# Growing Up Female in New Brunswick

## 1970–2000

Advisory Council on the Status of Women
Conseil consultatif sur la condition de la femme

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The New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women is a body for consultation and study created to advise the New Brunswick government and to bring before the public matters of interest to women. The NBACSW reports directly to the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women.

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*This book is dedicated*
*to the women of New Brunswick*

*... who came before us*
*... who stand beside us*
*... who will follow*

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# INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago, the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada launched an innovative concept by suggesting the appointment of advisory councils on the status of women both federally and in the provinces. It seems fitting today that the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women marks the arrival of a new millennium by taking stock of the progress made by women in New Brunswick since 1970.

The experience of growing up female in New Brunswick has changed dramatically in many ways over the past three decades. A growing body of research has explored women's concerns, and public opinion and policy initiatives have been increasingly sensitized to the importance of women's issues in this country and on the international scene. As well, individuals and women's groups have played vital, active roles in this evolution. Progress has been made on a number of fronts, but the struggle for full and equitable female participation in society is ongoing. This report is offered as a tribute to all women who are part of the history of growing up as a female in New Brunswick and the information contained herein draws on existing research and available statistics.

The study explores the important issues in the lives of girls and women in New Brunswick since 1970. It is based on the life cycle approach, which acknowledges the evolving nature of needs and aspirations as we move through life's different phases. The situation of women from infancy through to senior years is considered, with a focus on the key areas of health, education and economic autonomy. Attention is given to analyzing some specifics such as the similarities and the variations experienced by anglophone, francophone, and Aboriginal women living in both urban and rural communities. The publication presents a series of statistical portraits of women's situation, an inventory of problems and possibilities as well as an overview of policy and program responses to the needs of girls and women. In addition, it looks back at the road traveled over the past thirty years and highlights the progress made over the same time period. It is hoped that this study will

elicit among its readers a sense of pride in accomplishments and a message of hope for the future.

As the report examines how life has changed in the past three decades, it begins with a look at preschoolers and notes that what has had the most impact on them is the massive entry of women into the workforce. In 1999, two-thirds of women with children under 16 were in the workforce. Notwithstanding the efforts to set up a child care program, research indicates that affordable and accessible daycare is still unavailable in New Brunswick.

Children ages six to twelve have received less attention from researchers and policy-makers than infants and adolescents. This important stage for the female child indicates that moving beyond the shelter of family and home to explore the world of schooling, friends and extra-curricular activities marks her official entrance into the real world. Although girls are high-achievers in school, they must still deal with sexism in the larger society and remain vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse.

Adolescence is a period that can be difficult at the best of times and it has become even more challenging as improved communications have brought the world into the home and exposed young people to a range of possibilities unheard of even in 1970. Teenage girls particularly are more exposed to risky behaviours such as unhealthy dieting, smoking, drinking, drugs and unprotected sex. On the other hand, teenage girls and their families expect that they will have interesting careers which provide economic independence.

Today's young women are more that ever making their mark on university campuses, are a highly visible part of the workforce, and are active in business and the professions. A woman in the year 2000 can be an elected official, a social activist, and a strong voice in women's organizations pressuring for change. It is a well-known fact that women are still struggling to achieve equal access to non-traditional employment, fighting for pay equity, battling sexual harassment in the workplace and living with the consequences of under-representation in government. The critical challenge facing young women and society

generally is to find ways of ensuring that women attain economic independence and thereby avoid living in poverty in their senior years.

A look at the lives of pre-senior women reveals issues arising from family life, unpaid work and concerns about wellness. It highlights the greater freedom of choice enjoyed by women in their personal relationships and living arrangements as compared to thirty years ago. Women are marrying later, living common-law with partners of either sex or living alone, having fewer children and having them at later ages than was the case in earlier decades. Few women today define themselves exclusively as wives and mothers. But even today, most women still reach this phase in their life having carried out the double-day workload of paid employment and unpaid domestic labour. It is at this stage in life that women have traditionally established the foundations of their financial independence in preparation for their golden years.

There has been a minor revolution in the way people age in Canada, and the way people think about the aging population. With the rise of gray power in the 1980s, seniors have redefined what it means to grow old. Seniors aren't a homogenous group, however, and there are still significant differences based on gender and marital status. Overall, 20 percent of New Brunswick women age sixty-five and over live in poverty compared to 8% of men, however 45 percent of senior women living alone live in absolute poverty. Statistics show that senior women are the fastest growing segment of the population in Canada and there is a growing need for an improved home care system which will provide health and social support to the elderly.

The new millennium brings with it a new generation of girls, adolescents, and young women who will continue to add chapters to this book and the continuing story of Growing up Female in New Brunswick. It is hoped that these first few chapters will help them understand and reflect on the progress women have made in the past thirty years.

# CHAPTER 1

# INFANCY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD (0-5 YEARS)

## INTRODUCTION

A female born in New Brunswick in the year 2000 enters a very different world from her counterpart born in 1970. She will have a better chance of surviving infancy and childhood, of finishing high school, and going on to a postsecondary education, and of fulfilling her dreams than ever before. And she will encounter few people today who will tell her, at least directly, that a girl's only goal in life should be to take care of others.

Compared to her sister born in 1970, she will grow up in a smaller family, she will have more material possessions and fewer siblings to compete for parental attention, her parents will be better educated, and her mother will be more likely to work outside the home. As well, the majority of New Brunswick females born in the year 2000 can look forward to being healthy and happy and to living in a society that still places a high value on the family and that cherishes children and attempts to provide them with the best possible care.

But New Brunswick, like the rest of the world, is changing rapidly. The 1990s were a decade of government restraint and cutbacks, a decade where the number of Canadians living in poverty increased dramatically and the gap widened between rich and poor. If both of her parents are lucky enough to be employed, they are much more likely in the year 2000 to be working longer hours than they were in the 1980s and for relatively less money. Her mother in particular will be under stress to balance work with family life, since she still bears most of the responsibility for running the home and caring for the children, despite the fact that she also has a paying job.

It is more likely that the biological parents of a female infant born today are no longer living together or will split up at some point in her life than would have been the case three decades ago. Her "family" may even include a step-parent, step-siblings, or a same-sex partner. Generally speaking, social relationships for a child in the year 2000 are much more complex than they were in 1970. It is also likely that she will be living in a single-parent family, usually with her mother, in which case our

female born in the year 2000 may well be living in poverty, and suffering from all the disadvantages that that entails.

What improvements have we, as New Brunswickers, made for our children in the past three decades? The new millennium is presenting challenges and opportunities unheard of even in the early 1970s, but are we preparing our children to meet those challenges and to exploit those opportunities by giving them the support of a loving family and a caring society? For our girls in particular, will they enter the new millennium with confidence, believing in themselves and in their abilities and filled with a sense of their own self-worth? Will they grow up feeling valued by the people around them because of who they are – female, strong, capable – and not like an inferior version of their male peers? When a female child looks in the mirror for the first time in those early critical years, between birth and five years of age, will she see someone who has the freedom to develop, indeed to blossom, to her full potential, secure in a New Brunswick that considers girls and boys to be equal, equally valued, and deserving of equal opportunities?

## THE EARLY YEARS: WHAT CHILDREN NEED FROM CONCEPTION ON

...Children who have been well cared for have brains that are physically different from those of children who have experienced less favourable conditions in their early years.

– Federal-Provincial-Territorial Council on Social Policy Renewal, May 1999. *A National Children's Agenda: Developing a Shared Vision.*

In the past three decades, there has been an explosion of scientific research on the importance of the early years of life. In fact, we now have considerable evidence that the experiences of a child from conception to age five set the stage for academic achievement as well as success in the labour force and life in general. We know, for example, that from conception on, the nourishment passed through the placenta from the mother is essential to the health of a fetus. We also know that its development can be disrupted if the mother is unduly

stressed or drinks alcohol, takes drugs, or smokes cigarettes during pregnancy, all factors that can result in low birth weight (generally considered to be under five and a half pounds). This is a major concern of the medical profession today as there is growing evidence that low birth weight babies are at much greater risk of experiencing health, emotional, and social problems throughout their lives.

From birth on, assuming a normal birth weight and the absence of any major disability, an infant's most immediate needs are physical and emotional. Physical well-being and motor development will take place as it should as long as the child receives adequate nutrition, is protected from accidents, preventable diseases, neglect, abuse, and violence, and has ample opportunity to exercise the large and small muscles.

An infant's emotional health depends on her earliest experiences with primary caregivers. If her caregiver responds to her needs (for example, when she cries) consistently, promptly, affectionately, and appropriately, she will develop what experts call a "secure attachment." Research has shown that five-year-olds who had secure attachments to their primary caregivers as infants have a more positive outlook, have higher levels of self-esteem, and are more independent. For decades, scientists believed that there could only be one primary caregiver (usually the mother); however, evidence today suggests that an infant can and will develop secure attachments to her father and other caregivers, as long as the care is provided consistently and according to an established routine. Children with secure attachments see themselves as worthy of love and approach others, including their peers, with positive expectations. Such behaviour invariably produces a positive response, which forms the basis for good self-esteem and an optimistic outlook on life. On the other hand, a child who comes to believe that the caregiver can no longer be relied on for assistance and support, who as an infant is ignored, treated inconsistently, or abused, will develop a general mistrust of others and a low self-esteem. These children learn to expect rejection, and throughout their lives they will act in ways that elicit it.

A secure emotional attachment along with physical well-being sets the stage for an infant to develop into a toddler and then

into a preschooler with the increasing social competence and language skills that allow her to deal comfortably with the world around her. In an ideal world, all infants would be born into an emotionally secure and physically safe environment and be blessed with caregivers who respond quickly, consistently, and lovingly. However, New Brunswick and Canada generally do not constitute an ideal world. Like the rest of the country, New Brunswick has made great strides in the past three decades to reduce infant mortality rates and eliminate common childhood diseases. But it has done little to alleviate poverty, and there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that poverty is a determining factor in how our infant girl born in the year 2000 will make out in life. In 1989 the Canadian Parliament unanimously pledged to work towards the elimination of child poverty by the year 2000. Since then, the number of children in this country living below the poverty line has increased by 50 percent. Today, one in five New Brunswick children under the age of eighteen (one in four under the age of six) is poor.

## NEW BRUNSWICK IN THE '70S AND '80S: THE GROWTH OF CHILD CARE SERVICES

New Brunswickers are no strangers to poverty. In the 1960s, under the Liberals led by Louis Robichaud, the Program of Equal Opportunity was introduced to address the problems of poverty and social inequality. Until then, New Brunswickers had lived under an archaic county council system where services such as health and education were paid for by municipalities. In many rural, largely francophone parts of the province, schools often functioned for only part of the year because they were unable to pay their teachers. However, by 1970, after a decade of turmoil and structural reorganization, all essential services were funded by the provincial government in Fredericton. Henceforth, the welfare of children no longer depended on the economic situation of the municipalities.

For women in New Brunswick, the year 1970 was historic in more ways than one. Federally, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women had just published its landmark report. It was the first major analysis of the role of Canadian women in society, a role that even then was changing rapidly. The change

that may have had the most effect in their first five years of life was the increasing number of women entering the labour force. In New Brunswick, more than 30 percent of mothers with young children were already working outside the home, although many people still clung to the notion of the stereotypical family where the father worked and the mother stayed home with the children. In the New Brunswick of 1970, economic realities dictated otherwise – some families already needed two incomes to survive.

The problem arose of course, of what to do with the children. Most women relied on their extended family or the neighbour next door or on an older child to take care of the younger ones. There were few daycare centres in New Brunswick at the time, and those that did exist were organized privately, often through the churches, and beyond the limit of government control.

At the federal level, two concepts were being promoted simultaneously by the Royal Commission and other groups such as the Vanier Institute for the Family and the Canadian Labour Congress: first, that accessibility to daycare was crucial if women were to become part of the workforce; second, daycare could make a significant contribution to child development and education. The early 1970s were really the beginning of a struggle for high-quality, accessible, and affordable daycare, a struggle that has had its ups and downs over the years and to this day remains unresolved in both New Brunswick and the rest of the country.

In 1970, when the New Brunswick government tabled a white paper on social development, child care was among the services deferred indefinitely; even then it was intended only for the needy. Daycare was seen as an emergency service designed to keep low-income families together, an extension of the province's long-standing mandate to care for poor and orphaned children, which dates from the Poor Laws of the late 1700s. There was little understanding or recognition, at least at the government level, of the important role that daycare services could play in early childhood development not only for poor children but for all of society. Providing a support system for working mothers was not a priority at the time either. Despite the fact that women were employed in record numbers,

social attitudes still associated the working mother with poverty, widowhood, or paternal incapacity owing to illness or alcoholism. A woman who stepped outside the role of homemaker often became an object of scorn and ridicule.

The 1971–72 annual report of the Department of Social Services was the first government document in New Brunswick to mention the term daycare centre. However, the concept of early childhood education was becoming better known, helped along by the establishment of the Early Childhood Education Association in Fredericton in 1972 and the Garde de Jour NB Day Care, a provincial association of child care workers and directors, a year later. By the fall of 1973, New Brunswick was the only Canadian province without daycare regulations. Nevertheless, the number of private daycare centres continued to increase to meet the demand, and with that increase, pressure mounted on the government to take control of the expanding network of unregulated daycares in the province. In 1974 the first legislation covering daycare centres, the Child Day Care Act, was passed by the Department of Social Services. It established regulations such as minimum space requirements per child, child-staff ratios, safety and health conditions, furniture and equipment standards, as well as administrative requirements. The act, in essence, was a social welfare document that focused on a child's physical well-being rather than on overall developmental needs. Under the act, financial subsidies became available to low-income families. Throughout the 1970s, a series of studies was commissioned which began to advance the vision of daycare from being a welfare service to a service important, at least in principle, to early childhood development. A government Green Paper published in 1978, for example, noted that daycare centres had a role to play in the identification and prevention of developmental delays in the province's children.

From the time it was established in 1977, the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women (NBACSW) was a strong and relentless advocate of accessible and affordable daycare. One of its first initiatives was to commission a study by a Université de Moncton professor which found that 44 percent of all women over fifteen years of age were in the workforce, that 75 percent of them were married or the head of

a household, and that most working mothers saw daycare centres as an attractive alternative to babysitters, relatives, or private home daycare. At the time, there were forty-five licensed centres in the province providing 2,970 spaces. Daycare spaces in rural areas and on First Nations reserves and spaces for babies and daycare services for shift workers (such as fishplant workers) were almost non-existent. The report concluded that the government needed to get more involved.

In 1980, as the number of daycare centres in the province continued to increase, the Day Care Act was integrated into the Child and Family Services and Family Relationships Act, which stressed the importance of supporting families and family relationships. On 30 June 1983 this act became the Family Services Act. Day Care Regulation 83–85 of the act expanded the formal approval process for daycare centres to include home daycares.

The 1980s were a promising time for daycare advocates in New Brunswick. In 1981–82, grants became available to help daycares install fire alarm systems and to care for babies and special-needs children. As well, certification programs for daycare workers were set up in both French and English through the community college system, and public education about the role of daycare was disseminated by such groups as the Association Garde de Jour NB Day Care and the NBACSW.

In time, daycare began to lose its welfare stigma and became recognized as a legitimate way to care for the children of working mothers. It was increasingly accepted that daycare centres could contribute to early childhood development and help prepare disadvantaged children for school.

In 1982 eighteen New Brunswickers attending the Second National Day Care Conference in Winnipeg learned that the province's legislation compared favorably with legislation in other provinces. The quality of the legislation was a tribute to the growing number of advocates of early childhood education in the province, both in and out of government, who were prepared to invest their time and energy to establish a comprehensive daycare system.

By 1985 the province had instituted a flat rate grant to daycare centres of $45 per approved child space per year (in 1990 a new operating grant would be introduced which substantially increased existing grants), equipment grants of $1,500 per year and professional development grants of $75 per year per staff member. Subsidies continued to be available to low-income families. By October 1988 there were 143 approved daycare centres in the province with a total of 5,200 spaces, 78 percent of them in urban areas.

Throughout the 1980s, great strides were made on the issue of daycare in New Brunswick. The number of daycare spaces continued to increase, and measures were implemented to maintain their standards of operation. In 1988 the federal government announced a National Strategy on Child Care Services; however, the bill that would have allowed it to establish a cost-sharing program with the provinces died on the order paper when an election was called. The same year, the New Brunswick government created the Office for Childhood Services and its own minister of state for childhood services. In so doing, it endeavoured to place a new focus and emphasis on services to young children. The role of the office was to coordinate government policy development and program planning as well as to provide early intervention, head start, daycare, and school-age child care programs.

As the decade ended, it seemed that children and the role of child care in early childhood development were on everyone's agenda. Momentum seemed to be building towards a universal, quality daycare system both in New Brunswick and in the rest of Canada. Few realized, however, that as the decade drew to a close, the so-called children's agenda was about to be placed on the back burner as the country moved into a period of recession, government cutbacks, and fiscal restraint.

## DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER IDENTITY: FROM BIRTH TO AGE FIVE

We even stereotype children. Very few girls are allowed to play with trucks and very few boys are allowed to play with dolls, no matter how much they might enjoy doing so.

*– Equality for Women: Understanding the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 1974.*

The need for child care was no doubt a major preoccupation of women and women's groups in New Brunswick beginning in the early 1970s. But the Royal Commission report also spurred women, educators, and experts to begin examining how girls and boys were treated and how that treatment determined their sexual identity.

*Almost from the time a pregnancy is confirmed, future parents begin to fantasize about their baby. A father may visualize a son with whom he can spend time fishing and playing sports. A mother may dream about a daughter she can dress in frilly pinks who will be her best friend and closest confidante. The expectations and dreams of the parents will be influenced by their own experiences, by the way they were brought up and by their cultural background. Few parents in New Brunswick, however, will expect their daughter to play for the Université de Moncton's Blue Eagles and few will dream of a son who will win awards as an outstanding kindergarten teacher.*

But wait. Is this scenario paraphrased from Sandra Susan Friedman's book on adolescent girls a 1970 image? year 2000 image? or somewhere in-between?

There is no doubt, as the quote at the beginning of this section illustrates, that children have traditionally been stereotyped, based on their sex, from the moment of birth. Research evidence suggests that even in the hospital nursery, parents see a daughter as smaller, finer-featured, and more fragile than a son, who is viewed as hardier and stronger. Once at home, many mothers tend to touch their infant sons more often and

provide them with active stimulation, while girls are cuddled and comforted.

As babies grow, parents have different expectations for them and provide them with different learning situations to teach them gender-appropriate behaviour. Parents expect their sons to achieve more in the world and encourage and reward them for being independent, competitive, and responsible. Girls, on the other hand, are expected to remain physically and emotionally close to their parents and are rewarded for being cooperative, understanding, and, most of all, pretty. Boys are given toys such as trucks that encourage inventiveness, exploration, and manipulation, while girls receive toys such as dolls that encourage them to be nurturing and caring.

Since much of the research on gender identification dates from the 1970s, one wonders to what extent it holds true in the year 2000. While there is an abundance of scientific research on how children develop from birth to age five, few studies have focused on the differences between female and male development (although research is increasingly showing that male and female brains develop differently). And fewer still, it seems, are addressing the issue of whether Canadians, and New Brunswickers in particular, continue to stereotype their children according to sex.

Given that parents react to children based on their own experiences and upbringing, there is no doubt that some parents in New Brunswick continue to have limited expectations for their daughters. Some still believe that her primary role in life is to marry and raise children – that is, to care for others. A female between birth and age five who looks around her daycare centre, which exists only because of the low-paid labour of its female caregivers, undoubtedly picks up a message about the value of women and their work. And a young girl who watches her mother struggling with a low-paying job, doing most of the housework, or suffering at the hands of an abusive spouse will receive an even stronger message about the value of women in general.

On the other hand, economic changes and the entry of women into the paid labour force in the past three decades have

radically changed our society and, one hopes, our attitudes. Girls today have many more female role models than in the past from sports and culture to business and the professions. And the fact that girls will need to support themselves financially at some point in their lives is by now almost a given. Surely few people look at an infant girl born in the year 2000 and expect her future to be determined by gender alone. A female born in 1900, when life expectancy was around forty, could expect to spend her whole life raising a family. Conversely, a female born in 2000, with a life expectancy now of over eighty, will have half a lifetime to pursue other activities.

## A 1990 SNAPSHOT OF NEW BRUNSWICK'S YOUNG CHILDREN

One of the first initiatives of the Office for Childhood Services was the development of a policy framework to improve the quality of life for the province's children. Playing for Keeps, released in April of 1991, was a comprehensive document that introduced a series of strategies for the coming years. The report presented a snapshot of New Brunswick children and how families had changed in two decades. In 1990 there were approximately 131,200 children in the province between birth and age twelve, of which 63,800 (48 percent) were girls and 67,300 (51.3 percent) were boys. Children under twelve were declining in number: in 1971, they represented 27.3 percent of the New Brunswick population; by 1990 their numbers had dropped to less than 18 percent of the total population.

The composition of the family household was changing as well. Divorce was on the increase (although the rate was lower in New Brunswick than in Canada as a whole), and more unmarried mothers were keeping their babies. The percentage of single-parent families rose from 9 percent in 1961 to 13 percent in 1986, while their actual number more than doubled during that time. The proportion of single-parent families headed by women increased from 77 percent in 1961 to 82.5 percent in 1986. As well, more New Brunswickers were choosing common-law relationships, although once again fewer than in Canada as a whole.
The report also noted that in 1990 staying home to raise their

children was not a growing option for mothers: the participation of women in the workforce had increased from 38 percent in 1975 to 50.3 percent in 1988. Women with children under six in particular were entering and remaining in the labour force. In 1985 in New Brunswick, 61.6 percent of women in husband-wife families with preschool-age children were employed, compared to 63.3 percent of women in husband-wife families without preschool-age children. Indeed, the presence of children often required that both parents work in order to stay above the poverty line. The report reiterated the views of many that child care services were not keeping pace with these changes.

National trends in 1990 indicated that poverty was shifting from the elderly toward younger families with children, especially toward single-parent families headed by women. A larger proportion of two-earner families were becoming poor, and the rate of poverty among children was on the increase. It was a situation that would only get worse in the coming decade.

## NEW BRUNSWICK'S CHILDREN IN THE 1990S: ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

The 1990s marked the beginning of a difficult decade for New Brunswickers. While the McKenna Liberals struggled to get a handle on the provincial deficit and begin paying down the debt and the federal government was preoccupied with the same problems nationally, Canada was sliding into a recession. After the provincial election in 1991, because of budget cutbacks, the Office for Childhood Services lost its minister and was transferred to the Department of Health and Community Services.

Despite all the efforts of the 1980s, the daycare system of the early 1990s was not even close to meeting the needs of New Brunswick children and their parents. The Canadian National Child Care Study, released in 1992, noted that fewer than 5 percent of children in New Brunswick ages twelve and under (10 percent nationally) were cared for in the regulated

daycare system.

In 1994, the International Year of the Family, the province announced a new Policy Framework for Child Care Services that had as its goal the development of high-quality, affordable, and accessible daycare. The initiative was necessary, according to the government's own documents, because the existing system was no longer meeting the needs of the province's children: the number of children qualifying for a daycare subsidy was declining at a time when child care needs, based on the percentage of mothers entering the workforce, were increasing. In 1993 only 7 percent of children enrolled in regulated daycare in New Brunswick received a full or partial subsidy from the Department of Income Assistance, compared to close to 20 percent throughout the 1980s.

