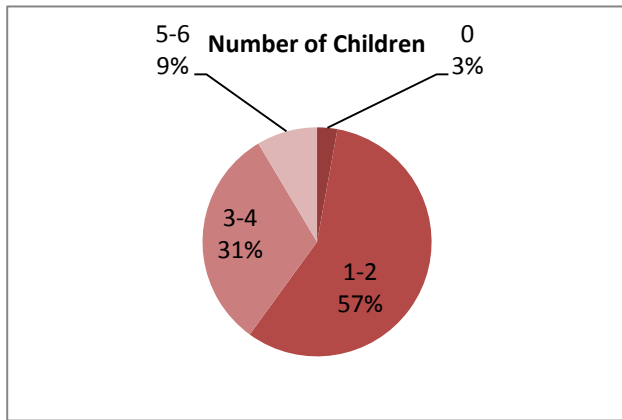
Appendix 1: Focus Group Questions

Questions for Focus Groups

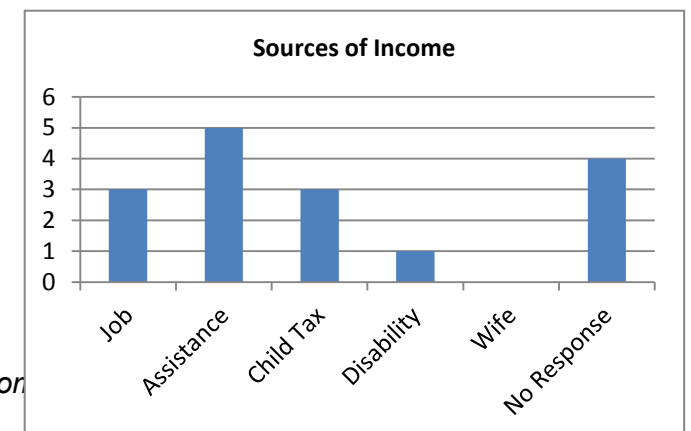
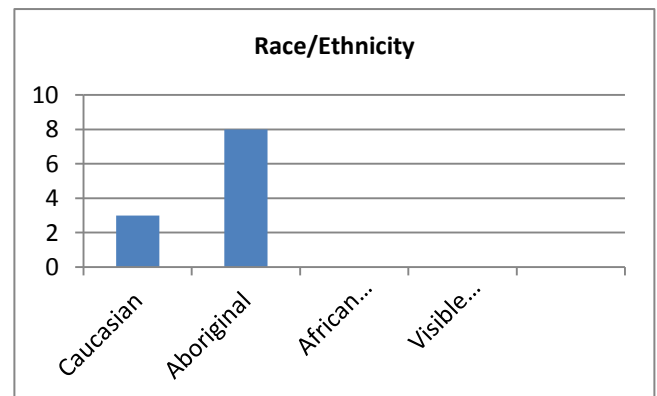
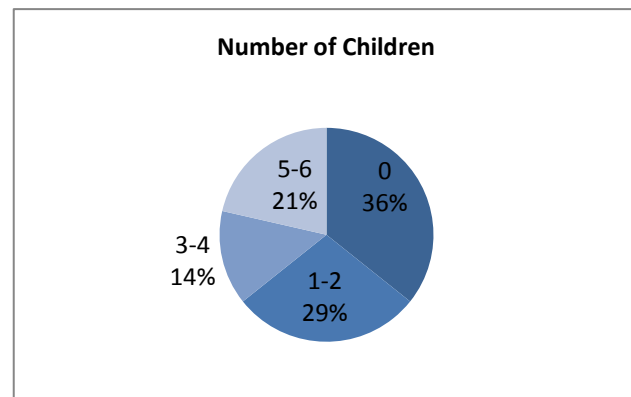
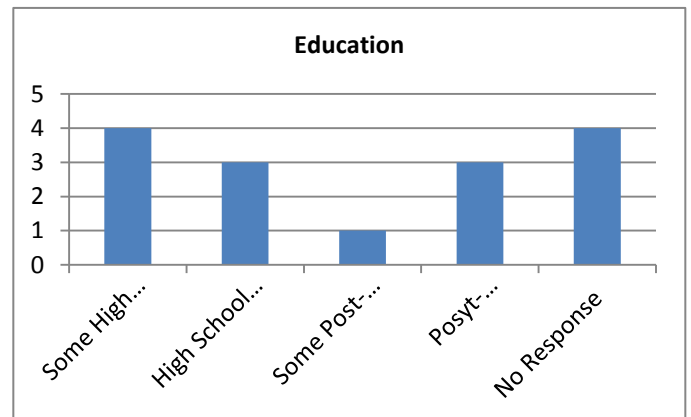
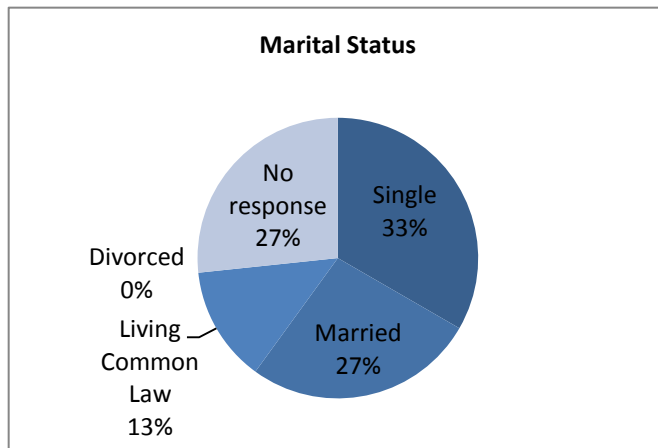
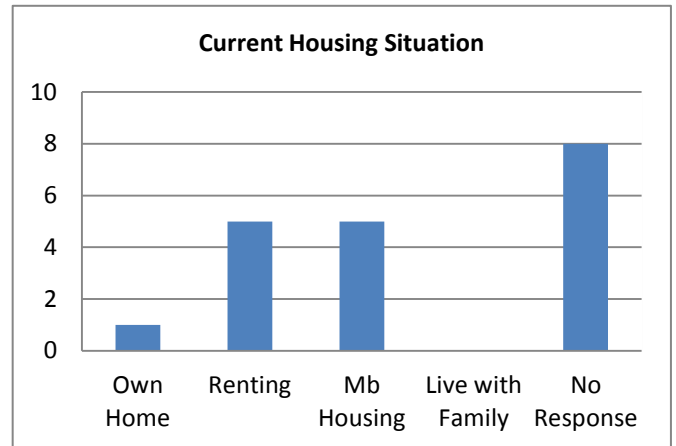
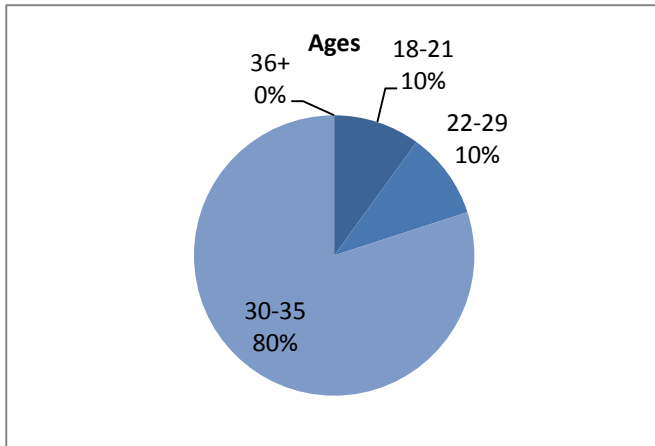
1. What does economic security mean to you?-
2. Looking at your personal experiences, what is making you feel secure? **Or** What has helped you survive?
3. What services or organizations exist in Portage that help you?
4. What has been holding you back? What is giving you the biggest headache
5. What suggestions do you have that could make things better for women in the community?
6. “If you could wave a magic wand and change or create one thing in Portage... what would it be?