In addition, there were significant rural-urban disparities in the province. Roughly 54 percent of New Brunswick's regulated daycare centres were in Fredericton, Saint John, and Moncton, even though only one-third of the province's children under age thirteen were located in urban areas of thirty thousand or more. Daycare in rural areas is particularly critical since the lack of appropriate, supervised care on the farm can often be a matter of life and death for a young child. There were also significant North-South disparities. Only 25 percent of daycare facilities were located in the northern, mostly francophone areas. For babies and toddlers thirty-five months and under, there were only four hundred spaces available province-wide to meet an estimated demand of 14,300. Clearly, the existing system was inadequate to meet the needs of New Brunswickers.

In an attempt to rectify the situation, the government increased subsidy rates for low-income families, bringing them closer to the actual amount charged by daycares. It also raised the qualification ceiling, so that working families could make more money and still qualify for subsidies. This was not new money, however: the needed revenue was "repositioned" from the operating grants budget. Operating grants to daycare centres, which had been in place for almost a decade, were eliminated. From then on, assistance for daycare in New Brunswick was limited to subsidies for low-income families. They were paid by the government on behalf of families and directly to the

daycare centres. The availability of such subsidies was not widely advertised, however, and people, even those who held a job, had to go to the welfare office to apply. Even though it admitted that the quality of care in the unregulated system was unknown and probably poor, the province was in fact investing as much money in the unregulated system – through money given to clients of the Department of Income Assistance to pay their babysitters – as it was in the regulated system. Despite the evidence of the previous two decades that daycare centres had a role to play in early childhood development, the province's only commitment was to those most in need. Indeed, the new policy, with the elimination of operating grants, represented a step backward for child care in the province of New Brunswick.

From the mid-1990s on, although the number of daycare spaces in New Brunswick continued to increase, the demand far outpaced the supply. Daycare operators are still struggling economically, but by the end of the year 2000 there were no longer any organizations to speak for them. By the end of the decade, daycare in New Brunswick seemed to be the forgotten issue. A massive research study funded by Human Resources Development Canada and released in the fall of 2000 found that child care in Canada was mediocre at best and that New Brunswick's system was the worst: it provided no operating grants to daycares and set no training requirements for daycare staff.

## CHILD POVERTY: THE CHALLENGE OF THE MILLENNIUM

A national child care program is the first and biggest step in any serious plan to eradicate child poverty in Canada.

– National Council of Welfare, 1999. *Preschool Children: Promises to Keep.*

A comprehensive child care system is not the only provincial program that helps preschool children and their families. In 1991, after close to two decades of discussion and on-again, off-again electoral promises, the provincial government implemented a public kindergarten system that for the first time would provide access to publicly funded education for all

five-year-olds. In 1994 the province began the Early Childhood Initiatives, a multifaceted program focused on at-risk families and their preschool children. There have been various other early intervention programs such as Moncton Headstart, and there was also a task force on education in 1993 which presented, perhaps for the first time in the province, the idea that children should be prepared for when they begin school.

Daycare then is not the only program to support families, although many now believe that it is the key. Accessible child care can make a tremendous difference in the ability of poor families to find and keep jobs, and affordable child care can help moderately poor families stay in the labour force. No one maintains that a comprehensive child care system is a cure-all for poverty, but, increasingly, many believe that the eradication of poverty will not be possible without one. As the National Council of Welfare puts it, "A high-quality child care system is the logical starting point for good early childhood development and the logical hub for other family supports."

When we talk about poverty in Canada, we usually refer to the low-income cut-off (LICO) level, which is calculated by Statistics Canada and relates to the percentage of income that a family spends on food, shelter, and clothing (the LICO also varies by geographic location). In New Brunswick, according to Statistics Canada, there were thirty-four thousand children under the age of eighteen who were poor in 1997, a 10 percent increase since 1989, the year that federal politicians vowed to eliminate poverty.

The rate of poverty for children under the age of eighteen in New Brunswick in 1997 was 20 percent; for children under the age of six it was 25 percent. This means that one in four children in New Brunswick, age six or younger, was considered poor in 1997. Not only has the rate of poverty increased but so too has the depth. In 1989 the average poor Canadian family lived $7,428 below the LICO; in 1997 the same family lived $8,265 below the LICO.

Clearly, children are poor because their parents are poor, and parents are poor mainly because they are unable to find sufficiently well-paying jobs. In 1997, again according to

Statistics Canada, the LICO in New Brunswick for a single parent with one child was $18,664. An individual working thirty-five hours per week for fifty-two weeks at minimum wage would have made $10,010, roughly 54 percent of the amount needed to reach the poverty level. These facts help to explain why the working poor are often better off going on welfare. Even though New Brunswick has historically had the lowest rates of social assistance in Canada, the 2000 Health of Canada's Children report notes that social assistance as a percentage of the LICO for a single parent with one child in New Brunswick in 1998 was 61 percent – that is, welfare brought the family up to 61 percent of the LICO. In Canada in 1976, a parent with one child had to work forty-one hours at minimum wage in order to raise a family above the poverty level. By 1994 that same parent would have had to work seventy-three hours a week to achieve the same result.

Poor children are not necessarily mistreated – parents of poor children are no less loving – but they are at greater risk of a wide variety of problems that by now are well-documented. According to a report on poverty in Atlantic Canada, poor children are more likely to be born prematurely or to have low birth weight. They are also more likely to be hyperactive, to exhibit emotional and behavioural disorders, and to eventually drop out of school and have trouble with the law. In addition, poor children face greater risks to health and safety because of poor nutrition or because they live in homes that need major repairs or lack safety features such as smoke alarms.

A family living in poverty struggles constantly to meet the basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing. Persistent worry and stress about money can affect a parent's ability to deal with children and lead to feelings of hopelessness and depression, which in turn can result in ineffective parenting strategies or harsh, inconsistent discipline. It may also affect the quality of attachments made in the earliest years between infant and parent.

In Canada, Aboriginal children are the poorest of the poor. In 1997 their poverty rate was 52 percent as compared to 23 percent for non-Aboriginal children. Aboriginal children die at two to three times the rate of non-Aboriginal children from any cause; have twice the infant, perinatal, and neonatal mortality rates;

and are four times more likely to die from preventable injuries.

Many experts today believe that there are windows of opportunity during the early years when a child is biologically primed to develop certain skills or abilities, and if the skill or ability is not acquired during that critical period, it may never be. This is true, for example, about some aspects of vision, where failure to develop neural pathways or specific skills during the first year of life can have irreversible effects. On the other hand, it is possible to compensate for the development of less than optimal social skills or poor language or cognitive development during critical stages through intervention programs such as quality daycare.

According to Gillian Doherty, who has done extensive research on early childhood development in relation to school readiness, studies have consistently documented the value of high-quality child care for children from impoverished families. Surveys have shown, for example, that children who received good-quality child care prior to school entry had larger vocabularies when they began school as well as superior language skills, higher levels of cognitive functioning, and a greater ability to get along with other children. These qualities were apparent at the time of school entry and continued on into subsequent grades.

Today, quality child care is important for the development of all children. Given the radical changes that have taken place in society in the past few decades – the increase in the number of poor and single-parent families and of two-parent families where both parents work together with the stress associated with trying to balance work and family life – Doherty believes that parents alone can no longer be expected to carry the burden of preparing their young children to be responsible and productive adults. According to her, this must be a collaborative effort between the family, the community, and society as a whole, and affordable, regulated child care is perhaps the most important resource to assist parents in raising their children.

In New Brunswick, one often hears the argument that as one of the poorer provinces in Canada, we are in no position to afford a quality child care system. But maybe the question in the year 2000 should be, can we afford not to invest in the

years from birth to age five? An investment in the early years will no doubt be repaid many times over in higher lifetime wages for individuals, increased tax revenues to government, lower crime rates, and ultimately a society that is happier and more productive.

In the year 2000, some Canadian provinces have already reached these conclusions. The province of Quebec, for example, has been a leader in the development of a comprehensive child care system since 1997, when it began to implement a program under which parents pay a maximum of $5 per day. As well, the province of British Columbia introduced a comprehensive quality child care system beginning in January 2001, under which parents pay a maximum of $7 per day for before- and after- school care.

In New Brunswick, affordable, accessible, high-quality child care is clearly possible but at a price. To realize such a program, however, will require political will. The province's leaders will have to decide that the early years in a child's life are not only important but critical and make support for young children and their families a major focus of government policy in the year 2001.

As the new millennium begins, there is reason for optimism. The federal government is enjoying a budget surplus, projected by some to reach $25 billion by 2005, and some of that money will be available for social investment. There is also a decline in unemployment, and new jobs are being created. As well, the National Children's Agenda has been agreed upon by the federal government, nine provinces, and three territories and released in 1999, and it could serve as a framework to develop creative policies and programs for children. In addition, the 1999 federal Speech from the Throne proposed to invest further in the National Child Benefit program and to extend parental leave benefits for up to one year under EI. One writer has noted that as the decade ends, all governments are "singing from the children's songbook." However, whether that means solutions will be found and comprehensive family-friendly policies and support systems will be put in place remains to be seen.

## A WAKE-UP CALL FOR NEW BRUNSWICK

New Brunswick shocked the nation several times in the late 1990s with of the deaths of young children, including children in care. When two-year-old Jacqueline Brewer died, alone and neglected in her crib in her family's home in Saint John, the province set up a Child Death Review Committee, whose report led to a comprehensive review and a proposal for the redesign of the province's child welfare system.

*Children Come First*, a report completed in January 2000 but not released until six months later, was a damning indictment of the province's attitude towards its children during the 1990s. Since the beginning of the decade, the report said, "There has been little evidence to support the belief that child welfare mattered in the Department of Health and Community Services". In an era marked by deficit reduction, the focus of the department had been on sustaining the health care system, with some energy being devoted to long-term services for seniors and adults with disabilities. Few resources were left over for children. In fact in 1997–98 only 4 percent of the departmental budget was spent on children.

The report also recalled that in the early nineties the then Office of Childhood Services was involved in some strategic planning and development of initiatives for children, which included a proposal to improve the quality of life for all children in New Brunswick. *Playing for Keeps* was the policy framework developed in 1991 that outlined a vision, values, and beliefs centered on the well-being of all New Brunswick children and the development of their potential. By the year 2000, however, after a decade of budget cuts and fiscal restraint, the document was largely forgotten.

There is overwhelming evidence today that development in the early years, from prebirth to age five, can shape a lifetime. We also have a better understanding of the effects of poverty, and we know the importance of reaching children before problems occur. Furthermore, we know that investing in prevention programs, supporting families in their role as parents, and building workplaces and community centres to support children and families not only are worthwhile for those concerned but will have long-term benefits for society as a whole.
Even the report *Children Come First* acknowledges that adult

capacities for health and productivity are largely determined between the prenatal period and three years of age. Consequently, the report concludes, social service systems, indeed governments as a whole, are now in a position to take a proactive role in promoting the health of communities and future generations, and in a way that will benefit both the economy and society at large.

By the age of five, our hypothetical female child will have undergone what some experts consider to be the most concentrated development in her life – from a helpless infant dependent on her caregivers to a bright-eyed, healthy, happy five-year-old who will cheerfully join her peers in the experiment we know as the public school system. Her kindergarten year will be based on play – an extension of her daycare program if she was enrolled in one – but she will soon be ready for the rigours of instructed learning. And if her early experiences have been positive, if her physical needs have been met, and if her caregivers have been loving, she will be ready for the challenge. So as she begins to move away from her immediate family and towards a wider world, her self-esteem will be high, her sense of self-worth intact, and her hopes for the future unlimited.

# CHAPTER 2

# CHILDHOOD (6-12 YEARS)

## INTRODUCTION

The years from six to twelve stand out as a potentially exciting time of discovery in a young girl's life. Sandwiched between the more intense developmental phases of early childhood and adolescence, this stage of the life cycle has been understudied and somewhat neglected by policy-makers. But it is an important time for the female child as she ventures beyond the caregiver-focused world of her infancy and preschool years to explore a large and complex universe. The home environment remains important for the preadolescent girl, but she is also exposed to a whole new set of influences outside the family. School entry broadens her horizons to include classmates, teachers, academic programs, as well as a host of extracurricular activities. These all play a crucial role in shaping gender identity. A girl's self-perception and her understanding of the world are also increasingly moulded during this phase by popular culture and the media.

How has life changed for the preteen girl living in New Brunswick in the year 2000 as compared to her counterpart of thirty years ago? Today's female child is growing up in a society that is more aware of gender biases and that takes steps to combat sexism. As a result, she can dream bigger dreams than her mother did and may participate in a wider range of learning and recreational activities. But New Brunswick girls also face some new or heightened challenges arising from the socio-economic and familial evolution since the 1970s. Disturbing trends include the widening gap between well-to-do and low-income families and the increasing time pressures experienced by working parents, particularly mothers. Single-parent and blended households, far more prevalent than in the past, may also present special challenges for many of our young females. Moreover, traces of the age-old, gender-related constraints persist, even in the year 2000, as girls continue to be exposed to subtle and not so subtle pressures towards passivity, conformity, and self-worth measured in terms of physical appearance.

A major challenge of this phase in the life cycle is how to foster a positive self-image for girls that will help them weather the crises of adolescence and develop into independent and self-

confident young women. How have girls fared in this regard over the past thirty years? How do girls perform in school as compared to boys, and what are the strengths of what we can call "girl culture"? How successful have we been in creating a healthy and supportive environment for the development of our young female's full potential at home, at school, and in leisure-time pursuits?

## FAMILIES AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

As was the case with the infant and preschooler, the home environment plays an important role in shaping the life chances of the girls ages six to twelve. The economic situation of parents has a significant effect on the well-being of our young females in the year 2000, just as it did in 1970. During the past three decades, New Brunswick families have been buffeted by a series of economic cycles. The expansionary phase of the 1970s gave way to the recession of the early 1980s and was followed by an upswing in the later 1980s. Government and corporate downsizing, cuts to social programs, and the growth of nonstandard work and self-employment have marked the decade of the 1990s.

New Brunswickers have not shared equally in the benefits of economic growth since 1970. One of the alarming trends of the past twenty years has been the relative deterioration of the economic status of many families. Child poverty rates even today remain unacceptably high in the face of rising family incomes at the opposite end of the scale. Since 1980, the proportion of children under the age of eighteen living below the poverty or low-income cut-off line, as calculated by Statistics Canada (using data on geographic location and the proportion of family income spent on food, shelter, and clothing), has rarely fallen far below 20 percent in New Brunswick or in Canada as a whole. The latest figures for New Brunswick or Canada reflect an alarming reality: in 1997 one child in five was living in poverty. Children under eighteen living in female single-parent families in New Brunswick are particularly hard hit by poverty: in 1996 some 66 percent of this group were living in low-income families, as compared to 12 percent of children in two-parent families. Aboriginal and

visible minority children are even more likely to live in poverty than other Canadian children. Statistics Canada's 1996 census data reveal that some 52 percent of Aboriginal children and 43 percent of visible minority children under the age of fourteen live in poverty, as compared to 23 percent of all Canadian children in that age group.

Poverty in New Brunswick is not limited to families receiving social assistance. Even families in which one or both parents are working may be struggling to provide their children with the basic necessities of life. The phenomenon of the working poor is a growing problem both in New Brunswick and elsewhere in Canada. The expansion of low-paying part-time and minimum-wage employment has meant that many workers experience an ever-widening earnings' gap between their salaries and the low-income line, even when working full-time, year-round.

How does a family's economic situation affect dependent children? On the most basic level, children of low-income families may experience physical deprivation when their parents are unable to consistently provide adequate food, clothing, and shelter. For the elementary-school-aged girl or boy, this may mean not eating a proper breakfast before leaving for school or not having a packed lunch or lunch money for the cafeteria. The lack of affordable housing in many New Brunswick localities means that many families must live in substandard accommodation or make sacrifices in other areas such as food or utilities. A young girl from a low-income family may not have appropriate winter gear or may suffer from comparison with her more fashionably dressed classmates. Children report that poverty is being afraid to tell your mother that you need gym shoes, being teased for the way you dress, not getting a hot dog on hot dog day at school, wishing you had a nice house, or not being able to go on school trips.

A growing body of research suggests that family poverty puts children at risk in a wide range of child-development areas. According to a recent study by the Canadian Council on Social Development, Canadian children in two-parent, low-income families experience serious disadvantages that are reflected in their behaviour, learning, and health, their engagement in

cultural, recreational, and social activities, and their living conditions within the family and community. They appear much more likely to live in poorly functioning families, often grow up in unsafe or unhealthy neighbourhoods, and tend to change schools more frequently than other children. Children in poor families also demonstrate higher levels of indirect aggression and suffer more often from problems with vision, hearing, speech, or mobility. They are more likely to exhibit delayed vocabulary development and are far less likely to have access to a home computer or to participate in organized sports than children in high-income families. Study authors David P. Ross and Paul Roberts argue that present child-poverty or low-income lines should be set higher to take into account the level of income families need to maximize their children's chances of full development. "If producing healthy children was the central objective of all anti-poverty efforts", they maintain, "far more would have to be taken into consideration beyond simply providing the 'basic necessities' of life – typically identified as minimum levels of food, clothing and shelter."

How have our governments responded to the economic needs of families with children? Comparative studies of family policy reveal that Canada lags behind most other Western nations in its income and family support programs. State recognition of the costs incurred by families with children has its roots in the first half of the twentieth century with the introduction by the federal government of tax deductions for dependent children (1919) and the universal family allowance program, which offers modest direct monthly payments to families with young children (1945). Since the abolition of these two measures in the early 1990s, federal and provincial authorities have experimented with various forms of child tax credit and income supplement schemes for low-income working families. Recognition of the child poverty crisis led to a federal-provincial initiative, the National Child Benefit, which came into effect in July 1998. Under this arrangement, the federal government provides the Canada child tax benefit and the national child benefit supplement which are paid to low-income families, while some provincial programs seek to encourage the labour force participation of low-income parents. The New Brunswick government has offered child-care subsidies to poor working families; however, provincial

assistance to needy families remains severely limited. Social assistance rates in New Brunswick fall far short of the Statistics Canada low-income cutoffs, even for families with children. In short, families of the working poor are not well served by public programs. After-school child care and other child-raising costs are significant drains on family finances, especially for parents who work at low-paying jobs or who face seasonal unemployment.

In recent years, federal and provincial cutbacks to employment insurance and other social programs have further deepened family poverty in a context of stagnating incomes and rising costs of goods and services for children. The increasing reliance on emergency-feeding initiatives is a sign of the times. Since 1989 the number of Canadians using food banks has more than doubled, while the number of communities with food banks has more than tripled. New Brunswick food banks, like those elsewhere in Canada, regularly make pleas to the public in order to meet the growing demand. In 1999 the provincial government launched a program encouraging citizens to make cash donations for food bank supplies at their grocery-store checkout. In recent years, some New Brunswick elementary schools have also introduced free-breakfast programs to ensure that children are adequately nourished and ready to learn. These initiatives may ease the most severe symptoms of poverty, but they are degrading and disempowering for parents and children and do nothing to help families achieve long-term economic self-reliance. Our challenge as a society is to develop more integrated antipoverty strategies which target the underlying causes of economic inequality and allow families to live in greater comfort and dignity.

## THE EMOTIONAL QUALITY OF FAMILY LIFE

At least as important as the ability to provide children with a measure of economic security is the emotional quality of home life. Research emphasizes that children's healthy development depends largely on the early formation of secure bonds to nurturing adults who provide consistent, caring support and affection throughout the childhood years. A recent study by Ben Schlesinger, a Canadian professor of social work, provides

an overview of some of the characteristics of healthy, stable families. In well-functioning families, individuals respect and care for one another and share leisure time and a sense of play and humour. Communication is clear, abundant, and direct, and members are encouraged to express their emotions and to develop their own unique identities. They are also taught a sense of right and wrong and to value service to others.

Of course, the challenges of everyday life in New Brunswick, as elsewhere in Canada, may interfere with ideal family functioning. Rising education levels and declining family size in the past thirty years may mean that some parents are in a position to devote more quality time and attention to their children; however, stresses and strains, often linked to economic difficulties, hamper the ability of many parents to provide an emotionally stable home life for their children. The demands of an ever-changing labour market characterized by high unemployment, underemployment, corporate or state downsizing, as well as, for some, excessive working hours or shift-work mean that simply making a living can be a major source of stress. Families, in particular mothers engaged in paid labour, are under increasing time pressures. Parents have been finding it increasingly difficult in recent years to balance work and family responsibilities. The rising divorce and separation rate of the past thirty years also means that more and more children are living with one parent (mainly the mother) in either joint custody arrangements or blended families. These shifting family structures often require some difficult adjustments. For all these reasons, the quality and quantity of parental attention given to children may suffer. Parents also bear the legacy of their own upbringing: some may not be well-equipped to create a stable, loving environment for their children.

In some cases, parenting problems are severe and result in the mistreatment of children. Indeed, for some young people, home is a distinctly dangerous place to be. Instead of a haven offering affection, nurturing, and support, it can often be an arena for physical or sexual aggression. Girls have traditionally been particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse within the family, often at the hands of their fathers or other male relatives. A long history of silence and shame has shrouded the problem of violence against women and children. In fact, the subject was

so taboo that it was not even mentioned in the comprehensive report of the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. It is only during the past twenty-five years that the women's movement has managed to place the issue of physical and sexual abuse on the public agenda.

The unavailability of statistical series reaching back thirty years and the problem of underreporting make it very difficult to measure the scope of the violence problem and especially its evolution over time. Reports of violence have certainly increased dramatically over the past fifteen years, in a context of heightened public awareness and improved law enforcement services. According to a recent report on the reform of New Brunswick's child welfare system, the number of cases of sexual abuse of children within the family that have been brought to the attention of provincial authorities has risen by more than 133 percent between 1985–86 and 1995–96. Available figures for Canada in the 1990s point to an alarming incidence of aggression perpetrated against young females (see box below).

### Physical and Sexual Abuse of Girls in Canada in the 1990s

- More than half (54 percent) of Canadian girls under the age of sixteen have experienced some form of unwanted sexual attention.
- Almost one in four (24 percent) girls under sixteen has experienced rape or coercive sex, while 17 percent are victims of incest.
- Over half (53 percent) of physical assaults of Canadian children by family members in 1999 are against girls under eighteen.
- Four out of five victims of family-related sexual assaults in Canada in 1999 (80 percent) are girls under eighteen.
- Aboriginal girls are particularly subject to physical and sexual assault: 75 percent of Aboriginal girls under the age of eighteen have been sexually abused.
- Girls with disabilities also experience higher rates of sexual abuse.

*Sources:* Statistics Canada, *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2000*; Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence, *Violence Prevention and the Girl Child: Final Report* (December 1999).

Evidence suggests that girls tend to internalize the effects of violence, whereas boys are more likely to externalize their reactions. Not surprisingly, victimized girls develop low self-esteem and a negative body image and do poorly at school. They display higher rates of depression, eating disorders, self-abuse, and suicide attempts than boys. Children witnessing violence in the home, even if they do not experience it directly, also sustain long-term damage. Research has shown that these traumatized children are much more likely to suffer from depression, fear, or anxiety or be involved in bullying or fighting, engage in theft and vandalism, and undergo other experiences that have negative effects on their social and academic development. Boys who have witnessed violence appear more likely to be violent in their own relationships in adolescence and young adulthood, while girls tend to repeat the patterns of victimization they have witnessed.