Appendix 2: Women Focus Group Demographics





Appendix 3: Men's Focus Group Demographics



Appendix 4: Key Informant Questions

Questions for Key Informant Interviews

- 1) What is currently working to help lower income women in Portage and area create economic security for themselves and their families?
- 2) A) What are the gaps that exist in services?

B) Do you see policies or systems that unintentionally impact women differently than men, or negatively impact specific subgroups?
{Eg. Single women, Aboriginal women, single mothers, immigrant women, women with disabilities, etc.}
- 3) Previous reports have identified these barriers to economic security in Portage and area.
 - Lack of transportation
 - Lack of education
 - Lack of childcare
 - Lack of affordable quality housing
 - Inability to access employment
 - Insufficient qualifications and experience
 - Lack of awareness of services
 - Divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples
 - Inability to afford recreational activitiesA) How do these barriers impact the clients you work with?

B) Are there other barriers not listed?
- 4) A) What are your suggestions for our community to strengthen what is working well, fill the gaps and remove barriers?

B) Are there promising practices you are aware of that would benefit our community?

C) Do you see ways Portage's current systems/ programs could be working closer together?
- 5) We are planning to engage women to share their perspective and ideas on economic security. Is it possible for you to gather names of women to participate and/or set up groups at your location?

- 6) Is there anything else you would like to talk about regarding economic security?
- 7) We are gathering information on the available programs in Portage and area. Could you share information on your programs either verbally at the interview or by providing written information?