How have we as a society worked to protect neglected, abused, and traumatized children? Most policy and service initiatives over the past three decades have been reactive rather than proactive or preventive in this area. A recent report by Canada's Alliance of Centres for family violence research reveals that the few violence prevention programs that exist in this country are underfunded short-term efforts concentrated in high schools. Clearly, children at risk are not as well served as they should be by New Brunswick's public and private agencies. Since 1980, when the province boasted just one transition house (in Fredericton) for abused women and children, shelters have been opened in a number of New Brunswick communities. Such front-line intervention services are chronically underfunded, however, relying mainly on volunteer labour and charitable support in addition to government aid. They are also more accessible to urban than rural women in this very rural province. Since the early 1980s, the activities of the provincial child welfare system, responsible for children removed from their birth families and taken into care as a result of abuse and/or neglect, have been expanded. Yet according to its own recent self-evaluation in a report entitled *Children Come First*, the intervention capacity of child protection services has been sorely restricted by inadequate human and material resources and by the fragmented nature of family and child support services.

A more prevention-oriented approach to child abuse or neglect has involved providing support to parents in difficulty. The past thirty years have witnessed the introduction of a variety of community-based parenting programs and services. Federally funded family resources centres have been established in most of New Brunswick's major cities to help low-income families: parenting programs and support groups as well as collective kitchens and toy banks are among the services offered. Other agencies such as Moncton's Support for Single Parents (Support aux parents uniques inc.) also offer valuable aid, including parenting classes and children's activities, to single parent families. Such groups and agencies do vitally important work in the face of skyrocketing demand, but their capacity to help families is limited by their reliance on dwindling sources of charity and government aid. As in the case of women's shelters, the inhabitants of rural areas are less well-served by family support services. Today more than ever, we are aware of the importance of parenting practices in healthy child development, and that awareness should be reflected in our family support initiatives.

Parents are also the primary agents in the socialization of children for adult roles. Research shows that parental expectations play a major role in shaping gender identity. The 1970 ground-breaking report of Canada's Royal Commission on the Status of Women (the Bird Commission) pointed to the ways in which Canadian parents were contributing to the perpetuation of a gender gap. Parents, particularly mothers, tended to allow their sons more freedom to engage in active, aggressive behaviour, while expecting their daughters to avoid verbal and physical aggression and to express dependency, passivity, and conformity. The examples set by parents of the time also tended to reinforce gender stereotypes. As the Bird Report underlined, observation of parental behaviour in everyday activities played a major role in forming young people's sense of self and their understanding of the world around them:

> The girl can learn what a woman is expected to do by watching her mother. The boy usually cannot watch his father's occupational activities which are in any case harder for a small child to understand than the mother's housework. While the girl readily sees her future career as wife and mother, the boy must be more imaginative or aggressive in learning the scope of expected male roles. The boy may be influenced by the attributes of a male who combines the attitudes of his father and other men he knows or has read about. Mothers at home all do the same thing, while fathers do many things. As a result, the boy may not identify with one particular activity as the girl does with the occupation of housewife and mother. Girls from families where mothers work outside the home often seem to have a less traditional concept of the woman's role.

Much has changed since 1970. Most notably, women with young children have entered the paid workforce in ever-increasing numbers. By the mid-1990s, some 67 percent of New Brunswick women with children at home were involved in paid employment, up from 46 percent in 1981. As well, close to 60 percent of New Brunswick single mothers were in the labour force in 1995. Moreover, despite the persistence of female job ghettos, women are now involved in a broader range of occupations and careers, including previously male-dominated fields such as medicine, law, university teaching, and corporate management. A growing body of research in the past thirty years has also heightened our awareness of the insidious nature of sex-stereotyping in early socialization.

Nevertheless, we are still sending mixed messages to our girls. Studies have shown that most women, including those working outside the home, continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of responsibilities within the household. Responses to the 1996 census questions regarding unpaid work revealed that 53 percent of New Brunswick women aged fifteen and over spent at least fifteen hours per week (and some as much as sixty or more hours per week) doing unpaid housework, as compared to 24 percent of men of the same age group. Some 27 percent of male respondents reported spending less than five hours per week doing unpaid housework, while a substantial 18 percent devoted no time at all to such activities. Even today, therefore, many young females may learn by observation that despite

having roles outside the home, women are still expected to do most of the cleaning and cooking as well as looking after children and elderly family members. Female economic disadvantage is another pervasive reality witnessed by many growing girls, whether their mother is a female single parent receiving social assistance, a worker struggling in a female job ghetto, or a well-educated professional facing the consequences of family-related career interruptions. A woman's identity may no longer be limited to that of wife, mother, and housekeeper in the brave new world of the twenty-first century, but domestic duties and nurturing qualities are still largely associated with females. And too many of our girls' mothers are still waging battles for economic and physical security.

The lack of in-depth studies of trends in gender-role socialization in Canadian and New Brunswick families means that we are unable to systematically measure the road travelled since the 1970s. There is a sense, however, that important strides have been made in the way that many parents view their female children. Fewer parents today hold to the traditionally narrow expectations concerning girls' overriding destiny as wives and mothers or subscribe to a limited role for women in the public sphere. Yet some aspects of gender-biased treatment of children by parents appear to be deeply rooted, despite the inroads made in this area. Parents may still be consciously or unconsciously influencing girls to be compliant and well-behaved, the nurturers and peace-lovers. Some thirty years on, therefore, the exhortations of the Bird Report still provide a useful reminder of the importance of encouraging girls to give free rein to their hopes and dreams:

> By the time a girl starts school she has a relatively clear idea of what is considered feminine and knows what kind of behaviour is expected of her as a girl. We urge Canadian parents to be especially sensitive to the individuality and aptitudes of both girls and boys. Parents must realize the importance of expanding the horizons of their daughters and learn to respect their aspirations and encourage their initiative.

## THE SCHOOLING EXPERIENCE

School entry is a major new step in the life of the preadolescent girl. In the year 2000 as in 1970, the classroom door swings open on a wide range of new experiences, both intellectual and social. From the age of six, she spends a large portion of each weekday in contact with nonrelated adults and with her peers. The daily routine is more intensive, and performance expectations are higher than in the public kindergartens or maternelles, which most five-year-old New Brunswickers have attended since their introduction in the early 1990s. Consequently, that first day in a grade one class truly marks the beginning of an important life journey. So, what has the schooling experience been like for girls during the past three decades?

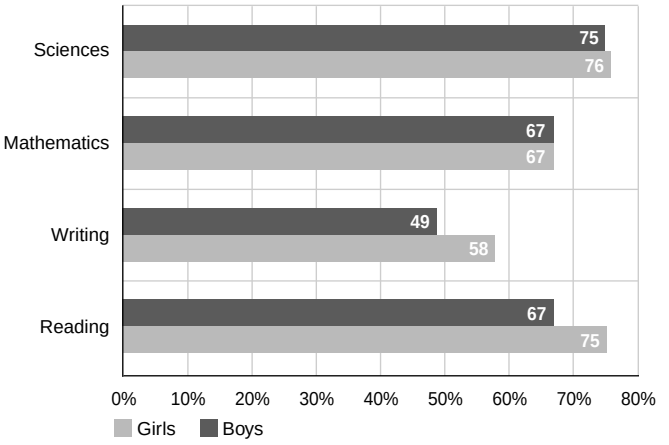
Elementary school is an arena in which girls have traditionally been able to shine. A large body of North American evidence suggests that females have generally started their school lives with an advance on males in the areas of language skills and emotional maturity. While boys appear to spend more time in physical activities and, in recent years, playing computer and video games, girls show a greater and earlier interest in reading. This probably contributes to the strong female academic performance in the early school years. The educational achievement of New Brunswick's elementary school-aged girls is indeed cause for celebration. Since the mid-1990s, we have been able to track some of these trends, thanks to the growing interest of administrators and educators in evaluating educational attainment. New Brunswick's Department of Education introduced testing at designated intervals of the educational process during the second half of the decade, while Canada-wide standardized tests have measured adolescent school results since the early 1990s.

The latest results from the provincial assessments of grades three and five anglophone students reveal girls' superiority in reading and writing and their at least equal achievement levels in mathematics and science (see Figures 1 and 2). Similar results for the performance of grades three and five were obtained in 1997. As for female French immersion students tested in the French second language assessment in grade six,

they significantly outshone their male counterparts in reading and writing. Seventy-three percent of girls achieved acceptable or better results in reading and 75 percent in writing as compared to 57 percent and 54 percent respectively for boys. Recent testing evidence shows that girls are carrying at least some of this edge over into the high school grades in the province's anglophone and francophone schools. The New Brunswick results fit into broader trends observed elsewhere in Canada. Indeed in recent years, educators observing girls' stronger language skills and their greater propensity to read have begun to worry about the school performance of boys. Ironically, in New Brunswick as in other North American jurisdictions, there is a growing call for more "boy-friendly" teaching strategies with a view to closing the gender achievement gap.

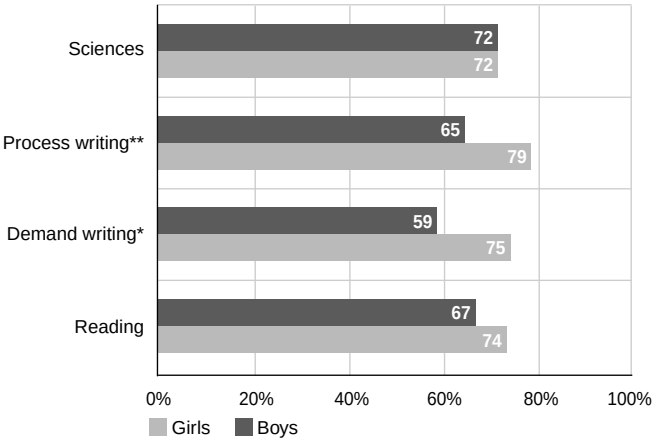
**Figure 1.**

Grade 3 Students Achieving Acceptable or Higher Ratings, New Brunswick Anglophone Schools, 1999




*Source:* NB Department of Education, *Report Card '99* (anglophone school districts).

**Figure 2.**
Grade 5 Students Achieving Acceptable or Higher Ratings,
New Brunswick Anglophone Schools, 1999




*Source:* NB Department of Education, *Report Card '99* (anglophone school districts).

* Short texts -- limited-time writing assignments.
** Longer texts -- more extensive time granted.

Does the early educational success of girls mean that gender equity has triumphed in our elementary schools? The importance of ensuring that females have full and fair access to education and a climate they can thrive in cannot be overstated. True workplace equity, it can be argued, is probably unachievable without educational equity, and that begins with the earliest educational experiences. The goal of gender equity in schooling also carries weighty psychological and social implications for women's lives. Healthy self-esteem and strong intellectual development may be essential to emotional maturity and female resistance to victimization later in life. Our understanding of gender-equity issues in the evolution of school content and practices is hampered by a lack of in-depth research into New Brunswick trends, but scattered evidence about the formal, or intentional, curriculum (school programs and instructional materials) and the so-called hidden curriculum (encompassing the values embedded in school policy, school organization, and the informal interaction that takes place within the classroom, halls, and schoolyard) suggests that we should be cautious about proclaiming schools as the ideal gender-fair forum of the new millennium.

A considerable body of research from the 1970s through to the 1990s suggested that schools tend to reinforce the gender-role differentiation established in early childhood and reflect the pervasive gender inequalities existing in the larger society. Sex-stereotyping in school curriculum and instructional materials came under fire as a major culprit in this process as the women's movement began to critically scrutinize all aspects of female experience. The Bird Commission Report in 1970 deplored the gender role imagery found in a representative selection of elementary school textbooks, which either underplayed or ignored a woman's creative and intellectual potential. The commission recommended that the provinces and the territories adopt textbooks that portray women, as well as men, in diversified roles and occupations, with the aim of fostering a female vision of success based on intelligence and ambition rather than on appearance and personality. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, researchers and activists also denounced the scarcity or absence of women in schoolbooks and programs.

Gender-specific messages are also conveyed through the so-called hidden curriculum. A substantial body of research from the 1980s and early 1990s done in Canada, the United States, and Britain pointed to significant inequities surrounding gender dynamics in schools. Studies and surveys focusing on classroom dynamics suggested that patterns of teacher-student interaction, in preschool through to elementary, high school, and university classrooms, favour boys. This situation was confirmed by a group of approximately one thousand Canadian girls and young women, ages eleven to nineteen, who participated in the Canadian Teachers' Federation A Cappella project in the early 1990s. These young females filled out questionnaires and participated in discussion groups with teachers that addressed their perceptions and concerns about schooling and a host of other issues. Many complained that their teachers did not always listen to their needs and concerns and tended to devote more attention in the classroom to boys. Research suggests that while girls in elementary school earn good grades and teacher approval for their industriousness and docile behaviour, boys gain more active instruction time through more assertive and rebellious behaviour. Boys are prone to speak up, act out, and interrupt in class. Girls, by

contrast, tend to react to this situation by assuming a self-effacing, quiet, and compliant demeanour.

Interaction between girls and boys in elementary school classrooms and playgrounds has not been as extensively studied as the teacher-student dynamic. However, existing research suggests that the different nature of the two sexes may account for a high degree of voluntary segregation by gender in the early school years, both inside and outside the classroom. The publication in 1982 of a ground-breaking study by Harvard University psychologist Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, heralded this new understanding of the divergent developmental paths of girls and boys. Gilligan argued that girls and boys think and operate quite differently. Girls grow up to be more interdependent than boys, less competitive and more empathetic and sensitive to the needs of others. Neither the male nor female style is superior according to Gilligan. Instead, their differences should be recognized as of equal worth. Evidence suggests that young females are more likely than young males to form affectionate relationships with their peers. Indeed, the existence of a "girl culture" involving close friendships with female peers seems to be a source of strength for young girls. Recent research on the development of resilience in six- and ten-year-old Canadian children reveals that girls may be better able to deal with stressful situations than boys because female friendships play a protective role, buffering the effects of an adverse environment. Recent evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth suggests that the ability of girls to tap into high levels of social support may persist throughout the teen years — good news for our female child, who is also more likely to do well in her studies.

The 1980s and 1990s have been marked by efforts to promote gender equity in the school system. The New Brunswick Department of Education introduced policy guidelines on gender equity for its elementary and secondary schools in the late 1980s with the aim of encouraging girls and boys to develop their capabilities, talents, and ambitions to the fullest possible extent. Education authorities reformed curriculums, scrutinized textbooks and other instructional materials for gender bias, announced their intention to reform career

education programs and other student services, and examined school organization and administration. The plan was ambitious and the intentions worthy.

But have the formal curriculum and the learning environment in elementary schools become truly responsive to a broader vision of the place of girls in society? The existing research on gender issues in Canadian and New Brunswick schooling does not provide us with much data on that question. The past three decades have certainly seen a heightened awareness of gender-equity issues. For example, we can point to some fine examples of more inclusive and gender-affirmative instructional materials, including textbooks, introduced over the past two decades in elementary and secondary schools. As well, initiatives in the area of career education seem to have had considerable success. Some research suggests that the guidance of girls towards nontraditional careers has been the greatest intervention for fostering gender equity in the school system. Inroads have also been made in increasing the presence of women within the higher echelons of the school administration hierarchy. Today, as was the case thirty years ago, the overwhelming majority of elementary school teachers are female, while women are underrepresented in supervisory positions. Nevertheless, twenty years after the appointment of the first female to the position of assistant superintendent in 1977, women have come to form roughly one-third of all principals, vice-principals, and superintendents in New Brunswick. The battle against blatant and more subtle forms of gender bias is a vast and complex undertaking that requires an ongoing and substantial commitment from public authorities, a resolve that may be compromised in a context of severe restrictions on government expenditures.

Considerable research on schooling has shown that it is a double-edged sword. Schools wield enormous positive potential for fostering healthy values and developing the intellectual and creative potential of children. The school may act as social leveler, bringing together children from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to develop cognitive and social skills in an atmosphere of respect and dignity. At their best, schools can be a place where children blossom under the guidance of caring and enthusiastic teachers. In some cases,

young people may benefit from intellectual stimulation and encouragement that they are not receiving at home. Since the introduction of the Robichaud government's Program of Equal Opportunity in 1967, New Brunswick's public school system has been expanded and reformed to provide greater accessibility and more standardized instruction for all children of the province. Over the past three decades, children born in urban and rural areas, in poor and rich districts, or in francophone and anglophone families have increasingly been offered similar learning environments.

But schools may also be places where youngsters are subject to negative influences from their peers or even from teachers and administrators. It is a place where attitudes and behaviours are shaped, where a female child may be validated, belittled, or rejected by her teachers and peers. Those seen as different — whether they be members of visible minorities, underweight or overweight, tall or short, poorly dressed or subject to behavioural problems – are often ridiculed and ostracized by their classmates. For such a child, school may become a "bad place" where she faces taunting or ridicule from her classmates or is subject to discriminatory attitudes, perhaps subtly expressed, of her teachers.

A growing body of research has focused on the school climate, examining the life-lessons learned at the hands of classmates and teachers. A recent study on bullying and victimization among Canadian school children found that a significant proportion of the country's school-aged children are either bullies or victims, with girls under ten much more likely to be victimized than boys. Visible minority students who participated in a recent New Brunswick survey on racism in the secondary schools reported that their experience of derogatory name-calling and other forms of racism began back in elementary school. For an Aboriginal girl, this might mean being called a "little squaw" or "wagon burner" or enduring the humiliation of other racial slurs. For girls more generally, the problem of sexual harassment by boys is a very real, though still understudied, reality at the elementary school level. Girls commonly experience some form of verbal or physical harassment, be it sexual insults or innuendo, pinching or shoving, during their early school years. Some research

suggests that younger girls, under the age of ten, are able to react more directly and aggressively to such intimidation, while early adolescent females, struggling with the effects of puberty, may experience more confusion or hesitation.

The introduction of the Positive Learning Environment Policy in New Brunswick's schools in 1999 reflects the heightened awareness of the reality of discrimination in the learning environment. Under this policy, discrimination on the basis of gender, race, colour, national or ethnic origin, religion, culture, language group, sexual orientation, or disability and the use of threatening or abusive language or intimidation are now prohibited in the province's public schools. Enforcement of such zero-tolerance rules is difficult, however, and depends on the vigilance of teachers, staff, and students themselves. In recent decades, the reality of racism and ethnocentric learning environments has led some Aboriginal communities in New Brunswick to establish their own schools with their own curriculum.

## EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Schools and private or community organizations have offered a growing menu of sports, arts programs, and cultural pursuits to the preteen girl since the 1970s. Extracurricular activities provide important outlets for her energies and offer welcome opportunities to associate with peers and nonrelated adults. The health and social benefits of physical activity in particular have been firmly established. Extracurricular activities play major roles in the socialization process and contribute to the formation of gender identity. For the preteen girl, involvement in nonacademic pursuits is a way of discovering her skills and talents and affirming her identity as an active and accomplished individual.

How have girls fared in recreational involvement over the past thirty years? The participation of girls and women in athletics and sports has traditionally been discouraged by social stereotypes concerning appropriate feminine behaviour and the inherent "weaknesses" of the female physique. These long-standing prejudices have been reflected in the unequal

distribution of resources, personnel, and equipment available for female athletics and sporting programs through the 1980s and beyond. In the past thirty years, however, New Brunswick society and Canadian society generally have become much more aware of the importance of physical activity for all citizens — young and old, men and women. Taboos surrounding the involvement of girls in sports and athletics have also been eroded. From the 1969 federal Task Force on Sports to the Participaction initiatives, governments, schools, and community groups have been successful in making physical fitness, well-being, and recreational activities more accessible to all, including girls. Today's girl is far more likely than her mother was to participate in team sports such as soccer, baseball, and hockey. Our female child may also choose from a wider array of cultural activities, such as chess clubs, music, dance, or arts lessons, offered by urban and rural schools, after-school child care programs, and community organizations.

Other less positive trends are also evident. Girls generally are less likely than boys to participate in supervised and unsupervised sports, according to a recent Canada-wide study of sports, arts, and community programs. Research indicates that between the ages of eleven and fifteen, an alarming number of previously active Canadian females abandon or decrease their participation in sporting and other physical activities. Moreover, in an effort to cope with funding cuts and pressures for more academic content, physical education programs in New Brunswick's anglophone elementary schools have been eroded during the 1990s. In fact from 1990 to 1995, the number of qualified physical education specialists has fallen by 60 percent. This flies in the face of the findings of recent research, including a study of New Brunswick's grade six students, which reveals a strong link between increased physical activity and self-esteem. It suggests that females who are physically active may be less likely to experience low levels of self-esteem. Recent Canada-wide research on participation rates in arts, sports, and cultural programs also points to the high direct costs of such activities as an important barrier to the participation of low-income children.

## POPULAR CULTURE AND THE PRETEEN GIRL

A female child's sense of self is constructed from a complex mix of experiences and influences within the family, the school, and the community. Popular culture also plays a growing role in her life as she becomes more actively involved in "consuming" media products such as television programs, film, music, and magazines. Watching television has itself become a major leisure-time activity for North American children since the 1960s. At a time in life when our girl is beginning to distance herself more and more from her parents, she feels the need to assert her individuality and independence by choosing her own clothes, music, and friends, and when making such choices, the young female looks beyond her parents to media trends and models.

The devaluation of women in the media is a long-standing problem that has been denounced by the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women and other women's groups since the late 1970s. In television, films, and the print media, girls and women have traditionally been portrayed in a narrow range of domestic and career roles as housewives, nurses, and secretaries and are frequently depicted as passive and vulnerable, as silly and childish, or as natural victims. Our awareness of gender bias and its destructive impact has increased by leaps and bounds over the past thirty years, thanks to the efforts of researchers, activists, and advocacy groups like MediaWatch, a national feminist watchdog organization established in 1981. And some important inroads have been made in diversifying the portrayal of females in print and visual media since the early 1970s. From the dynamic 1970s' crime-fighters of "Charlie's Angels" to real-life anchorwomen and the increasingly visible female physicians and lawyers of the 1990s' television dramas, the media over time have offered girls a wider array of smart and progressive female role models. The late 1990s' musical group the Spice Girls, with their message of fun and female assertiveness or "girl power" is another example of positive female imagery.

But blatant as well as more insidious sexist, racist, and violent messages are still rife in the world of the new millennium. The music and fashion industries, closely allied with the world of

television, cinema, and youth magazines, generally promote narrowly defined ideals of physical "beauty" and emphasize sexuality as the key to relationships. Younger and younger girls are depicted as sexual beings and objects of adult desire. Women also continue to be significantly underrepresented in most of the media. Even in the 1990s, as communications specialist Shari Graydon reports, females made up only 35 percent of all characters and commentators seen on prime-time television and less than 25 percent of those appearing in children's programming. The rise of cable music networks and the proliferation of television, film, and print products aimed at young women over the past two decades mean that today's girl is bombarded more than ever with increasingly sophisticated messages. The power of the media is such that few girls remain entirely unaffected by the images presented and tend to acquire new values, including sexist ones, within the mainstream culture. Adult guidance is needed to help girls "decode" media messages, which often undermine the more positive ones provided by parents, teachers, and community leaders. It is important for the elementary school-aged girl to develop a critical approach to popular culture before she becomes overly preoccupied with issues relating to body image, sexuality, and peer group acceptance.

## NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION TO ADOLESCENCE

The consolidation of a healthy self-esteem, a life-long human need, is a critical issue during the early years of a girls' life. It becomes an even more vital concern during the later years of elementary school, when the female child is approaching the onset of puberty. It is during the period of early adolescence, characterized by psychologists as the years eleven to thirteen, that she begins to navigate the difficult transition between girlhood and womanhood. Over the past twenty years, a number of studies have revealed the existence of a self-esteem "gap" between girls and boys. Boys and young men tend to have a stronger sense of self-satisfaction than do girls and young women, and the gender gap increases with age. As some girls move from childhood to early adolescence, they lose their sense of self and experience a marked decline in self-assurance. Recent evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of

Children and Youth, launched by the Canadian government in 1994, indicates that while most boys feel self-confident throughout their adolescence, self-confidence among girls falls steadily from 72 percent of grade six students to only 55 percent of grade ten students. Existing research does not indicate if the gender self-esteem gap has narrowed significantly since the 1970s.

How can we account for this situation? The onset of puberty, at the average age of twelve, is accompanied by very visible physical changes and no less important emotional ones. The young female with her developing anatomy increasingly becomes a sexual object in the eyes of boys and men at the same time as she is experiencing her own sexual awakening. She may have experienced sexual harassment at school or in leisure-time activities or may even have been physically or sexually assaulted by a family member or another adult. Body issues become a major preoccupation of many a young female who experiences growing feelings of inadequacy as she compares herself to media-promoted standards of physical beauty or experiences disappointment in attracting the attention of boys. Pressures to be slim, or even dangerously thin, appear to be internalized at ever-younger ages. An alarming trend of the 1990s has been the growing number of preadolescent and early adolescent girls who have turned to radical dieting or exercise regimes, at a time when the new teenage eating disorders of bulimia and anorexia have been on the rise. The patterns of declining self-esteem, negative body image, and even depression that begin in early adolescence or earlier tend to affect more girls, and the more deeply as they mature.

Is there a way for girls to build a solid sense of self-worth early in life so that they can better withstand the pressures of the vulnerable teenage years? How can we counteract the often negative messages conveyed in the media or communicated by peers? How can parents, teachers, and society generally work together to pass on a valuable legacy of inner strength to our female children? In the past ten years, a growing number of studies have addressed the problem of fostering a positive self-image in girls. In a recent survey of more than a thousand successful American women, child psychologist Dr. Sylvia

Rimm identified a series of characteristics shared by these women, who had achieved job satisfaction in a variety of traditional and nontraditional careers as well as personal fulfillment in their family life and relationships. Most of these women had parents who set high academic and career expectations for them. They were encouraged to study and work hard and to be involved in a range of extracurricular activities, including some that were competitive. They were also taught lessons about self-assurance and the importance of developing their own unique potential in the face of obstacles. For them, self-worth was not measured by physical appearance or popularity but rather by a sense of achievement and purpose in life.

The past decade in particular has witnessed the growth of initiatives to build self-esteem in school-age girls, particularly females age eleven and older. Some, like the Canadian Teachers' Federation A Cappella project of the early 1990s, are based on discussion groups which offer young women the chance to voice their feelings and concerns in a safe, strictly female forum. Just for Girls is a widely used program to prevent eating disorders developed by psychologist Sandra Friedman in 1992. Based on facilitator-led discussion groups for adolescent girls, the program encourages girls to express their joys, fears, and concerns and helps them understand the societal pressures they face and the female-friendly resources they can use to deal with them. The Ottawa-based Power Camp, founded in 1995 by three University of Ottawa students, provides girls ages eleven to fifteen with a summer program which allows them to share experiences and participate in a wide range of physical and cultural activities. There are also many other worthwhile initiatives that involve role-modelling or mentoring. As well, talks by female veterinarians and other invited speakers in the elementary schools offer girls inspirational examples of women working in nontraditional settings.

Thirty years of women's activism and efforts to address gender inequities in society have heightened our awareness of the promise and perils of the preteen years for girls. Growing up

female is still fraught with special challenges, even in the New Brunswick of 2001; however, parents, schools, and communities have made great strides in recognizing the importance of opening up broad vistas to girls and encouraging them to shine. For most girls who have enjoyed a healthy family environment and adequate economic support, the years from six to twelve are likely to be happy ones — years in which they flourish as individuals as they explore a new world of learning, fun, and friendships. Yet fundamental shifts in perceptions and behaviour also start to occur during this understudied developmental phase. As our twelve-year-old girl embarks on the sometimes stormy seas of adolescence, it is especially important that she have the support not only of her parents but also of a caring society truly committed to the practice of gender equity. Poised on the brink of a new phase in her life cycle, she will soon face a series of critical decisions which will weigh heavily on her future.

# CHAPTER 3

# ADOLESCENCE (13-18 YEARS)

## INTRODUCTION

The teen years are a time of developmental changes as profound as the changes in the first five years of life. Teens are on a physical, emotional and social roller coaster that their families, especially their parents, ride with them.

*– Understanding Your Teen: Ages 13 to 19.*

To paraphrase the novelist Charles Dickens, adolescence is the best time of times; it is the worst of times. On the other and, it is a wonderful period in the life of a young girl — a period when she begins to broaden her world, to create her own identity, to fall in love for the first time, to establish herself as a person with abilities and accomplishments, and to set herself firmly on the path she will stay on for the rest of her life. On the other hand, adolescence can be a dark and difficult period for her when hormones are changing, when the need to be liked and accepted by peers sometimes overpowers reason and good sense, and when she can feel happy and confident one day and insecure and miserable the next.

As she enters her teen years in the year 2000, a young girl faces challenges that are in many ways, far more serious then those experienced by her counterpart in 1970, some involving risky behaviour with the potential to affect the rest of her life or even take it away entirely. Even the more ordinary obstacles in her path can have important consequences for her healthy development as she progresses towards womanhood.

The good news though is that there has never been a better time than the present to be a teenage girl in New Brunswick. Girls are excelling in school, even in subjects like math and science traditionally considered the domain of boys, and they are going on to university in increasingly large numbers. They are also playing organized sports and volunteering in their communities. In short, the majority of teenage girls in New Brunswick today are healthy and happy. And despite a tendency for their parents to believe otherwise, their families are still very important to them. The attachments they have made since birth are and continue to be a source of strength for them and a

determining factor in the important decisions they will make during the course of their teenage years.

## PUBERTY: THE ONSET OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL CHANGES

During the many years I have spent as a teacher and as a therapist, I have puzzled over the riddle of what happens to girls in the process of growing up that makes them lose their self-confidence and sense of self, and instead encourages them to define themselves through the eyes of others and by the number on a scale.

– Sandra Friedman, *Girls in the '90s.*

Puberty can begin for girls as early as age seven, although we tend to associate it with the teenage years. With the onset of puberty, the central nervous system triggers the release of growth hormones that result in height and weight gains, breast development, and the beginning of menstruation. In the life of a young girl, physical maturity, which is accompanied by increasing emotional independence, can be an exciting time. And yet because our society tends to value a very limited and largely unattainable ideal of female attractiveness, the pubertal changes that turn a girl into a woman can also be a confusing and even frightening time. A girl who at eight felt completely comfortable in her body suddenly finds that she is losing control of it: her hips and thighs widen, her belly becomes more round, she develops breasts, and sweat glands begin to produce body odour and acne.

A girl may mature earlier or later than her friends and face teasing and ridicule, especially by boys, as a result. Whether or not she has the support of family and friends, many girls feel very alone during this time, as if they are the only ones going through these changes and no one else could possibly understand how they feel. As they attempt to conform to society's image of a stereotypical female, some girls become obsessed with their weight and are prone to eating disorders, addictions, depression, or even suicide.

As Sandra Friedman says in the epigraph to this section, many experts have begun to examine what happens to young girls on the road to womanhood that causes them to lose their self-confidence, shakes their self-esteem, and turns them into creatures obsessed with their appearance. Certainly part of the explanation is the "thin is beautiful" message that continually bombards young people, and especially girls, everywhere they turn.

The media influence on the lives of girls is even more pervasive today than it was in 1970. Some children watch an estimated four hours of television every day, and studies suggest that by the time they reach high school, young people have spent more hours in front of the television than they have in school. Unfortunately, many teenage girls watching television and rock videos, reading magazines, and listening to popular music lack the cognitive skills and life experience to question what they see and hear. They tend to internalize the values and attitudes they absorb through the media and accept the images presented to them as ideals they should emulate. One only has to look at some of the popular TV programs today ("Friends" and "Entertainment Tonight," for example) and the wafer-thin females featured in them to know that television plays a major role in shaping acceptable body images for girls and women.

It is true the media are not the cause of eating disorders, but they do establish standards for strength and beauty that are almost impossible for either sex to achieve. Problems relating to body image are on the increase for both teenage girls and boys, although research shows that they continue to be much greater for girls. The 2000 report *Health of Canada's Children* notes that there has been a steady increase in all grades in the proportion of Canadian students who are dissatisfied with their body. In 1998, 43 percent of females and 31 percent of males in grade six said they would like to change something about their body. For fifteen-year-olds in grade ten, the proportion increased to 77 percent of females and 52 percent of males.

Girls are much more likely than boys to be preoccupied with losing weight (boys tend to want to increase body mass), and this preoccupation rises during the early and midteen years. In 1998 nearly half of Canadian girls in grades nine (47 percent)

and ten (45 percent) either were on a diet or felt that they needed to lose weight. This compares to 20 percent of boys in grade nine and 18 percent of boys in grade ten.

Despite the widespread research that exists today on the ineffectiveness of dieting, it continues to be a major preoccupation of teenage girls. Improper and excessive dieting can have severe consequences on the health of a growing adolescent. It can result in a range of problems from lack of concentration and anxiety to eating disorders, depression, and, in extreme cases, attempted suicide.

According to the report *Health of Canada's Children*, experts say a pyramid is a good way to illustrate eating disorders among female youth: those at the bottom "feel fat"; those at the second level are preoccupied with their weight; those at the third level turn to fasting, bingeing, and/or purging; and those at the fourth level suffer from eating disorders. The fifth and sixth levels represent varying degrees of medical risk.

In her 1997 book *When Girls Feel Fat*, Sandra Friedman notes that when she started out in private practice in 1980, bingeing, purging, and fasting were so uncommon that girls engaging in these behaviours were considered to have an established eating disorder. Today, she writes, these behaviours are so much a part of the normal teen culture that whenever she talks to high school students about eating disorders, many of them have a hard time applying the information to themselves. They just worry about their weight, they say. It's the other girls who take it too far and put themselves at risk.

The 1985 report *Health of Adolescent Girls*, published by the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women, found little evidence in the province of the two most common eating disorders, anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Anorexia nervosa is a condition defined as drastic weight loss resulting from self-induced starvation. Bulimia is characterized by cycles of binge eating followed by purging to rid the body of calories. Based on provincial health statistics, no New Brunswick girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen ever received the primary diagnosis of bulimia between 1979 and 1984, while a total of thirty-two girls in the province were

diagnosed with anorexia nervosa during the same period. (The report notes that it is likely that the diseases were being misdiagnosed or undiagnosed.)

The report also found that in 1985 obesity was the most common problem related to poor eating habits and lack of exercise in young women and adolescents in New Brunswick. It said that between 5 and 20 percent of children and teenagers were obese and that obesity was more common in females. According to the report, at least 10 percent of adolescent girls were obese. Obesity in young people is a concern because research suggests that those people who are obese during childhood and adolescence will carry their obesity into adulthood. For a young girl in particular, obesity not only increases the potential for present and future health problems; but it can also be devastating for her emotional and social development and even her school performance.

The causes of body image problems and eating disorders among teenagers are complex. Some experts believe that eating disorders are a strategy used by young people to cope with problems they find too painful to discuss, such as the loss of a major relationship through divorce or death. Others report that eating disorders are more common in girls who have a tendency towards perfectionism, who have low self-esteem, or who have been sexually or physically abused. Teenage girls themselves report that dieting makes them feel in control of their lives. Often it is the only thing they feel they can control. Sandra Friedman says that girls use food and weight as a means of dealing with their transition into an adult world that devalues women and undervalues the ways they interact with the world. She writes, "Underlying all the personal reasons why girls feel fat are the societal pressures to be thin and beautiful, combined with the general psychological distress that comes from growing up female in a male-defined world."

It is important to note that while most teenage girls worry about their appearance, not all will control their weight to the same extent or develop an eating disorder. The report entitled *Health of Canada's Children* estimates that only 1 to 2 percent of females ages fourteen to twenty-five will develop anorexia nervosa, and only 3 to 5 percent will develop bulimia. Although

eating disorders also affect males, 90 to 95 percent of the sufferers are female.

In 1998 the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women sponsored a national essay contest for teenage girls on the subject of body image. The institute expected to receive essays on the female body in sports and dance or lives affected by physical disabilities or the reactions of girls of colour to life in our Eurocentric Canadian society. The entries, however, were a surprise to everyone. The vast majority of essays divulged terrible secrets of young women who hated themselves because they failed to conform to society's conception of beauty. There were heartbreaking stories of severe eating disorders that in some instances led to the brink of death. On the positive side, however, the afterword in *That Body Image Thing* notes that the authors of these essays should not be seen as mere victims: "If many of the young women we read have suffered and experienced self-hatred through the body, they have also recovered and found their path and own self-loving voice, vision and touch. They can teach a lesson or two to other young women and to many older women suffering from hatred of the flesh in contemporary western society."

Perhaps the lesson to be drawn here is that while conforming to society's stereotype of female beauty continues to be a major preoccupation of girls in the year 2000, there is also a growing tendency among some girls to reject these stereotypes and to accept and even embrace the body with which they were born. After all, how we feel about our body ultimately determines how we feel about ourselves.

## SEXUALITY: ESTABLISHING IDENTITY

In some ways, life is much more complicated for New Brunswick girls in the year 2000, than it was for their counterparts three decades ago. While many teenage girls worried about their weight in 1970, their behaviour was not as extreme, and eating disorders were not yet part of the vocabulary. Many teenage girls smoked in 1970, but a greater percentage are smoking today, and they are starting younger. Teenagers in 1970 may have used alcohol, but in the year 2000,

the number of mind-altering drugs to choose from has expanded, and the peer pressure to use them can be intense. In 1970 teenagers experimented with sex and worried about getting pregnant. Today, teenagers are having sex earlier, and in addition to getting pregnant, there is the danger of contracting sexually transmitted diseases that can be chronic or even fatal.

Although the subject of teenage sexuality in the year 2000 is fraught with problems, from disease to pregnancy to rejection, the reality is not all negative. Teenagers in New Brunswick have had sex and will continue to have sex for the simple reason that it feels good. Development of a sexual identity is also a critical part of growing up. But while exciting and at times difficult for all teenagers, the experience of developing a sexual identity can be even more unsettling for young people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Many suffer higher rates of loneliness, depression, and even attempted suicide.

Surprisingly perhaps, the double standard still exists in the year 2000, although it is probably less rigid than it was three decades earlier. Sex for most boys has little to do with intimacy and a lot to do with achievement and reputation. When boys describe their first sexual encounter to their high school pals, they get overwhelming approval. On the other hand, a girl's first sexual encounter is likely to be with someone she feels close to, someone she loves. Girls are not as inclined as boys to talk about sex to their friends because the reaction is more likely to be mixed. Even today, some people still think that a girl who has sex with her boyfriend, especially if she enjoys it, is a slut.

For teenage girls, sex is about romance, about being loved and accepted. The consequence of such an attitude is that girls are more likely than boys to have spontaneous sex, which is risky behaviour given that few sexually active young people today are adequately protecting themselves. While statistics show that boys are more sexually active than girls, girls are more likely to have unprotected sex. The report *Progress of Canada's Children* notes that almost half of sexually active women in Canada age fifteen to nineteen and one-third of young men in the same age group reported having unprotected sex in 1994. And almost 20 percent of females and 13 percent of males ages fifteen to nineteen reported sexual activity with at least two

partners without using a condom. These are alarming statistics in an age when the consequences of unprotected sex can be serious if not fatal.

The Canadian Institute of Child Health estimated that throughout the 1990s about 25 percent of Canadian teenagers were having sexual intercourse by age fourteen. The girls who engage in regular sexual activity at this age are usually dating older boys. One study found that nearly three-quarters of the girls who had intercourse before age fourteen said it was involuntary. The CICH estimates that 40 percent of teens have had sexual intercourse by age sixteen, 53 percent by age seventeen, and 80 percent by the end of adolescence.

A study carried out by Queen's University in Kingston in 1989, *Canada Youth and Aids Study*: *New Brunswick Report,* found that New Brunswick teenagers were more sexually active than Canadian teenagers as a whole. By grade nine, 31 percent of New Brunswick youth compared to 26 percent of Canadian youth had had sexual intercourse at least once. New Brunswick youth were also less-informed than Canadian young people generally. Most were getting their information about sex from friends, television, and/or family, and not from the school system.

Traditionally, the biggest risk associated with teenage sexual activity is pregnancy. Some good news is that the rate of teenage pregnancy in New Brunswick dropped during the 1970s and 1980s, began rising in the late 1980s, but has been on the decline since 1994. According to the report *Health of Canada's Children*, the teenage pregnancy rate in New Brunswick for women ages fifteen to nineteen was 64/100,000 in 1974 and 40/100,000 in 1994. The New Brunswick rate has been higher than the Canadian average for the past fifteen years. The declining rate of pregnancy has been accompanied by an increase in the number of young girls keeping their babies. Clearly, there is less shame felt by an unwed mother today than was the case three decades ago.

Some experts attribute the decrease in the pregnancy rate in New Brunswick to an improved network of reproductive health clinics around the province and to a more open attitude to sex

education both within the schools and in the public at large. Efforts have also been made to help young mothers stay in school. Until 1996, according to provincial government statistics, the majority of teenage single mothers on social assistance in New Brunswick dropped out of school. With the implementation of the youth policy, this trend has reversed. In 1996 approximately 60 percent of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds and nearly 50 percent of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds who were single mothers on social assistance were attending school.

Despite these efforts, teenage girls with children inevitably have a harder time moving ahead with their lives. The report *Health of Canada's Children* notes that young mothers are more likely to be single parents than other mothers, and they tend to have less education than their peers who are not mothers. As a result, teen mothers and their children are at greater risk of poverty and its attendant problems. Given the economic and social challenges they face, some young mothers may also be predisposed to abuse and neglect their children.

Research suggests that the majority of teen pregnancies are unplanned or unwanted, a result of failed contraception or lack of contraception. Stewart (1998) suggests that there are a small proportion of young women who want to become pregnant. They may be looking for love, a sense of purpose, and/or a sense of connection with others. Building positive self-esteem in these girls may be a critical element in pregnancy prevention.

## SMOKING, ALCOHOL, DRUGS, AND STDS: RISKY BUSINESS

Low self-confidence leads to a lot of drug and alcohol use. Growing up in a small community where there is not a lot to do, does not help either. I think there needs to be more support groups and hotlines that are confidential.

– Female grade 12 student, age 18, *NB Provincial Student Drug Use Survey, 1998.*

While the rate of teenage pregnancies has dropped in New Brunswick over the past three decades, the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease (STD) has increased. According to the report *The Progress of Canada's Children*, the rates of some sexually transmitted diseases (such as chlamydia) have been falling, although the rate of infection for youth is still higher than for any other age group. Young Canadian women ages fifteen to nineteen have almost nine times the overall reported chlamydia rate.

The Queens' University AIDS study, mentioned above, found that New Brunswick youth in grades nine and eleven possessed on average less accurate information about STDs than their Canadian counterparts. Specifically, they were among the least-informed youth in Canada about such issues as being able to catch STDs more than once, birth control pills not protecting a female from STDs, the serious consequences of undetected chlamydia, and the risk of contracting genital herpes from oral sex. Again, most New Brunswick youths were getting their information from sources other than school.

Although less-informed about STDs generally, New Brunswick young people in 1989 were as knowledgeable as their Canadian counterparts about HIV/AIDS. Two-thirds of the province's youth, compared to one-half of their Canadian peers, said that getting AIDS was a concern, although a very low percentage of grade elevens (18 percent in New Brunswick and 15 percent in Canada) said that this fear stopped them from engaging in sexual intercourse.

According to the report *Health of Canada's Children*, by December of 1998 more than forty thousand positive HIV tests had been reported to Health Canada. Of these, 1.5 percent were adolescents ages fifteen to nineteen and, 1.6 percent were under fifteen. For children, the main sources of infection were tainted blood products or their mothers while in utero. By contrast, over 60 percent of teens ages fifteen to nineteen contracted the virus as a result of unprotected sex. Adolescent girls and young women are the fastest-growing group in Canada contracting the HIV infection.

In addition to the potential of contracting a sexually transmitted disease, studies show that teenagers involved in early sexual activity also tend to participate more in other risky behaviours such as smoking, drinking alcohol, and taking drugs. And again, such behaviour is beginning at earlier ages. The report *Health of Canada's Children* says that Canada-wide, 54 percent of students in grades seven to twelve reported alcohol use in 1996, compared to 51 percent in 1991; 35 percent reported tobacco use, compared to 26 percent in 1991; and 32 percent reported cannabis use, compared to 17 percent in 1991. (No gender breakdowns are provided for these statistics.)

Young people, especially teenage girls, are also starting to smoke at earlier ages, and they are often resorting to it as a way to control their weight. In New Brunswick, the ACSW study on the health of adolescent girls noted that even in the late 1970s, girls in grades seven to eleven were already tending to smoke more than boys. This finding correlated with the 1981 Canada Fitness Survey, which found that more adolescent females than males smoked and that by ages eighteen and nineteen, almost one in two females was at least an occasional smoker. Evidence suggests, however, that while a greater proportion of teenage girls smoke, boys tend to be heavier smokers, and most adult smokers are male.

The ACSW report also noted that in 1981, based on a survey carried out by the New Brunswick Alcoholism and Drug Dependency Commission, junior and senior high school students, both female and male, were reporting similar rates of drug use. Alcohol appeared to be the drug of choice, followed by cannabis products (marijuana) and a combination of alcohol and cannabis. Females, however, tended to use pills more than boys. In grade eleven, for example, 13.3 percent of girls (three times as many girls as boys) reported using tranquilizers for nonmedical reasons. The province began to survey students in grades seven through twelve on drug use in 1986 and has done so every few years since. According to the latest Provincial Student Drug Use Survey in 1998, there was a decrease of almost 4 percent in the use of LSD between 1996 and 1998, and a slight increase in the use of marijuana and mescaline. It also found that cocaine use among New Brunswick students in the

above grades increased, from 2.9 percent to 4.1 percent between 1992 and 1998.

However, the biggest increase was seen in alcohol use. In 1998, 55.5 percent of students reported using alcohol compared to 52.1 percent in 1996. Females use alcohol almost as much as males. More females (34.3 percent) than males (30.6 percent) reported tobacco use, while more males (33.4 percent) than females (28.3 percent) reported cannabis use. This survey did not ask questions about binge drinking, although other research suggests that binge drinking is becoming increasingly common among young people. In 1994–95, according to the report *Health of Canada's Children*, 52 percent of Canadian males ages fifteen to nineteen and 35 percent of females reported binge drinking. Some researchers note that binge drinking among youth tends not to be pathological as it is with adults but rather reflects patterns of socialization and experimentation among young people. The problem is that drinking to the point of intoxication creates potentially dangerous situations, increasing the risk of car accidents, fights, or infection by a sexually transmitted disease as a result of unplanned and unprotected sex.

The incidence of risky behaviours tends to be greater for young people from disadvantaged homes. The report *Child Poverty in Atlantic Canada* notes that poor children are more likely to smoke, take drugs, or have a drinking problem. They are also less likely to practice birth control, and therefore, teenage girls from low-income families are five times as likely to become pregnant as girls from higher-income families. Teens from poor families are also less likely to use condoms as protection from STDs.

Another report, *Income and Child Well-Being: A New Perspective on the Poverty Debate*, found that teens who are neither working nor in school are at much greater risk than other teens of getting into trouble with the law, developing problem behaviours such as alcohol or drug addictions, and ending up in poverty as adults. From 1994 to 1997, about one in six teens from low-income families in Canada was neither employed nor in school, compared to only one teen in twenty-five from middle- and high-income families.

## SCHOOL AND STUDIES: THREE DECADES OF PROGRESS FOR GIRLS

Students must be educated in a learning environment that promotes equal opportunity and encourages sex-equity in all aspects of the school's curriculum, policies, teaching methods and assessment procedures.

– New Brunswick Department of Education, 1987, *Educational Opportunities for Girls and Boys.*

In 1970 New Brunswick was a rural province with poor roads, isolated communities, and inadequate systems of transportation and communication. Young people could grow up, marry their childhood sweetheart, and settle into their communities – boys following their fathers into the fishery or onto the farm, girls becoming wives and mothers – and have little or no contact with the outside world.

In the year 2000 New Brunswick remains a rural province – 50 percent of the population still lives outside urban centres – but the transportation and communication infrastructure has been vastly improved. Television and the Internet have brought the outside world into New Brunswick homes, and teenagers today are exposed to events and opportunities unimagined even in the 1970s. They are also exposed to graphic images of sex and violence, more temptations, and a significant increase in peer pressure. Having sex, smoking and using alcohol and drugs are all part of teenage culture, and for a minority the outcome will be tragic.

The vast majority of teens in New Brunswick, however, will find ways to resist such pressures. By focusing on sports, part-time jobs, or volunteerism, and with the continuing support of their families, most will survive the teenage years and even thrive.

One arena where New Brunswick teenage girls have done extremely well over the past three decades is in the classroom. The 1970 Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was one of the first studies in Canada to focus on the way girls were being educated at the secondary school level. It

noted that there are two critical times in the educational life of a girl: one is the transition from elementary to high school when she chooses the courses she will take, and the other is the completion of high school when she has to decide whether she will continue on to university, enroll in a technical-training course or a community college, or find a job. Decisions made in the first instance obviously affect choices available in the second.

The report found that girls in Canada in 1970 were choosing and being encouraged to choose commercial courses, while boys were choosing vocational courses such as industrial and mechanical trades. Girls predominated in social studies, boys in the study of math and sciences. In effect, New Brunswick girls in the seventies were being educated to be secretaries and teachers and, of course, wives and mothers. The report also noted that while proportionately more girls than boys stayed in school until the higher grades, they were dropping out in greater numbers before completing their senior matriculation. As the report pointed out, this could not be explained by a lack of academic ability since girls at the secondary-school level generally did better than boys.

The Royal Commission report was the impetus that encouraged educators and experts to begin to look seriously at the education of young girls. One of the earliest studies, now considered a landmark, was by Harvard professor Dr. Carol Gilligan. Her 1982 book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* documented, probably for the first time, how girls learn differently than boys. Dr. Gilligan wrote that psychology had persistently and systematically misunderstood girls and women – their motives, their view of the world, their psychological growth – and that developmental theories had always been built on observations of men's lives. Other researchers call it the "male as norm" model of psychological development.

Since then, a number of other books and reports, including one in 1992 by the American Association of University Women, have documented how schools shortchange girls. A 1993 study done for the Working Group of Status of Women Officials on Gender Equity in Education and Training (which included New Brunswick representatives) noted that there are four areas

where schools often reinforce sex-role stereotypes. First, curriculum and learning materials do not portray girls and women in realistic ways, nor do they include their full range of experiences. Second, classroom interactions are dominated by boys. Teachers interact differently with boys and girls and expect different levels of achievement from them. Third, language used in the classroom is often sexist and affects what is taught and how it is taught. And finally, sexual harassment is common even in elementary schools, and girls fear for their safety on playgrounds, in hallways and in the classrooms.

In New Brunswick, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, established in 1977, was one of the first groups to lobby to have the school environment made more hospitable for young girls. Its 1983 plan of action proposed that a system be established for assessing sexism in schoolbooks and for developing teaching materials that give equal value to women's contributions. It also recommended that guidance counsellors be trained to be more aware of conditions facing women in society so that they could give nonsexist service and that affirmative steps be taken to discourage girls from opting out early from such courses as math and science.

In the late 1980s, the Canadian Teachers Federation surveyed young women across the country. In its report *A Cappella: A Report on the Realities, Concerns, Expectations and Barriers Experienced by Adolescent Women in Canada,* the federation found that 90 percent of high school girls felt that women's chances of succeeding in the world today are as good as men's. However, many of the adolescent girls in the study expressed mixed opinions about their role as women in society and the degree of discrimination they experienced. While a few felt there were no differences in the way they were treated compared to boys, almost all detected at least some unfairness in sports or in the freedom boys were given at home. Others sensed a deeper antifemale bias in general and in their own experiences. Many were resentful of and angry at boys who appear to "get it all without really trying."

Since the Royal Commission report appeared in 1970, and especially in the past decade, governments have committed resources to a wide range of activities to improve the status of

women in education. On a national level, these have included development of training courses for women trying to enter nontraditional occupations in trades and technology, support for programs and chairs in women's studies at universities across the country, and providing grants to promote and publish research on women's lives.

In New Brunswick, the provincial Department of Education issued a policy statement on gender equity in 1987 *(Educational Opportunities for Girls and Boys: A Commitment to Sex Equity)* and followed it with a guideline for action and a checklist for detecting bias and stereotyping in instructional materials. Textbooks in some areas were revised. In the late 1980s, some school districts initiated activities such as summer science camps for girls.

After a review of its education system in 1993, the province began to support initiatives such as research and funding on date violence. It distributed *Raising Young Voices*, a video in both English and French on gender issues in schools and collaborated with the ACSW to develop the Take Our Kids to Work Program, which was geared in particular to grade nine girls. As well, there was an increased emphasis on communications technology (all schools in the province are now connected to the Internet), and programs were introduced to encourage young girls to pursue careers in math and sciences.

Some researchers argue that the 1980s' feminist reform agenda in education appears to have been quite successful in New Brunswick but that educational reforms to promote women's equality have stagnated in the 1990s because of a focus on financial reform and cutbacks; in some cases it has even regressed. According to Linda Eyre's 1999 study: "The province has promised to improve women's access to education but has taken a regressive position toward women's sexual and reproductive health, demonizes teen mothers, and financially penalizes women students with children.…The province claims to be developing non-discriminatory policies in education but supports cuts to social assistance benefits, implements discriminatory policies against people in poverty, and actively supports the ghettoisation of women's work to support its own economic agenda." It is clear that in the year 2000 the

education system in New Brunswick is still far from perfect. On the positive side, one measure of the success of some of these initiatives is that girls in New Brunswick schools are now doing as well as if not better than boys in many areas, which shatters the myth that teenage girls are either unwilling or unable to excel at mathematics and science.

In the late 1980s, the Canadian Council of Ministers of Education began the School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) in order to assess the performance of the country's thirteen- and sixteen-year-olds in reading and writing (surveys carried out in 1994 and 1998), mathematics (1993 and 1997), and science (1996 and 1999). Performance in each discipline is measured according to five levels of achievement, from level one at the lowest end to level five at the most advanced. These five levels are intended to represent the continuum of knowledge and skills that students have acquired over their entire school lives. In all subjects, educators regard level two as the standard expected of thirteen-year-olds (grade eight) and level three of sixteen-year-olds (grade eleven). The province of New Brunswick also tests students at various stages but the SAIP is probably the best measure of how well New Brunswick students are doing compared to students across the country and of how well girls are doing compared to boys (see Table 1). Since the tests are given every three or four years, the SAIP also allows us to measure whether students are improving their abilities overall and whether gender differences are changing.

On a national level, girls have always done better than boys at reading and writing, and the SAIP results reflect this. In the 1998 Canada-wide reading test, 86 percent of thirteen-year-old females compared to 70 percent of males reached at least level two. The difference was even more pronounced at level three (53 percent of females and 30 percent males). For the sixteen-year-olds, 82 percent of females compared to 60 percent of males reached level three, and almost 45 percent of females reached level four compared to 22 percent of males.

In writing as well, females scored better than males at all levels for both age groups: 80 percent of thirteen-year-old females reached level three compared to 60 percent of males, 91 percent of sixteen-year-old females reached level three compared to 80

percent of males, and 46 percent of sixteen-year-old females reached level four compared to 32 percent of males. Comparing these results to the 1994 test, the gap between Canadian girls and boys in reading and writing is widening as boys fall significantly behind.

In science, the 1999 nation-wide test showed no significant differences in achievement at most levels between males and females. The 1996 science assessment found that girls in both age groups performed as well as boys in the practical-task component, while in the written component, sixteen-year-old males had a "slight but significant" advantage over females. More males reached the higher levels. In general, both the 1999 and 1996 science assessments concluded that the overall message of the data is that efforts in Canada to make science education more relevant to and more inclusive of young women continue to have positive results.

In math, the 1997 test found no significant differences between thirteen-year-old girls and boys, although in the math problem-solving component, there were more boys than girls at the higher levels. For sixteen-year-olds, there were significantly more boys at the higher levels for both components. (We should note that the SAIP math results conflict with data from the Third International Mathematics and Science Survey, which found that female grade eight students perform as well as male students in math but are at a disadvantage in science.)

**Table 1.**
New Brunswick Students Reaching at Least Level 3 in SAIP Tests, by Gender and Linguistic Group

| | Females (Eng.) % | Females (Fr.) % | Males (Eng.) % | Males (Fr.) % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1998 SAIP reading assessment** | | | | |
| Thirteen-year-olds | 50 | 49 | 26 | 22 |
| Sixteen-year-olds | 77 | 81 | 64 | 55 |
| **1998 SAIP writing assessment** | | | | |
| Thirteen-year-olds | 77 | 56 | 62 | 25 |
| Sixteen-year-olds | 91 | 77 | 84 | 46 |
| **1997 SAIP math content assessment** | | | | |
| Thirteen-year-olds | 18.9 | 37.7 | 18 | 26.8 |
| Sixteen-year-olds | 47.5 | 63.7 | 47.1 | 63.2 |
| **1997 SAIP math problem-solving** | | | | |
| Thirteen-year-olds | 11.9 | 17.5 | 11.7 | 14.8 |
| Sixteen-year-olds | 33.2 | 37.2 | 34.1 | 37 |
| **1999 SAIP science assessment** | | | | |
| Thirteen-year-olds | 49.7 | 40.3 | 51 | 36.8 |
| Sixteen-year-olds | 75.4 | 70.7 | 71.3 | 67.9 |

Note: Thirteen-year-olds are expected to reach level 2 in these tests, sixteen-year-olds level 3.

Table 1 shows that a greater percentage of females than males, both anglophones and francophones and in both age groups, reached level three in the reading assessment but that more anglophone males than francophone females in both age groups reached level three in the writing assessment.

In the math assessments, anglophone females did better than anglophone males in both age groups except for the problem-solving category, where slightly more sixteen-year-old males than females reached level three. Francophones in general did better than anglophones in math, and female francophones did slightly better than male francophones in both categories and age groups. Nation-wide, Quebec francophones had the best results in math.

In the science assessments, a slightly higher percentage of thirteen-year-old anglophone males than anglophone females reached level 3, and both anglophone and francophone thirteen-year-old females did better than francophone males in

the same age group. For sixteen-year-olds, a higher percentage of anglophone females reached level three than both anglophone and francophone males.

The SAIP reports caution that New Brunswick francophones may have done poorer in science than anglophones because the tests were carried out in the spring of 1999 before the implementation of a new science program in the francophone system: that was done in September 1999 for grade eight and in September 2000 for grade ten. The reports also note that New Brunswick has been undergoing a significant transition in the past few years in the way math is taught. Curriculum and resources are now being developed to emphasize the importance of math for both sexes and to highlight its relevance to today's technology.

Provincial testing of grade elevens in 1998–99 suggests that a higher percentage of boys than girls in the anglophone system (56 percent compared to 44 percent) are now choosing "nonacademic" math (mathematics 113), which does not count towards university admission. The provincial Report Card '99 does not provide a breakdown between those taking regular math courses, mathematics 112, or its enriched version, mathematics 111. But a slightly higher percentage of grade eleven girls (51 percent compared to 49 percent of boys) took mathematics 111/112 in 1998–99, and their success rate was also slightly better: 50 percent of girls passed the exam compared to 49 percent of boys.

Once again, more boys than girls in the francophone system, (56 percent compared to 44 percent) took "modified" math, which can be used for university admissions but only in a nonscience program such as history. A higher percentage of girls than boys (53 percent compared to 47 percent) took regular math courses, which allow them to continue with math and sciences at the university level. For both regular and modified math, grade eleven girls scored higher averages on the provincial exams than boys: 61 percent compared to 59 percent in regular math and 60 percent compared to 57 percent in modified math. Comparing these results with the findings of the Royal Commission in 1970, indicates that girls in New Brunswick in the year 2000 are just as likely as boys, perhaps

more likely than boys, to take the more advanced math courses that will allow them to study math at the university level.

In the year 2000, the tide of academic achievement among teenagers seems to have turned. New Brunswick girls have closed the gap with boys in math and sciences and are much more advanced in reading and writing. It has even reached the point where experts and educators are now beginning to worry about boys. Some are wondering whether the familiar theme in the 1980s and 1990s – that schools were shortchanging girls – now applies more appropriately to boys. In the year 2000, 56 percent of undergraduates at Canadian universities are female, up from 37 percent in 1970.

## OUT OF THE CLASSROOM, INTO THE CORRIDORS: VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

Young girls may be doing well in the classroom, but how are they faring in the corridors and the schoolyard? In 1970 boys teased girls and pulled up their skirts. In 2000, boys are more threatening in their behaviour, and girls have to contend with violence in relationships, bullying in the schoolyard, sexual harassment, and gay bashing.

A 1999 report called *Violence Prevention and the Girl Child* by the Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence concluded that violence against girls is common and endemic in Canadian society and that it has become increasingly accepted as a way of life. Canadian girls are subjected to a continuum of violence ranging from sexist remarks at school, sexual harassment, and exclusionary attitudes and behaviours to rape, battering, and murder. The report also noted that violence experienced by girls results in low self-esteem, poor grades, and a negative self-image.

A study on date violence among New Brunswick adolescents that was carried out in 1999 by Sandra Byers and her colleagues at the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research in Fredericton found that the problem has become serious and pervasive among New Brunswick teenagers. Almost one-third of the adolescent girls in grades

seven, nine, and eleven who were interviewed for the study stated that they had had a psychologically, physically, and/or sexually abusive experience while on a date. Some adolescents said they were unclear about when certain behaviours such as yelling, hurling insults, and physical horseplay could be termed abusive. The results also revealed that an alarming 10 percent of male students believe that abusive behaviour towards girls is appropriate.

Although fewer boys reported that they had been abused by girls while on a date, it does happen. Some boys even complained of a double standard, that abuse by girls is considered more acceptable than by boys. In focus groups, comments like the following were expressed: "He would have twenty guys after him if he hit a girl, but if he said she hit me, who is going to beat the girl up?…It is more common that the male will beat up the girl, but like nobody really wants to talk about or admit that the girl is beating up the guy."

The issue of aggressive girls is receiving some attention in Canada these days because of a number of crimes committed recently by gangs in which girls were involved. Indeed, the report *Health of Canada's Children* does confirm that girls are becoming more aggressive. The violent crime rate for female youth in Canada increased by 179 percent between 1987 and 1997 as compared to an increase of 85 percent for male youth during the same period. In fact, however, the actual rate of girls charged with a violent crime in 1997 (47/10,000) is still much lower than the rate for boys (133/10,000). In the end, girls are still much more likely to be the victims of crime than the perpetrators. They are at much greater risk of physical and sexual violence, and the risks are even greater for girls who are lesbians, disabled, or Aboriginal. There is also evidence that girls in poverty and those in rural areas are more vulnerable to violence.

Even within their own families, girls are the targets of abuse more often than boys. In 1999 Statistics Canada reported that four out of five victims of family-related sexual assaults in Canada (79 percent) are girls, and over half of physical assaults of children by family members (55 percent) are against girls. Nation-wide, adolescent wives between the ages of fifteen and

nineteen are murdered three times more often than adult wives (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1994).

Existing research suggests that boys tend to externalize their responses to violence, that is, they become violent themselves, while girls tend to internalize the effects of violence. Girls are much more likely to get depressed or even suicidal. The New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women in its 1985 report *Health of Adolescent Girls* found that over twice as many girls as boys between the ages of sixteen and eighteen and almost four times as many girls as boys between the ages of twelve and fifteen received a primary diagnosis of depression in New Brunswick hospitals between 1979 and 1984. According to the report *Health of Canada's Children*, the rate of depression among Canadian girls ages fifteen to nineteen is shockingly high. Three percent of Canadian twelve- to fourteen-year-olds of both sexes reported suffering a major depression in 1994–95, while 12 percent of females ages fifteen to nineteen compared to 6 percent of males in the same age group experienced a major depression.

The same report also notes that in 1996–97, the greatest single cause of hospitalization as the result of injury for females ages fifteen to nineteen was attempted suicide; for males in the same age group, it was unintentional injuries, especially those suffered in traffic accidents. Female youth are much more likely to attempt suicide; males are more likely to succeed. According to the report, suicide death rates for Canadian males ages fifteen to nineteen climbed dramatically between 1961 and 1991 (the 1991 rate was six times the rate in 1961) and then decreased between 1991 and 1996. The suicide death rate for female youth in Canada has remained stable since 1976 at about 4/100,000. The report went on to say that the suicide death rates for Aboriginal youth are alarming. Between 1989 and 1993, the rate for male Aboriginal youth ages fifteen to twenty-four was more than five times that of the national rate for males generally (126/100,000 compared to 24/100,000). For female Aboriginal youth, it was almost eight times that for female youth nationally (35/100,000 compared to 5/100,000).

Girls are far more likely than boys to report loneliness, although there has been a slight improvement this decade.

Between 1990 and 1998, the percentage of Canadian girls reporting loneliness went from 20 percent to 19 percent in grade eight and from 23 percent to 21 percent in grade ten.

Female students are also more likely than male students to say they "often wished they were someone else," although again the percentage has decreased this decade. In 1990, 45 percent of Canadian girls in grade eight and 41 percent of girls in grade ten agreed with this statement. In 1998 the figure was 37 percent of girls for both grade eight and grade ten. Some researchers attribute this seeming improvement in girls' self-esteem to public awareness campaigns during the decade that have encouraged teachers, parents, and others to promote the healthy development of girls.

As the decade ends, girls are also reporting that they have more friends. According to the report *Progress of Canada's Children*, the proportion of children in grades six and eight who reported having fewer than two close friends dropped between 1990 and 1998, especially among grade eight girls. In 1990 nearly one in five girls in grade eight reported having fewer than two close friends, but by 1998 the proportion was only one in fourteen. Nearly all grade eight girls say they are comfortable discussing their problems with their same-sex friends, but only two-thirds of boys say they can confide easily in their friends. One statistic of concern is that few teenage girls feel comfortable confiding in their fathers.

Another piece of good news is that despite a widespread belief that teenagers want little to do with their parents, research suggests that teens who remain connected with their families (that is to say those who feel cared for and understood) are less likely to be involved in risky behaviour. The report *Health of Canada's Children* notes that a study on adolescent health in British Columbia in 1998 showed that youth who were strongly connected with one or both parents were less likely to engage in risky behaviours such as early and unprotected sexual intercourse, smoking and alcohol consumption, and use of marijuana. Despite their growing independence and occasional bravado, teens still depend on their parents for support and encouragement.

## NEW BRUNSWICK'S TEENAGE GIRLS IN THE YEAR 2000

Girls today face the future under a lot more pressure than we did. Along with becoming sexy wives and perfect mothers, both thin and beautiful, they also have to have a successful career. This means showing good enough marks to get into university and competing in the job market at a time when jobs are scarce.

– Sandra Friedman, *When Girls Feel Fat.*

It is probably true that New Brunswick girls in the year 2000 are feeling much more pressure than their counterparts did in 1970, not only to be thin and beautiful but also to earn good marks so they can get into university and ultimately find the perfect job. Fortunately for many girls in the province, getting good marks does not seem to be a problem.

It is also true that teenage girls still face enormous obstacles on the road to womanhood, obstacles that can lead to an obsession with weight and self-image, eating disorders, and participation in risky behaviour involving such things as unprotected sex, drugs, and alcohol. And girls are still more likely than boys to be victims of sexual abuse and violence. It is uncertain, however, whether sexual abuse and violence suffered by girls are more common in New Brunswick families today than they were in 1970, because they were taboo subjects thirty years ago, and we have no statistics on the subject. Nor can we say whether girls today are more obsessed with their weight than they were in 1970, although it is probably the case that serious eating disorders have become more prevalent over the years.

At least in the year 2000, these issues are out of the closet and are being addressed. Greater awareness of teenage eating disorders and other problem behaviours and efforts to deal with them have led to treatment programs and public awareness campaigns to bolster the self-esteem of young people. Since 1995, we in New Brunswick have benefited from the Making Waves Program (Vague par vague in the francophone system) that attempts to educate teenagers about date violence – what is

acceptable in a relationship and what is not. And the school system itself has introduced important changes to make the classroom more hospitable to girls.

Yet more remains to be done. The New Brunswick Youth Council was created in 1987 to advise the government on youth issues. Made up of fifteen New Brunswickers between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, the Council has frequently called on government to provide sex education programs within the school system that are more comprehensive, as existing programs are fragmented, focus on the biomedical aspects of sex, take an "abstinence is best" approach, and depend on the goodwill of teachers, who are not always comfortable dealing with the subject. For example, discussions about installing condom machines in high school washrooms inevitably lead to vigorous debate and controversy, especially in rural communities. There is also a lack of information on drugs, alcohol, and STDs. The Youth Council believes that a peer-based program – one young person hearing from another young person whose life was thrown into turmoil because of drugs or alcohol or becoming a teenage parent – could be the most effective approach.

The Youth Council has also argued for programming that would help counter the pervasive effects of the media and support young women in developing a better self-image. Such programs exist in other locations: for example, the Just for Girls Program in the United States, which was developed by psychologist Sandra Friedman to help young girls understand the societal pressures in their lives, or the Ottawa-based Power Camp for girls ages eleven to fifteen. To date, nothing similar is available to girls in New Brunswick.

In 1970 the future for New Brunswick girls was limited by the selection of female role models they saw around them: secretaries, teachers, fish plant workers and mothers and wives, the last two being the roles in which they could expect to spend most of their lives. Today, however, teenage girls see women in every imaginable field of activity. Their horizons are limitless, from astronauts and scientists to any number of professions to sports that were once regarded as the exclusive domain of boys and men – baseball, hockey, weightlifting, pole vaulting. The list seems endless. And what has been the effect of having such

role models? Are teenage girls in the year 2000 qualitatively different from their sisters in 1970? Unfortunately the research is lacking. As noted in the report *The Canadian Girl-Child*, research has focused almost exclusively on examining "deviant" or "problem" behaviour among this population: "Missing from this picture are the faces of young lesbian women, young women with disabilities, young women of colour, young women who are happy and high achieving...who are meeting the everyday challenges of growing up a girl in predominantly patriarchal society."

There may be little hard research available but anecdotal evidence suggests that teenage girls today are different from their sisters in 1970, and the main difference may lie in their expectations. The majority of girls in the year 2000 expect to leave secondary school and go on to further training or education and eventually land an interesting job or have a challenging career. Their futures no longer hang on marriage and a family, and few expect that their opportunities will be limited by their gender.

New Brunswick expects great things of its teenage daughters in the year 2000, much more than it expected for its daughters thirty years ago. And as Dr. Sylvia Rimm discovered in her blockbuster book *See Jane Win: How 1,000 Girls Became Successful Women*, high expectations by parents, educational and otherwise, are the number one reason why teenage girls develop into very successful adult women. According to Dr. Rimm: "Most women of past generations could only marry the American dream; they didn’t dare to have such high expectations for themselves. Most of the women in our study, however, are living the American dream through their own achievements." The same could be said of teenage girls in New Brunswick: in the year 2000 they have the opportunity through their own achievements to live the Canadian, some might say the New Brunswick, dream.

During this period, our young New Brunswick girl has been transformed from a gangly, insecure thirteen-year-old girl-child to a bright, blossoming eighteen-year-old young woman. Her path may have been difficult at times, the pressure to take part in compromising, even risky behaviour occasionally overwhelming. But with luck, good sense, and the support of

friends and family, she has survived, and with her self-esteem intact. As this stage in her life comes to an end, she is leaving the secondary school system and taking her first tentative steps into the future. Whether they will lead to university or community college, into the workforce or the wide world of travel, or even into marriage and a family, she knows in the year 2000 that girls have the ability to do anything they set their hearts and minds to. It is a lesson she has learned from personal experience.

# CHAPTER 4

# ADULTHOOD (19-64 YEARS)
## EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND POLITICS

## INTRODUCTION

Now that she has left the secondary school system, our young woman has important decisions to make about her future. Will she go on to university and maybe into one of the professions, or will she take courses at a community college or study at a private institution? She may decide to go directly into the labour force, or perhaps she has met her life partner and is contemplating marriage and children. Whatever she decides to do with her life will be based on a range of choices available to her, and that will be determined partly by decisions she and her family have been making for her since her earliest years and partly by her circumstances. For example, in spite of her youth she may already be married with a child and struggling to balance school with work and parenting. As she stands on the brink of adulthood, the decisions she makes now and in the course of the next forty years will be critical to her future success and happiness and will decide among other things if her senior years are spent in comfort or in poverty.

How has life changed since 1970 for women ages eighteen to sixty-four living in New Brunswick? In this first part of our look at the pre-senior phase of adulthood, the focus will be on education and training, employment, and the role of women in electoral and grassroots politics. There is no doubt that important progress has been made in these areas during the past thirty years. A wide array of options is now available to adult females in the worlds of learning, paid work, and public life and we are seeing more women pursuing advanced education and training, working in new and different jobs, or exploring the possibilities for personal growth and community involvement in ways that challenge convention. Women in New Brunswick are also better educated than ever before, outnumbering and even outperforming male students at university, and are making significant inroads into nontraditional fields of study such as law, medicine, and business administration. As well, they are playing a more active role in the labour force, holding down well-paying jobs, and enjoying more opportunities as self-employed professionals or entrepreneurs. They are also a stronger force in government than in the past and have been especially successful in organizing for change at the grassroots level. At the dawn of the

new millennium, women in New Brunswick are much more ambitious than their mothers were in defining their educational, career, and political aspirations and more successful in realizing their goals.

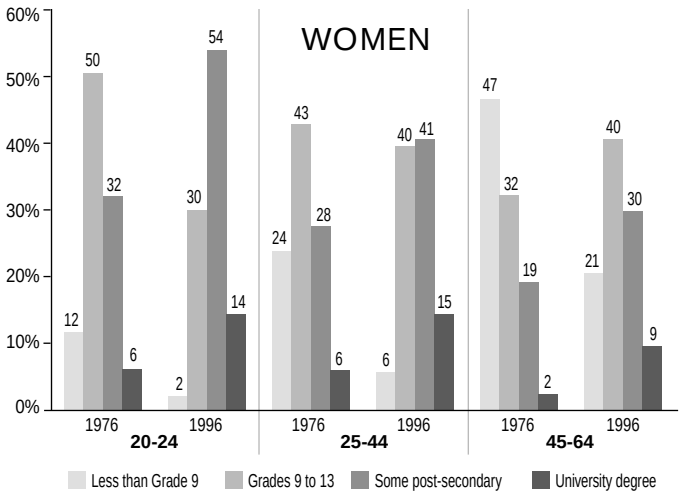
Although women have come a long way in the last thirty years, the picture is not all rosy. They still tend to cluster in traditional female fields of study in universities, colleges, and private institutes and are denied equal access to training for nontraditional occupations. In the year 2000 as in 1970, a female in New Brunswick is more likely to work in a dead-end, low-paying job than her male counterpart. Even if she works full-time all year, her average salary is still little more than two-thirds of a man's, one of the widest pay gaps in the country. In addition, she still faces systemic discrimination in the workforce and in economic life both as an employee and an entrepreneur, and sexual harassment continues to be a problem in the workplace as well as in educational institutions. She is vastly underrepresented in decision-making positions at all levels of government, and as we shall see in part 2 of this phase of our study, housework and caregiving obligations take a heavy toll on her education, paid work, and social life.

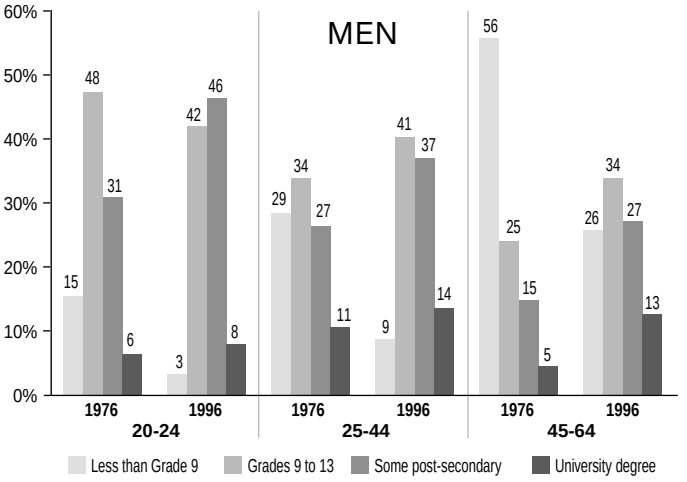
Today, as she did thirty years ago, a woman in the early and middle stages of adult life must face a critical issue: the need to establish the foundations of her financial independence. The problem raises a number of questions. Where and when do women lose ground in the economic struggle? What are the barriers that prevent a woman ages eighteen to sixty-four from a full and equitable participation in New Brunswick society? How can the development of a woman's labour market skills and her economic autonomy be reconciled with her family responsibilities? And how can we save women from the life of poverty during early and middle adulthood that sets the stage for the even harsher poverty experienced by so many of them in later life?

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The only area where the educational standards of women in New Brunswick and the rest of Canada have been lower than men's is at the university level (see Figure 3), and over the past thirty years that gap has been closing. Since the 1970s more and more female high school graduates have been setting their sights on postsecondary education. They, like their older sisters and mothers, have been making the connection between advanced education and better employment prospects. According to the Canadian Council on Social Development in its 1998 report on youth, Canadian women ages twenty-five to thirty-four with a university degree earn just 15 percent less than men with the same credentials, while those with only a high school diploma earn 26 percent less than their male counterparts. The importance of postsecondary education to women in the labour market has been emphasized by high school guidance counsellors and university recruitment programs over the past two decades. Such initiatives have also encouraged girls and women to set higher and more diverse goals for their working and personal lives, and as a consequence they have been flocking to universities, community colleges, and private career colleges and training institutes in ever-increasing numbers.

**Figure 3.**
Educational Attainment by Age, New Brunswick, 1976–96



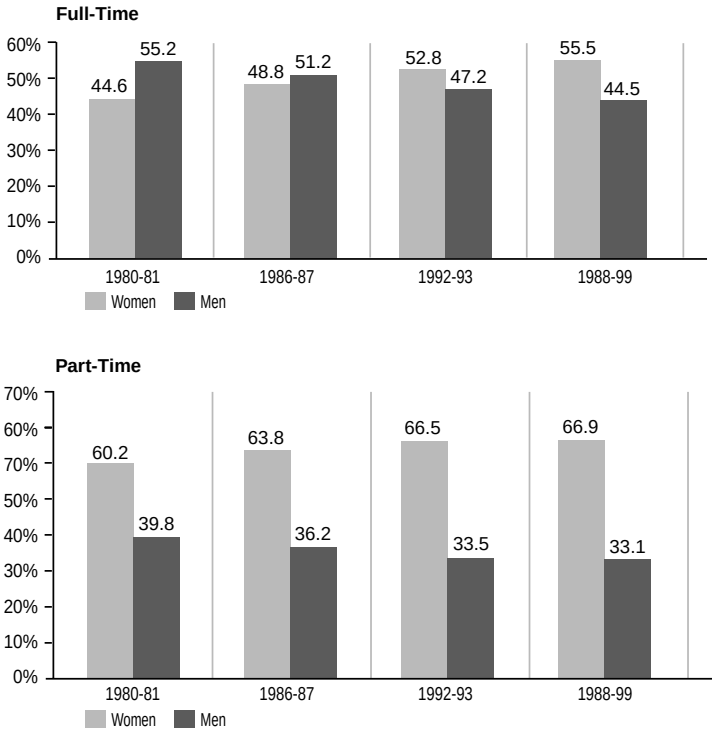



*Source:* Statistics Canada, 1996 Census, 93F0028xDB96002.
*Note:* Figures represent the percentage of the general population.

## PURSUING A UNIVERSITY DEGREE

Female participation in postsecondary education is one of the great success stories of the past three decades both in New Brunswick and in Canada as a whole. Since the mid-1970s, when according to Statistics Canada 43 percent of students at New Brunswick universities were female, the full-time enrolment of women has increased dramatically. In fact by the late 1980s females outnumbered males in New Brunswick universities, and by 1998–99 they accounted for 56 percent of full-time enrolments (see Figure 4). Today, women are graduating in record numbers from all programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

**Figure 4.**
Women and Men as a Percentage of University Enrolment by Status, New Brunswick, 1980–81 to 1998–99




*Source:* Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission database.
*Note:* Includes all programs (bachelor's/first professional degree, master's and doctorate).

The once substantial gender gap in the holders of university degrees has been all but eliminated in New Brunswick and the rest of Canada. Statistics Canada data indicate that in 1971 just 2.1 percent of the province's female population over the age of fifteen had a university degree compared to 4.6 percent of males in the same age group. Fifteen years later the gap had narrowed, with 6.4 percent of females holding university degrees compared to 8.2 percent of males. The latest census figures for 1996 reveal that 10.0 percent of New Brunswick females ages fifteen and over have a university degree compared to 10.4 percent of their male counterparts. Young women are currently more likely to hold degrees than young men: 14 percent of New Brunswick females ages twenty to twenty-four have a university degree compared to 8 percent of

males in the same age group (see Figure 3). The province's francophone women, who traditionally have trailed behind their anglophone sisters, have also made great strides since the 1970s, aided by the expansion of French-language secondary schooling and by the creation in 1963 of the Université de Moncton.

Not only are women doing well in their studies; they are outperforming men. Indeed, a study of the academic performance of female undergraduates at the University of New Brunswick (UNB) during the period 1980 to 1990 shows that women students earned on average consistently higher grade-point averages than men in all years of their programs and in all fields of study. The authors of the report, titled *See Jane Soar*, note that such findings should give women the confidence to undertake university studies leading to the career of their choice. Unfortunately, research has also shown that women tend to underestimate their academic performance and attribute their successes to effort rather than ability. Such diffidence is bound to disappear as women continue to make their mark in postsecondary education.

Despite the growing number of women in postsecondary institutions, a closer look at enrolment patterns reminds us that gender parity is far from complete in the province's universities. This is confirmed by our female student, who is far more likely than her male counterpart to be pursuing her studies part-time. One in three female students attended university part-time in 1980–81 compared to one in five male students. Despite the growing number of female full-time students, 22 percent of women versus 15 percent of men still had part-time status in 1998–99. Part-time enrolments in universities have declined slightly in recent years; however, women have consistently accounted for no less than two-thirds of all part-time students since the early 1980s (see Figure 4). Women's heavier family responsibilities and their generally lower incomes undoubtedly contribute to this pattern.

An examination of women's choice of studies also reveals some similarities and differences between today and thirty years ago. In 1970 our female university student was likely preparing for a career in public-school teaching or in the health professions, or she was pursuing her studies in the humanities or social

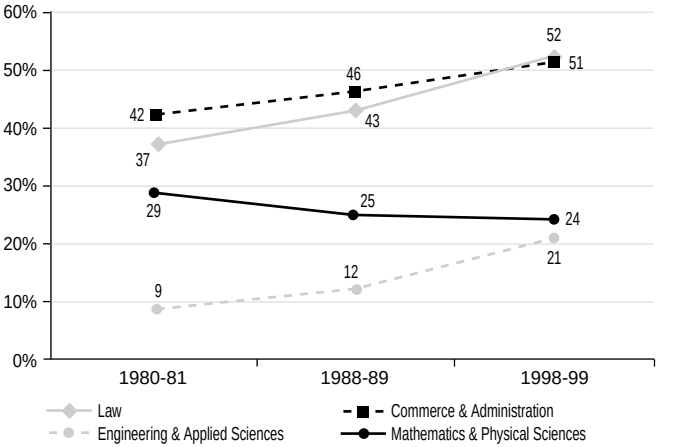
sciences. In 2000 women still predominate in traditional faculties like education and nursing and are over represented in the humanities and social sciences. Clearly gender segregation is still a reality in universities today.

To counter that trend, growing numbers of women are opting for programs in nontraditional subject areas. Women for example, have become a significant presence in medical and law schools in recent years as revealed by data from the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission. And the rise in the number of women in dentistry programs has been particularly dramatic over the past two decades. At Dalhousie University, the only regional medical school serving New Brunswick's anglophone students, aspiring female dentists accounted for a mere 17 percent of total enrolments in 1980–81. Fifteen years later, they achieved parity with their male counterparts and then surpassed them by the late 1990s. In 1998–99 females made up more than half of the dentistry students at Dalhousie University (55 percent). Also at Dalhousie, a parallel, though less rapid, evolution occurred in medicine when the female share of enrolments rose from 34 percent in 1980–81 to a full 50 percent in 1998–99. Women in New Brunswick's law faculties have also increased their presence, with female enrolment climbing steadily from a 37 percent share in 1980–81 to 52 percent in 1998–99 (see Figure 5). At the Université de Moncton female law students have gained even more ground over the past twenty years than their counterparts at UNB: the female share of total law enrolments at the francophone institution rose from 33 percent in 1980–81 to an impressive 61 percent in 1998–99, while at UNB the proportion of women studying law climbed from 39 percent to 47 percent during the same period.

Business administration has also witnessed a surge in popularity among female students. Women made up slightly more than half (51 percent) of all commerce and administration students in New Brunswick universities in 1998–99, up from 42 percent in 1980–81 (see Figure 5). Interestingly, francophone females appear particularly keen on acquiring business skills and credentials. Since 1990 women have accounted for more than half of all enrolments in this field at the Université de Moncton (52 percent of the combined

enrolments of the three campuses) and made up a full 55 percent in 1998–99. The growth of enrolments in commerce and administration is partly a reflection of the rise of an important class of female entrepreneurs, particularly small business owners. It may also be linked to the growing presence of women in managerial positions in the public sector.

**Figure 5.**
University Enrolment of Women in Nontraditional Fields of Study, New Brunswick, 1980–81 to 1998–99




*Source:* Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission database.
*Note:* Includes full-and part-time students in all programs (bachelor's/first professional degree, master's and doctorate).

On the other hand, female enrolment in the traditionally male-dominated fields of engineering, applied and physical sciences, and mathematics continues to lag well behind that of men. After slow progress through the 1980s, women's share of enrolments in engineering and the applied sciences almost doubled between 1988 and 1998 (see Figure 5). In the decade since the tragic 6 December 1989 slaying of fourteen women at the Université de Montréal's engineering school, the traditionally male domain of engineering has seen a significant rise in female enrolments in New Brunswick and the rest of Canada. Still, at the end of the 1990s, only one in five students in the field of engineering and applied sciences is female. In contrast, women in mathematics and the physical sciences boasted a 29 percent share of enrolments in 1980–81 but then

lost ground toward the end of the decade and through the 1990s until now they represent barely one student in four.

This situation has important consequences for women's earning power and career status, as some of the best-paying jobs are in the scientific and technology sectors. Efforts have been made to recruit female students in the nontraditional programs through special scholarships, guidance programs in secondary schools, and the creation of women's chairs in fields such as engineering; however, these initiatives may be undermined by an atmosphere that is often hostile to women in male-dominated departments and faculties.

Even in faculties such as law where women are a stronger presence, female students are often made to feel unwelcome. A survey conducted by UNB's Faculty of Law in 1991 found that many women felt they were taken less seriously by professors because of their sex, reported hearing sexist comments about feminists, and thought too few professors discussed or paid enough attention to issues of social justice, equality, and to issues of gender. And then there is the problem of sexual harassment, which remains a persistent and painful reality of campus life. A survey conducted at the Moncton campus of the Université de Moncton in 1999 found that 70 percent of female students and 55 percent of female employees reported experiencing at least one incident of sexist behaviour, sexual harassment, or sexual aggression. It should be pointed out that the first official policies to address the problem only date back to the mid-1980s, and in most New Brunswick universities are less than a decade old. Indeed, the term sexual harassment, so common today, did not even exist until the mid-1970s, when it was coined to describe the unwanted imposition of sexual demands in the context of a relationship of unequal power.

Gender differences are also evident when we look at the place of women in graduate programs. Women have made significant inroads in graduate studies over the past thirty years, but they remain less likely than men to pursue the more advanced degrees, particularly the doctorate. Data from the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission indicate that the female share of enrolments in bachelor's and first professional degree programs in New Brunswick rose from 50 percent in

1980–81 to 58 percent in 1998–99. Women also increased their presence in master's programs, from 36 percent in 1980–81 to 52 percent in 1998–99. As for doctoral studies, women's enrolment has more than tripled during the same period, climbing from a mere 13 percent to 41 percent. Undoubtedly, the significant investments of time and money required by a doctorate program in particular constitute serious obstacles for women who are in their child-bearing years.

The under representation of women in graduate studies, especially in certain nontraditional fields, is a matter of serious concern as it limits the pool of potential new professors available for hirings to meet employment equity goals. In 1998–99 women constituted only 24 percent of enrolments in master's programs and 20 percent in Ph.D. programs in engineering and applied sciences in the province's universities, up from barely 6 percent and 5 percent respectively in 1980–81. During the same period, female enrolment in master's programs in mathematics and physical sciences remained stable at 25 percent, while the proportion of women enrolling in doctoral programs in the same field rose from 8 percent to 26 percent. In contrast, women in master's programs in commerce and administration have steadily inched towards parity, climbing from 28 percent in 1980–81 to 46 percent in 1998–99.

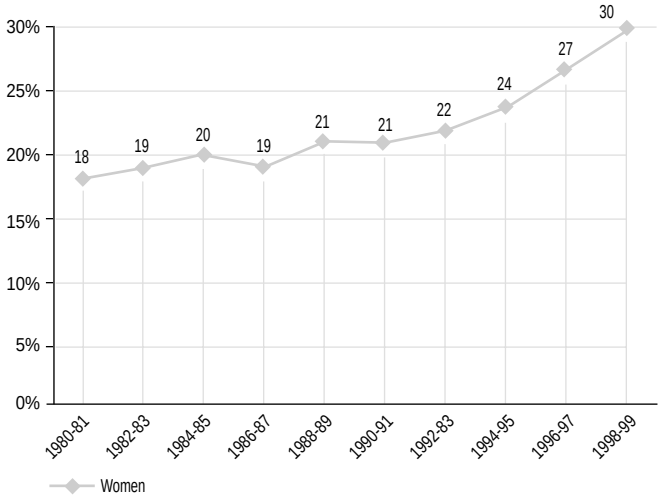
## FEMALE ROLE MODELS IN UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS

Our young student is fortunate that the year is 2000 and not 1970 because thirty years ago she would have encountered few female role models in university teaching and research. Even today, however, women holding academic positions in the universities in New Brunswick and elsewhere in Canada are still far more likely than men to be employed on a part-time or short-term basis. And women remain seriously underrepresented among full-time university professors in New Brunswick, although their numbers have been growing slowly but fairly steadily over the past two decades, rising from 18 percent in 1980 to 30 percent in 1999 (see Figure 6).

Some institutional variations are worth noting here. The rate of feminization of the full-time teaching staff in 1998–99 ranged from a low of 23 percent at Mount Allison University (up from 12 percent in 1980–81) to a high of 35 percent at St. Thomas University (up from 22 percent in 1980–81). The francophone institutions have made a relatively strong showing in this area during the past five years. At the Université de Moncton, 33 percent of full-time professors were female in 1998–99, up from 24 percent in 1980–81. At the University of New Brunswick, women made up 29 percent of the full-time faculty in 1998–99, compared to just 16 percent in 1980–81. The fact that the francophone institution was established less than forty years ago and that UNB is steeped in tradition may help to account for these differences. However, as highlighted in a recent analysis of women's progress in New Brunswick's francophone educational system, female representation in senior administrative positions (from department heads to deans to members of the academic senate) at the Université de Moncton has lagged well behind faculty and student gains during the 1980s and 1990s.

Employment equity policies are of very recent origin in postsecondary education. In fact, it was only in the 1990s that most New Brunswick universities adopted guidelines in this area. While such initiatives have probably contributed to reducing the gender imbalances within the ranks of professors, the implementation of equity measures among and even within institutions often leaves much to be desired. How enlightened a university is in its policies and philosophy and the prevailing culture of its faculties and departments appear to play an important role in the rate of female hirings.

**Figure 6.**
Women on University Faculties as Full-Time Professors, New Brunswick, 1980–99

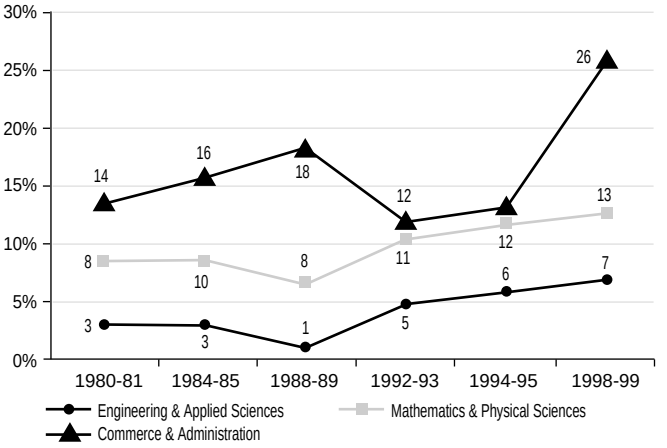



*Source:* Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission database.
*Note:* Percentages are proportion of total full-time faculty who are women (number of full-time women on faculty/total full-time faculty).

The overall increase in the number of women as full-time faculty members is an encouraging trend. Still, a young woman studying in a nontraditional field such as mathematics, the physical sciences, engineering, and applied sciences, commerce, and administration would be hard pressed to find any female professors as they are seriously underrepresented in these fields. Female professors, like female students, tend to be concentrated mostly in education, the humanities, and social sciences. The statistics presented in Figure 7 illustrate the scarcity of full-time female faculty members in nontraditional subject areas, even in the later 1990s when female enrolments rose significantly. Although the number of females in commerce and administration has almost doubled over the past five years (from a meager 13 percent in the mid-1990s), engineering, mathematics, and the physical and applied sciences have made little progress in redressing the gender imbalance in recent years. While the smaller pool of female candidates in these nontraditional fields may contribute to this

situation, one must also look at other factors for an explanation, including the attitudes of the predominantly male hiring committees in these departments.

**Figure 7.**
Female Full-Time University Professors in Nontraditional Fields, New Brunswick, 1980–81 to 1998–99




*Source:* Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission database.
*Note:* Percentages are proportion of total full-time professors in each field who are women (number of female full-time professors in the field/total number of full-time professors in the field).

## PAYING FOR A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

A postsecondary education may hold out the promise of a better job for our female student, but she will have to make heavy financial sacrifices to pay for it. Over the past decade university tuition fees have risen dramatically in all provinces as postsecondary institutions pass along deep government funding cuts to their students. Statistics Canada data reveal that between 1990 and 1999, the average undergraduate arts tuition at New Brunswick universities increased by an alarming 75 percent, up from $1,898 dollars in 1990–91 to $3,329 in 1999–2000. During the same period, the average Canadian university tuition fees for the same group climbed by 126 percent. And those figures do not include the job and salary that students have sacrificed for an education. Nor do they take into account the cost of textbooks, accommodation, food,

transportation, and other expenses. Human Resources Development Canada estimated that in 1996, the typical living costs for an eight-month college or university program in Canada were between $10,000 and $13,000 for students living away from home and from $3,400 to $6,400 for those who lived with their parents. In addition to the cost of tuition and books, students in four-year programs can expect to spend as much as $50,000 if they are living away from home and $25,000 if they stay with their parents.

Most students rely heavily on money advanced through the Canada Student Loans Program to finance their education. Information on student aid by institution compiled by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission reveals that a higher percentage of francophone than anglophone students depend on government assistance. Increasingly, government aid has taken the form of loans rather than grants to needy students, thereby adding to student debt. In 1993–94 New Brunswick's bursary program was replaced with a loan/bursary program, and in 1999 a federal-provincial agreement harmonized the New Brunswick and Canada Student Loan programs by creating a single loan system.

Student indebtedness has become a serious problem right across Canada, where the average debt load carried by undergraduates in four-year programs rose from $8,700 in 1990 to $22,000 in 1997. In New Brunswick, the estimated debt load for the graduate of the class of 1986 stood at $13,795, rising to $20,448 for 1996 graduates. And there seems to be no relief in sight. According to projected debt loads presented by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, the New Brunswick graduate of the class of 2001 will have to repay $29,852, while the student completing an undergraduate degree in 2005 faces a crushing debt of $38,799.

For female students, who generally earn less than their male counterparts in summer and part-time jobs, the debt burden tends to be even larger than the reported averages. A 1998 Statistics Canada study on repaying student loans revealed that Canadian female graduates of bachelor's programs also tend to take longer than male graduates to pay back their loans, mainly because they borrow more than men and earn less. And despite

efforts to increase university accessibility over the past two decades, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and place of residence still produce inequities. Women from low-income families and from Aboriginal communities in particular continue to be underrepresented at university. A report commissioned by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission in 1997 warned that the prospect of a crushing student debt is enough to discourage many young people from low-income families from pursuing a university education.

## RETURNING TO UNIVERSITY AS A MATURE STUDENT

It is possible that instead of going directly from high school into postsecondary education, our young woman may wait until her thirties, forties, or even fifties before returning to the classroom, perhaps as the result of a career change or an adjustment in her long-term goals. The mature female student has become more common on university campuses in the province over the past three decades. And because she must juggle the multiple roles and responsibilities of a breadwinner, mother, and wife, she is more likely to be a part-time student. For single mothers, the balancing act is even more challenging.

How responsive are postsecondary institutions to her needs as a mature student? The growth of distance-education programs and the decentralization of course offerings to regional centres over the past two decades have certainly favoured wider access to university instruction and helped to reduce the rural-urban and socio-economic divide. Some New Brunswick colleges and universities have also introduced special initiatives to help mature women pursue postsecondary education. These generally take the form of prior-learning and skills programs, or the "reconnaissance des acquis" as it is known in francophone circles. Prior-learning or experiential-learning measures, pioneered in Quebec since the mid-1980s, aim at granting postsecondary credits for knowledge and experience acquired outside the university setting and in various types of volunteer and salaried work. In practice, however, such accreditation models, worthy as they are, may not be as accessible to the students who need them as they should be.

Mature women students have traditionally faced particular obstacles in their efforts to return to and continue their studies, obstacles that are highlighted in a report on the progress of women at UNB during the 1980s. They include feelings of inadequacy and fears about returning to the classroom, limited availability of evening courses and part-time programs, and child care problems. The adult female student is usually obliged to hold a part- or full-time job and therefore struggles with time constraints. And she also shoulders a heavy financial burden with little help from the Canada Student Loan Program, which favours full-time students.

## TRAINING FOR THE WORKFORCE

For other mature women, and some high school graduates, specialized training for the workforce is a more affordable and appealing option than a long stint at university. Some programs are available at community colleges and private institutions, which have served as an alternative to university studies for the past three decades. So how have women fared in training programs? And have they enabled New Brunswick females to realize their aspirations for better-paying, higher-skilled jobs with decent benefits and possibilities for advancement?

Women unfortunately have not been very well served by training programs over the past three decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, women in the province's public network of community colleges were far more likely to be training to become nurses' aids, legal secretaries, or hairdressers than carpenters or mechanics. This educational segregation can be linked to the systemic gender discrimination which pervaded college programs of the day, the attitudes of teaching, counselling, and administrative staff, textbooks, and existing support services. In its 1984 plan of action on the status of women in community colleges, the province's Advisory Council on the Status of Women (NBACSW) sounded the alarm and called for large-scale reforms in the system.

Still, low female enrolments in nontraditional courses persisted into the 1990s. Indeed, a study released by the NBACSW in

1994 concluded that training patterns of the 1990s would only help perpetuate long-standing gender inequities in the workplace. In 1992–93, three-quarters of full-time female enrolments in regular training were in the academic, secretarial-clerical, business, and health-community services training clusters, while about the same proportion of male enrolments were in the construction, mechanical-motorized equipment, academic, electronics, mechanical-industrial, and metal training clusters. Moreover, female participants throughout the province who participated in study-focus groups in the early 1990s reported a host of problems before, during, and after their training. These included lack of information about course offerings, inadequate financial and moral support, deficient employment counselling, and problems entering or reentering the workforce. In light of these findings, it is hardly surprising that there have not been more women filling quality jobs in the nontraditional trades sector.

And the future of women's training does not look any better. St. Thomas University economist Joan McFarland highlights some disturbing trends in her recent study on women and training in New Brunswick. In contrast to the growing female presence in universities, women continue to be underrepresented in the province's community colleges; even today there is a 60/40 male-female ratio. To make matters worse, community colleges are suffering from declining enrolment as well as a proportional decline in female enrolment. Females accounted for 45.9 percent of total community college enrolments in 1988–89 but have fallen to 39.2 percent in 1998–99. Gender segregation is also a problem; for example, women are far more likely to be in second-language training than in apprenticeship programs.

McFarland notes that women have traditionally faced many barriers in accessing training opportunities, particularly in the nontraditional trades occupations. Not the least of these, she insists, is the lack of public financing of training programs. From the 1970s through to the mid-1990s, most female trainees in New Brunswick's community colleges benefited from some form of public sponsorship such as government aid to cover tuition and living costs. Occupational or trades training and academic upgrading programs targeted mainly unemployment insurance/employment insurance (UI/EI) and social assistance

recipients. Yet women have been underrepresented in most of the sponsored training programs, particularly in apprenticeships but also in other initiatives, including the Canadian Jobs Strategy and the new Skills, Loans and Grants Program. Only in the few short-lived programs that were specifically aimed at women (in the end they helped relatively few women) – Re-entry, NB Works, and the Self-sufficiency Project – were females well represented (see Table 2). Then in 1996, changes to the Employment Insurance Act led to the virtual withdrawal of the federal sponsorship of trainees, and the responsibility for administering training programs shifted to the provinces. McFarland argues that in the context of an increasingly market-driven approach to occupational training, "A woman wishing to undertake training has few choices left if she or a family member does not have the funds to pay for it."

**Table 2.**
Female Participation in Training Programs in New Brunswick

| Program | Annual Female Enrolment | Females as % of Total Participants |
|---|---|---|
| Seat Purchase CEIC (1970s–96) | 6,782 | 43 |
| Apprenticeship (1944 to present) | 48 | 2.3 |
| Canadian Jobs Strategy(1985–89) | 9,758 | 38.9 |
| Re-entry (Sept. 1985–Sept.1989) | 341 | 99.7 |
| NB Works (1992–98) | 811 | 84 |
| Skills, Loans and Grants (Oct. 1997 to present) | 1,628 | 35.8 |

*Source:* Table presented in McFarland, *Women's Access to Training in New Brunswick* (1999), 6.

Private career colleges and training institutes also offer job preparation in a variety of fields. In the 1970s, our young woman might have enrolled in a hairdressing course or a secretarial or business college to acquire clerical skills. Today's woman may still choose a traditionally female avenue such as esthetician, or she may sign up for a course in information technology (IT) offered by one of many private institutes in the province. The IT field exercises a powerful attraction in today's growing knowledge-based economy, and the allure is often

inflated by promises of lucrative job opportunities for course graduates. The reality, however, is that IT students must pay high fees to these unregulated institutions for programs that sometimes fail to live up to expectation. And for many, there is no employment pay-off at the end of the rainbow. Nevertheless, information technology is a rapidly expanding employment sector in which women remain underrepresented. Some evidence suggests that many women are not attracted to it because they see it as a predominately male domain. Responding to the demand for technology-savvy workers and improving women's position in this field is a growing preoccupation of labour market observers and advocates of women's training.

## EMPLOYMENT

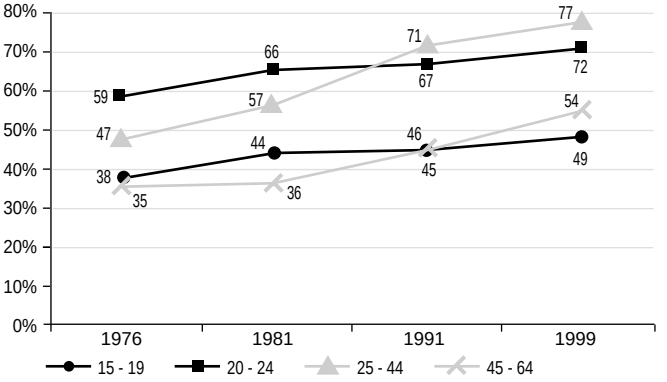
Our pre-senior female understands the importance of advanced education and training to improving her employment situation and earnings potential, and ultimately to establishing financial independence. Questions we might ask now are, in what ways and to what extent has the personal investment of so many women in postsecondary education paid off in the labour market? And how have those with less education fared in the labour force over the past three decades?

## WORKING FOR WAGES

Among the social and economic shifts of the past thirty years, none has been more remarkable than the increase in the number of women in the labour force. While New Brunswick's female population ages fifteen and over grew by a little less than half between 1971 and 1999, the number of women in the workforce more than doubled. In 1999 one in two women ages fifteen and over was employed, up from about one in three in 1971. Our twenty- and thirty-year-old women are even more likely to be working for pay or profit than their older or younger sisters (see Figure 8). Now more than ever before, women are making an essential market contribution to their families' well-being and survival, and that is in addition to their unpaid domestic labour. Today, dual-earner families are the

prevalent economic family type, representing 60 percent of families in the province in 1997, up from 47 percent in 1980, and families with the husband as the sole breadwinner have become increasingly rare, making up just 15 percent of New Brunswick families in 1997, down from 35 percent in 1980.

**Figure 8.**
Women in the Labour Force by Age, New Brunswick, 1976–99




*Source:* Statistics Canada, E-Stat database.

The growing number of employed women with young children accounts in part for this surge of women into the labour force. In 1999 some two-thirds of New Brunswick women with children under sixteen were in the workforce, up from less than a half (46 percent) in 1981. Even women with preschoolers are more likely to be employed, especially if they have a husband or partner: in 1999, 71 percent of women in two-parent families with a youngest child less than six, were working for pay compared to 49 percent of single mothers. It is still the case, however, that in New Brunswick and the rest of Canada, women without children are more likely to be employed than women with children. In 1999 three out of four New Brunswick women under fifty-five without children had jobs. The difficulties of combining work with child-rearing responsibilities no doubt accounts for this situation. Even today, there are too many women without access to affordable, quality child care. In the end, our female may find the cost of

working outweighs the economic gains, especially if she is earning minimum wage in a typically female job in the service sector.

The nature of paid work has also changed dramatically over the past thirty years, and not always for the better. Since the 1980s, the labour market has been transformed by globalization, technological change, and downsizing in the public and private sectors. In the economy of the late twentieth century, stable full-time jobs with regular hours and benefits are few and far between, and that has undermined job security and led to erratic scheduling and economic uncertainty. A major trend has been the rapid growth of so-called nonstandard employment (part-time jobs, seasonal, short-term, and contractual work, as well as self-employment), an area in which women are overrepresented. At the dawn of the new millennium, our woman may be one of the new breed of "homeworkers" performing clerical tasks using the telephone, a modem, and a computer, or she may be sewing garments at piecework rates. She may also work on-call as a waitress in a donut shop or as a sales clerk in a clothing store, or she may be running a home-based translation business. Nonstandard employment often means difficult working conditions, frequent periods of overwork or underemployment, limited or non-existent benefits, and chronic economic insecurity. And for women, such work-related tensions are compounded by the need to reconcile the demands of job and family.

The situation of women in the labour force is different from that of men in a number of ways. In the year 2000 as in 1970, family responsibilities tend to shape the working life of women more than they do men. Because the years between eighteen and forty constitute the prime child bearing and child rearing years for women, those in this age group have traditionally moved in and out of the labour market according to the rhythms imposed by their maternal obligations. Following their child bearing years, many women are caught up in caring for elderly relatives. Women are far more likely than men to work part-time, a pattern that has altered little over the past three decades. One-quarter of New Brunswick females over the age of fifteen in the labour force worked part-time in 1999 as compared to 26

percent in 1977. In contrast, just 5 percent of New Brunswick males worked part-time in 1999, down from 9 percent in 1977. The difficulty of combining paid labour with domestic tasks accounts in part for women's higher rate of part-time employment. Some women may prefer part-time work for family-related and other reasons, but many others would undoubtedly opt for full-time employment if it was available and if they had the necessary social support, notably affordable, quality child care services.

## REFORMING THE UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE SYSTEM

According to Statistics Canada labour force statistics for New Brunswick, since the early 1980s women have been somewhat less likely to be unemployed than men. This is offset, however, by the fact that females are more often employed on a part-time, short-term, or seasonal basis. Moreover, because of their distinctive work patterns, women have suffered more than men from recent reforms to the unemployment insurance system. The reforms began in the mid-1990s, when the number of weeks needed to qualify for benefits was increased and the benefit rate dropped from 57 percent to 55 percent of salary. Later, the maximum duration of benefits was decreased from fifty to forty-five weeks, and the so-called intensity rule was introduced to penalize those who apply each year. In New Brunswick, this affected seasonal workers in particular, many of whom work in fish plants along the Eastern Shore. These changes created periods in the year when unemployment insurance, rebaptised as employment insurance, had run out and work had not yet started (the people affected are called "gappers"). In addition, the application of the intensity rule leads to a reduction of the claim for each successive year the claimant applies.

According to a recent study by the Canadian Institute for Research on Regional Development, these reforms resulted in a 37 percent decrease between 1993–94 and 1997–98 in the number of New Brunswickers receiving unemployment benefits. The Canadian Labour Congress in its 1999 report on the issue found that the percentage of unemployed workers covered by UI in Canada in 1997 was only 36 percent, down

from 74 percent in 1989. UI coverage for women is even lower: only 32 percent of unemployed women received regular EI benefits in 1997. The federal government's second assessment of the changes, published in 1998, confirmed that women and youth were especially hard-hit by the reforms. Claims by women dropped by 20 percent between 1995–96 and 1997–98 compared to a 16 percent decline among men. And young people below the age of twenty-five filed 27 percent fewer claims than they had before reform. Women and young people are less likely to be eligible for EI since they are overrepresented in several categories not covered by the plan: new entrants and reentrants to the workforce, part-time workers in short-term jobs, and employees working a limited number of hours.

## TRADITIONAL JOBS AND NEW HORIZONS

Barriers to gender parity in the labour market are deeply rooted in historical discrimination against women in the larger society and in the world of paid work. The labour force in 1970 and now in 2000, continues to be highly segregated by sex. The young adult female New Brunswicker is far more likely than her male counterpart to be stuck in a low-paying, precarious job which offers few benefits and little chance for advancement. This is especially true for the woman who goes directly from high school into the labour force and has little choice but to work in the low-wage service sector. We must not forget that while education levels have risen spectacularly over the past thirty years, many young women, even in the year 2000, have just a high school diploma or less. This was still the case in 1996 for 45 percent of the province's females ages twenty-five to forty-four and for 61 percent of those ages forty-five to sixty-four, down from 76 percent and 83 percent respectively in 1971. And even young people with an advanced education have difficulty finding good entry-level jobs. The Canadian Council on Social Development noted in its latest report on youth that in 1995 more than 30 percent of all Canadian university and college graduates under age twenty-five were still working in ordinary low-wage jobs in stores, restaurants, and other service industries.

New Brunswick women, like their Canadian sisters, continue for the most part to work in a very limited range of occupations compared to men. Indeed in 1999 some three out of four employed females in this province worked in the health, education, clerical-secretarial, and sales and service sectors, a figure that has remained fairly constant over the past three decades.

The slow pace of change over the past decade is illustrated in Table 3, which presents the occupational distribution of women in order of importance of the various sectors. Like their Canadian counterparts, New Brunswick men continue to dominate the best paid jobs in the province's goods-producing and primary resource industries. A disproportionate number of men also work in the natural and applied sciences and management sectors. New Brunswick women are considerably less likely than women in the rest of Canada to work in primary industries: just one in ten of our province's females compared to a little more than one in five or 22 percent in the rest of Canada. It should be noted that throughout the period 1987–99, more than 90 percent of women working in business, finance, and administration held secretarial or clerical-type jobs. Continuing occupational segregation may be linked in part to women's unequal access to training opportunities, particularly in nontraditional employment sectors. Research has shown that women face serious obstacles entering and advancing in such fields.

**Table 3.**
Full-Time, Year-Round Female Workers in New Brunswick by Occupation, 1987–99

| Occupation | 1987 | 1994 | 1999 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Health | 88% | 82% | 83% |
| Business, finance & administration | 70% | 71% | 74% |
| Sales & service | 60% | 61% | 61% |
| Social science, education, government service & religion | 56% | 59% | 61% |
| Arts, culture, recreation & sport | 52% | 51% | 55% |
| Management | 27% | 35% | 35% |
| Processing, manufacturing & utilities | 29% | 30% | 28% |
| Natural & applied sciences | 14% | 17% | 19% |
| Primary industry | 11% | 11% | 10% |
| Trades, transport & equipment operators | 3% | 4% | 5% |

*Source:* Statistics Canada, *Labour Force Survey* (data table supplied by Statistics Canada).
*Note:* Figures represent women workers as a percentage of the occupational group.

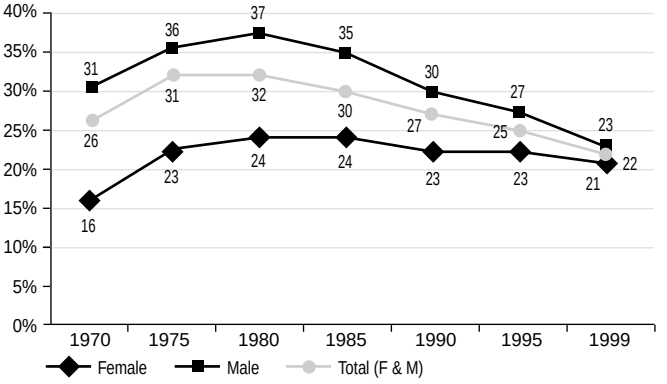
However, there are some bright spots in this otherwise gloomy picture: women professionals and administrators have been gaining ground in several fields in recent years. Women have increased their presence among business and financial professionals from 42 percent in 1987, to 48 percent in 1999. This mirrors Canadian trends and reflects women's enthusiastic pursuit of university credentials in this field. Female lawyers, physicians, and dentists have substantially increased their representation, moving closer to gender parity in these professions. And the position of women in managerial positions has been strengthened – 35 percent in 1999, up from 27 percent in 1987. In spite of these improvements, a woman is still far more likely to be a lower-level manager: just one in five senior managers in New Brunswick was female in 1999, up from 15 percent in 1987.

## PROTECTION IN THE WORKPLACE

Our adult female faces other disadvantages in the world of paid work. For example, she is less likely to be protected by a labour organization than her male counterpart. Today, as in 1970, most New Brunswick workers, male and female, are not unionized. Moreover, following a period of growth through the 1970s, the overall rate of unionization in the province has declined significantly, from 30 percent in 1985 to 22 percent in 1999 (see Figure 9). Women workers in particular have traditionally been underrepresented in the ranks of organized labour, in part because of their concentration in certain vulnerable employment sectors. In 1970 about one in six female workers in the province belonged to a union compared to almost one in three male workers. Unionization among New Brunswick women did rise through the mid-1980s but then stagnated and even declined slightly to settle at about one in five female workers by the end of the 1990s. These rates compare unfavourably to Canadian averages: in 1999, 31 percent of Canadian women workers versus thirty-three percent of their male counterparts belonged to a union compared to just 21 percent and 23 percent female and male New Brunswick workers respectively. The narrowing of the gender gap in unions over the past decade is the product of a significant drop in male union membership rather than female gains. As a result, women in 1999 represented 44 percent of all union members compared with just 19 percent in 1970.

The public sector has been the principal stronghold of female unionization over the past few decades and a major factor in the rise in union activity among women prior to the 1990s. Female teachers, nurses, and government employees in New Brunswick have been able to substantially improve their salaries and working conditions since the 1970s, but these good-quality jobs have been under attack over the past decade as a result of government downsizing, which has reduced many public sector employees to casual or temporary status. Most women who work for wages or profit in fast-food restaurants, in retail outlets, in rural fish plants, as supply teachers, or running a home-based business fall outside the limits of union protection.

**Figure 9.**
Percentage of Unionized Workers in New Brunswick by Gender, 1970 – 99




*Sources:* New Brunswick Department of Labour, *Directory of Labour Organizations*, various years; 1999 statistics supplied by the New Brunswick Department of Training and Employment Development.

*Note:* Figures represent union membership as a percentage of the labour force for both genders.

For the vast majority of female wage earners, who do not belong to unions, the only recourse to settle a dispute is through the province's Employment Standards Act, which sets minimum workplace standards. Introduced in 1982 and with only minor modifications since that time, the act is in urgent need of revision. As a recent ACSW brief argued, the legislation offers inadequate protection for the many employees who are not covered by collective agreements. The act's provisions, summarized in the box below, compare unfavourably with similar legislative packages in other provinces and with the Canada Labour Code, which covers employees of federal department agencies and federally regulated industry. From hours of work, rest breaks, pay levels, to vacation and paid leaves, the unorganized female worker is truly vulnerable to workplace exploitation.

Provisions of the New Brunswick Employment Standards Act

- Does not cover live-in domestics, farm workers, independent contractors, homeworkers, and people in various work/training situations
- No limits on the number of hours an employee may be required to work in any daily, weekly, or monthly period
- Overtime pay only provided for hours worked beyond the forty-four-hour week and at one and a half times the minimum wage rate, regardless of the employee's regular rate of pay
- No minimum call-in pay for employees who report for work at the request of the employer
- No guaranteed paid rest breaks
- Just six statutory paid holidays per year
- Annual vacation leave entitlement of just two weeks after one year's service (4 percent vacation pay)
- No paid leaves for illness, bereavement, or family responsibility
- Setting of minimum wage rate left to the discretion of the provincial government, with no fixed formula or frequency of review.

*Source:* NBACSW, *Women and the Employment Standards Act,* (April 2000).

## STRUGGLING TO CLOSE THE EARNINGS GAP

Another concern of our adult female is that she is still being left behind by men in the earnings race. In 1971 a New Brunswick woman over the age of fifteen who worked full-time, year-round earned on average just 62 percent of what her male counterpart earned; more than twenty-five years later and in the same situation, a woman took home 70 percent of a man's earnings (see Table 4). New Brunswick's pay gap has fluctuated in response to changes in both male and female earnings while narrowing very slowly over the past thirty years. During the 1970s and 1980s, our provincial rate was often better than the Canadian average, but through the 1990s it fared less well. The latest Statistics Canada data (for 1997) reveal that Alberta has the widest pay gap in the country at 64 percent, and New Brunswick is second at 70 percent.

**Table 4.**
Female Pay Gap and Average Earnings by Gender,
New Brunswick and Canada, 1971–97

| Year | N.B. | Canada | N.B. Women | N.B. Men |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1971 | 62% | 60% | $4,526 | $7,364 |
| 1975 | 62% | 60% | $7,361 | $11,839 |
| 1980 | 66% | 64% | $11,480 | $17,523 |
| 1981 | 64% | 64% | $12,905 | $20,104 |
| 1985 | 64% | 65% | $16,603 | $25,779 |
| 1986 | 64% | 66% | $17,244 | $27,038 |
| 1987 | 66% | 66% | $18,072 | $27,596 |
| 1988 | 70% | 65% | $20,199 | $29,052 |
| 1989 | 62% | 66% | $19,528 | $31,312 |
| 1990 | 66% | 68% | $21,490 | $32,659 |
| 1991 | 65% | 70% | $22,915 | $35,050 |
| 1992 | 70% | 72% | $24,492 | $35,124 |
| 1993 | 62% | 72% | $22,761 | $36,917 |
| 1994 | 64% | 70% | $23,671 | $37,052 |
| 1995 | 65% | 73% | $24,605 | $37,692 |
| 1996 | 69% | 73% | $25,637 | $37,282 |
| 1997 | 70% | 73% | $25,735 | $36,890 |

*Sources:* Statistics Canada, *Earnings of Men and Women;* Statistics Canada, *Income Trends in Canada, 1980–97* (1999), table 101, CD-ROM
*Note:* Female/male earnings ratio is based on average annual earnings of women/men fifteen years and older and working full-time, year-round.

When does the pay gap start in our female's working life? Today, as was the case thirty years ago, the earnings differential affects women of all ages, but it increases over the course of their lives. From their mid-twenties and particularly after age thirty-five, the gap progressively widens (see Table 5), becoming especially onerous for women over forty-five: in 1997 New Brunswick women ages forty-five to fifty-four earned just 60 percent of what their male counterparts earned, up from 53 percent in 1980, while the earnings ratio for women 55 and older dropped from 61 percent in 1980 to 55 percent in 1997. Women clearly lose ground in the earnings race as they

age, and their earnings tend to stagnate. Marriage and accompanying family responsibilities also appear to negatively affect the female/male earnings ratio. The gender pay disparity is highest among married women and men (66 percent in 1997) and lowest among women and men who never married, (96 percent in 1997) the latter, in part since both sexes usually start their careers with similarly low earnings. Possession of a university degree helps reduce but does not eliminate the pay gap. This continuing wage differential has far-reaching negative consequences for women and society as a whole, including the feminization of poverty and ultimately a pension gap for senior women.

**Table 5.**
Female Pay Gap, for Selected Age Groups, New Brunswick, 1980 – 97

| Year/Age | 1980 | 1982 | 1984 | 1986 | 1988 | 1990 | 1992 | 1994 | 1997 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 15–24 | 66% | 77% | 71% | 70% | 86% | 75% | 76% | 89% | 90% |
| 25–34 | 78% | 69% | 73% | 66% | 77% | 75% | 71% | 71% | 80% |
| 35–44 | 69% | 68% | 66% | 66% | 67% | 63% | 74% | 63% | 74% |
| 45–54 | 53% | 63% | 59% | 65% | 64% | 58% | 64% | 63% | 60% |
| 55 + | 61% | 69% | 61% | 55% | 74% | 70% | 69% | 53% | 55% |

*Source:* Statistics Canada, *Income Trends in Canada, 1980–97* (1999), table 104, CD-ROM.
*Note:* Table shows average annual earnings of women working full-time, year-round as a percentage of men's earnings.

The persistence of this gender pay gap in New Brunswick and in the rest of Canada is puzzling, particularly in light of women's educational progress over the past thirty years. Canadian economists have conducted extensive research on the question, but they have as yet been unable to account for it. A 1996 Advisory Council working paper on the problem, made the point that inequality in the labour force mirrors inequality at home and in the larger society. That is to say, the sexual division of labour within the home continues to disadvantage women, whose unpaid domestic labour has never been recognized by society, and these inequities are reproduced in the labour force, where occupational segregation and the

devaluation of women's paid work are intertwined with various forms of direct and systemic discrimination.

More recently, a highly detailed Statistics Canada analysis provided new quantitative evidence on the pay gap question, but in the end it too pointed to discrimination as a central element of the equation. Even after taking into account some fourteen different factors (including education, field of study, full-time work experience, job tenure, age of children, part-time status, union membership, firm size, job duties, industry, and occupation), the study found that at least half of the earnings disparity could not be explained. In short, women still earn considerably less than men even when they have the same work experience, education, and accumulated time in their current job, when they perform the same tasks, and when they work in the same occupations and industries for the same weekly hours. The unexplained component may therefore be attributed to gender-based labour market discrimination. Other research has also shown that discrimination against women is widespread, affecting female workers all the way from lawyers to clerical employees.

## ADDRESSING GENDER-BASED WORKFORCE CONCERNS

While awareness of the gender pay gap and public policy efforts to address the problem date from the early twentieth century both in Canada and internationally, government initatives have multiplied during the past three decades. In 1977 the federal government added a pay equity provision to the Canadian Human Rights Act which applied to employees in government and federally regulated companies; however, it only covers a limited number of workers and is complaint-based rather than proactive. In 1989 the New Brunswick government legislated in favour of equal pay for work of equal value among its departmental employees, extending pay equity to school district employees in 1994. While some progress has been made over the past decade, particularly for white, able-bodied women, gender wage differentials persist within the federal and provincial civil service. There are also problems with the legislation and enforcement mechanisms which leave a

lot to be desired. At the provincial level, the Pay Equity Bureau set up to implement the policy was abolished in 1991.

The private sector in New Brunswick and in most other regions in Canada remains largely untouched by pay equity regulations. Only Quebec introduced pay equity legislation in the mid-1990s requiring employer action in the private sector. New Brunswick's labour standards legislation includes a clause on "equal pay for equal work" that dates back to the 1980s and involves comparing the wages paid to female and male employees who perform the same or similar work and whose jobs require similar skill, effort, or responsibility. But men and women rarely do work that is "substantially the same in nature" or is performed in the same establishment and under similar working conditions. This outdated principle, limited in application, has been superseded over the past twenty years by the concept of equal pay for work of equal value, which aims at comparing the more common situation where men and women perform different work. Even in the year 2000, anglophone and francophone New Brunswick women are working together to fight for truly proactive pay equity legislation which would apply to both private and public employers. The Union des femmes pour l'équite salariale/Women's Union for Equal Pay, including representatives of some fifteen women's groups, recently joined forces with the New Brunswick committee of the World March of Women 2000 to bring this fundamental problem to the attention of politicians and policy-makers.

In contrast to pay equity measures, employment equity initiatives are more far-reaching and potentially more effective in the long-term. Employment equity aims to redress the traditional underrepresentation of groups who face systemic discrimination in the labour force, including women, Aboriginal peoples, the disabled, and members of visible minorities. It involves employment practices focusing on the recruitment and promotion of members of these groups. The concept of employment equity has given rise to a growing body of studies and initiatives in Canada in the wake of the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment (1983–84), headed by Judge Rosalie Abella. In 1986 the federal government introduced the Employment Equity Act and other legislative

and policy measures which covered federally regulated employment sectors, federal public service employees, and contractors. In New Brunswick and in most other provinces, employment equity principles have not been enshrined in specific legislation but are officially encouraged in the provincial civil service.

Evidence suggests that while the representation of designated groups has improved in the federal civil service, advances are uneven, notably in the case of visible minority women. Systematic data are not available for the provincial public service, but at both the federal and provincial levels, it does not appear that white, able-bodied males are in danger of being deprived of their share of hirings and promotions, despite the fears of some opponents of the principle. Moreover, a recent exploratory study comparing equity policies and practices in the ten Canadian provinces suggests that effective implementation is too often hampered today by a lack of political will and by misconceptions concerning the systemic barriers faced by disadvantaged groups, particularly visible minority women.

Women traditionally face special on-the-job hazards, including sexual harassment. Even today, female employees are all too often on the receiving end of suggestive remarks or unwelcome sexual advances from their co-workers or supervisors. Aboriginal women, women of colour, disabled women, and lesbians may be particular targets of harassers. For two decades now, federal and provincial human rights legislation has held out the possibility of protection for victims of sexual harassment, but both the New Brunswick and the Canadian Human Rights Acts place the onus on individuals who are ready and able to lodge a complaint. Enforcement mechanisms are complex and time-consuming, with the result that many harassment sufferers quit their jobs or abandon their complaints before they can be resolved. A study of complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace that were reported to the Canadian Human Rights Commission by women from 1978 to 1993 reveals that cases were resolved, on average, two years after they were initially filed. Some employers establish their own workplace policies to combat this problem, but they are a rarity. Changing the culture of the workplace, which mirrors the

attitudes of the broader society, appears to be a complex and demanding task.

## WOMEN IN BUSINESS

Entrepreneurship is one area where women in New Brunswick have made significant inroads in the last decade of the twentieth century. More and more women are starting their own businesses in an economy which offers fewer options for traditional employment. The 1992 edition of the Atlantic Canada Opportunity Agency's report on the state of small business and entrepreneurship in Atlantic Canada noted that by 1989, 30 percent of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in Canada were owned by women, up from just 11 percent in 1964. A study carried out in 1992 by the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women revealed that in 1991, women owned 25 percent of SMEs in New Brunswick. Even then, women entrepreneurs were the fastest-growing segment of small business start-ups, with four women for every three men starting a business. Female entrepreneurial dynamism was also highlighted in a 1996 Bank of Montreal study. Firms headed by women were leading new business growth in every province and creating jobs at four times the average rate while proving themselves to be financially strong, tenacious, and innovative. New Brunswick boasted 16,200 firms headed by women in 1994, an 11 percent increase since 1991 and close to 30 percent of all firms in the province during the decade.

Female entrepreneurs have launched businesses in a variety of areas, especially in the expanding service sector but also increasingly in the manufacturing and technology sectors. Today's typical female businesswoman may be the owner of a specialty retail shop or a hair salon, or she may be an accountant offering bookkeeping services in her home office. Self-employed women are more likely than men to work on their own, without partners or paid staff, although according to a recent study on gender and self-employment, female entrepreneurs with employees have increased their numbers significantly in Canada, from 11 percent of employers in 1971 to one-quarter of this group in 1997. The important contribution

made by women-owned enterprises to the regional economy has been highlighted in reports by the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and other bodies like the Women's World Finance/Cape Breton Association.

How can we account for this remarkable surge of entrepreneurial activity among women? Research has shown that one of the major reasons women start their own business is because they want to balance work and family. A survey of four hundred New Brunswick women carried out in 1992 by the province's Advisory Council on the Status of Women (NBACSW) found that 80 percent of women started their business because of a need for flexibility and a desire for independence. Almost half, however, reported that operating a business had a negative effect on their family life during the start-up phase because of the multiple business and family roles they were forced to play and the high levels of stress it produced. However, once the initial stage with its long hours and attendant uncertainty was over, most survey respondents seemed to adjust. A study carried out for the Women's World Finance/Cape Breton Association in 1997 offers a more positive picture. The majority of respondents to a survey of 351 business owners in the Atlantic region did not regard family responsibilities as an obstacle to their business operation. According to the study, only a very small percentage (3.4 percent) of the women entrepreneurs surveyed saw the issue of family and children as a serious problem, "reflecting the fact that women have developed strategies to successfully cope with the issue of balancing work and family responsibilities."

Women entrepreneurs need a high degree of determination and tenacity, since they encounter particular barriers when they create and develop their businesses. A number of studies point to the problems women have in obtaining business financing. The NBACSW survey showed that most women in New Brunswick in the early 1990s were launching their businesses with an initial investment of $10,000 or less, mainly from personal or joint savings. Banks were the next major source of financing; however, only about a quarter of respondents had attempted to obtain a loan from a bank, and of these, 17 percent were turned down. The survey respondents complained about being treated as second-class citizens and high-risk clients by

financial institutions, even when they did receive funding. Evidence from the more recent Women's World Finance/Cape Breton Association survey suggests that women still face discrimination when seeking financing from commercial banks. Some two-thirds of respondents used personal savings to start their businesses; approximately one-third of the women-owned firms reported having difficulty obtaining financing at start-up and in accessing financing as their businesses matured.

As for the economic pay-off for female business owners, existing evidence suggests that the financial rewards are often quite limited. The 1992 NBACSW survey of New Brunswick women revealed that a high percentage, about 45 percent, were not drawing any money out of their businesses. Of those who did, 72 percent drew less than $2,000 per month. Some married women were able to rely on their spouses' income, but when measured against poverty lines, the reported meagre economic returns seemed to place the province's women entrepreneurs in a "pink ghetto". The 1997 Women's World Finance/Cape Breton Association survey also concluded that in general, women business owners were not taking much from their businesses in terms of a salary or draw. Some 43 percent of respondents reported drawing less than $10,000 per year, although women business owners were apparently able to increase their salary or drawings as businesses mature.

Recent studies caution that self-employment should not be seen as an "emancipatory" option for all women, as business activities are highly variable in quality and the benefits they provide. Some women now enjoy good economic prospects, while others are struggling just to survive. Moreover, the gender wage gap persists for both employers and individuals who work alone, despite the gains made by some women. Many self-employed women are deprived of the important benefits available to paid workers such as pension plans, disability coverage, and training opportunities.

Women's involvement in business is nevertheless a positive development which holds out promise for the future. As women grow their enterprises and get a foothold in the myriad business and economic associations in the province, the expansion of the female entrepreurial network should encourage other potential

businesswomen. Success can be measured in different ways. The 1992 NBACSW survey concluded that women do not necessarily define a successful business solely in terms of economic profitability. Self-fulfillment is also important. More than 90 percent of the respondents in this survey reported satisfaction with their decision to start a business, citing an improved self-image and the ability to fulfill their multiple roles as worthwhile benefits.

## WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT AND ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE

Women's minority status among decision-makers in government undoubtedly helps account for their continuing struggles for equity. The record of female "firsts" in New Brunswick political life reminds us of the recent involvement of women in electoral politics. Brenda Robertson was elected to the legislature in 1967 as its first female member and then went on to become the province's first female cabinet minister in 1970. In 1979 Louise Blanchard became the first woman to lead a political party in the province, the Parti Acadien. Then, in 1983 Elsie Wayne was elected mayor of Saint John, the first female to head a city administration in New Brunswick. And later Aldéa Landry became the first female deputy premier after the McKenna Liberals were elected in 1987. Over the past three decades women have become more visible in the higher echelons of public life and have made splendid contributions to the policy-making process. We should remember, however, that women in New Brunswick and the rest of Canada who hold political office and rise to become senior civil servants are venturing into male-dominated territory.

Women in Government, New Brunswick

- Since the 1998 municipal elections, women account for 12 percent of the province's mayors and 22 percent of its municipal councillors, up from no mayoralty representation and 3 percent of councillors in 1971.
- The number of female MLAs stands at 10 (18 percent) in 2000, up from 2 (4 percent) in 1975.
- The number of female Cabinet ministers increased from none in 1975 to 3 in 2000.
- In 2000, the provincial civil service includes 5 female deputy ministers or 24 percent, and 60 senior executive officers, or 26 percent, up from 16 percent in these two categories in 1994.

*Sources:* Office of the Chief Electoral Officer/Municipal Electoral Officer; Municipal Journal (Feb.-Sept. 1983); Legislative Assembly Library; New Brunswick Department of Finance.

Research has shown that barriers to female representation in the upper reaches of public life are numerous and deeply-entrenched. "The voice of government is still a man's voice" noted the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970, some fifty years after women had won the right to vote and hold office in the federal arena. The major obstacles identified by the Commission: prejudice in the constituency associations, inadequate financial resources and family limitations on mobility – still operate to a large degree thirty years later. Women have traditionally been relegated to a supporting role in political parties, helping out behind the scenes with canvassing and fund-raising. And even today, female candidates must face the persistent discrimination of the "old-boy" networks, and often lack the time and money to pursue political office. Nevertheless, it is vitally important that women fight to win their place at all levels of government, in order that women's equity and social justice concerns be given due attention.

Beyond the confines of electoral politics, countless New Brunswick women have been working tirelessly for change at the grassroots level during the past three decades. Our adult female may be an active member of one of the province's long-established women's organizations, like the Women's Institutes/Institut féminin, established in Andover in 1911, or the Fédération des dames d'Acadie, founded in Campbellton in 1968. She may sit on a women's committee in a mixed-gender

labour union or religious institution. Or she may have joined one of the myriads of specialized women's groups that mushroomed in this province since the 1970s. Since 1981, for example, the New Brunswick Native Indian Women's Council has represented the province's Mi'kmaq and Maliseet women. Women Working with Immigrant Women, founded in Fredericton in 1984, and later renamed the N.B. Women's Intercultural Network, has been dedicated to promoting the interests and well-being of immigrant and visible minority women. In the mid-1990s, a group of female technologists, operators and tradespersons launched the New Brunswick chapter of the national Women in Trades and Technology Network, with the aim of helping more women enter and thrive in these nontraditional job sectors. Such groups have helped overcome the isolation of women in rural, urban and ethnocultural communities and worked to improve women's lives.

In the wake of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (1967–70), women sought to place their concerns on the public agenda. A first provincial conference on women's issues was held in Memramcook in 1974, a sign of women's growing strength and unity. Over the next few years, organizations like the Moncton-based political action group LES FAM (Liberté Égalité Sororité – Femmes Acadiennes de Moncton; Liberty Equality Sorority – Acadian Women of Moncton), formed in 1973, lobbied for the creation of a provincial advisory council on the status of women. Legislation providing for such a body was adopted in 1975, but it was not until December 1977 that the Hatfield administration appointed the Council's first members and allocated the funds for the Council's Moncton-based operations. For more than two decades now, this consultative, research and watchdog agency has championed women's issues and worked to rally women and men for change.

Women and their associations have made a difference on the provincial and national scenes as well as in their home communities. The empowerment of individual females and heightened public awareness of women's issues are an important part of this legacy. Essential services, from shelters for abused women and their children to daycare centres were

established and continue to operate largely because of women's volunteer labour. And women's organizations have successfully lobbied for reforms ranging from a more sensitive judicial treatment of family violence, to the inclusion of a gender equality clause in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We can look back with pride on this record of activism and look ahead with confidence to the continuation of women's struggles in the new millennium. As researcher Elspeth Tulloch affirms in her history of New Brunswick women, "women's power continues to lie in their desire and ability to band together on common issues".

Compared to her sister of 1970, today's woman aged nineteen to sixty-four can sample a broader range of possibilities in the spheres of learning, salaried work, self-employment, and politics. She is more visible than ever in the labour force and has made an impressive showing on university campuses, in business and the professions in New Brunswick. She has also increased her public profile, through participation in electoral politics, but especially as a social activist in voluntary organizations. But even in the year 2000, the average female is trailing behind her male counterpart in the economic arena. She starts to lose ground even as she chooses her education and training path, by concentrating in traditional female programs which lead to less well-paying jobs. From the moment she enters the workforce, our adult female must deal with persistent systemic discrimination which holds her back from equality of results in occupational options, earnings, benefits, and advancement possibilities. Given these ongoing constraints, economic autonomy remains beyond the grasp of many women. And in the search for employment equity and financial independence, our female continues to be disadvantaged by the disproportionately heavy share of family responsibilities that she shoulders.

# CHAPTER 5

# ADULTHOOD (19-64 YEARS)

## FAMILY LIFE, UNPAID LABOUR AND HEALTH

## INTRODUCTION

This second part of our examination of the lives of New Brunswick females ages nineteen to sixty-four will deal with issues arising from family life, unpaid work, and health. How have women fared in these areas over the past thirty years? In general, our adult female today can contemplate wider horizons than she could have in 1970. In her personal relationships and living arrangements, she can exercise greater freedom of choice than was possible three decades ago. Marriage and child bearing are increasingly delayed or even abandoned while women invest in advanced education and training, explore new employment possibilities, launch their own businesses, or engage in political or social activism. Some of this freedom can be attributed to the advent of the birth control pill which was instrumental in allowing women to take control over their reproduction. In the year 2000, the average female has fewer children and takes advantage of paid maternity leave to minimize career interruptions, and she is more likely to be a single parent who is divorced or has never married or to be living in a common-law union or a same-sex family. As well, our woman is increasingly taking charge of her own health and well-being and like most other women today would never think of defining herself solely as a wife and mother or ever contemplate a life of self-sacrifice at the expense of her own needs.

Despite the gains of the past thirty years, however, women still have a long way to go to achieve equity on the home front. More present than ever in the labour force, most women still put in the "double day" of paid employment and unpaid domestic labour. The woman who is a mother or a caregiver to elderly relatives often finds her working life and financial situation, not to mention her health, seriously compromised by her domestic obligations. And because a woman’s economic situation still depends in part on her attachment to a man, many female single parents are condemned to a life of poverty. Our adult female is also vulnerable to violence from her male partner, and she experiences higher stress levels than men and is more likely to suffer from depression and even to attempt suicide.

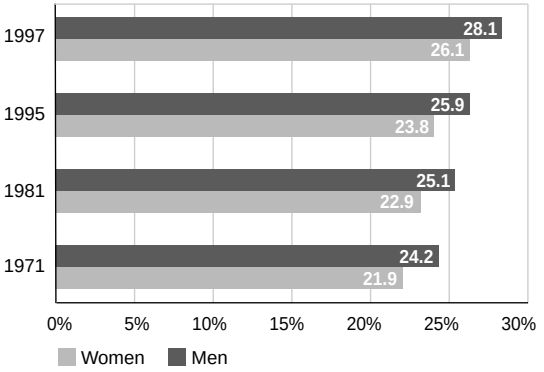
In the year 2000, more so than in 1970, our adult female is involved in a difficult juggling act. She is struggling to fulfill her caregiving duties while at the same time furthering her career and carving out her own place in society. Today, as thirty years ago, our woman faces a crucial issue: the need to establish the foundations of her financial independence. How can family responsibilities be reconciled with the development of our woman's labour market skills and her economic autonomy? And how can we protect her from a life of poverty during early and middle adulthood, which lays the groundwork for the economic plight of so many senior women?

## RELATIONSHIPS AND REPRODUCTIVE WORK

Motherhood and homemaking have traditionally been central to women's lives and in the year 2000, despite massive and permanent shifts of women into the labour force, they continue to shoulder the primary burden for childrearing and household tasks. Women's roles as mothers and caregivers seem to be largely responsible for the disadvantages they experience in the labour market and in public life. It is a problem that society has failed to address by not providing adequate support to mothers, fathers, and caregivers, and as a result our adult woman faces difficult choices involving her relationships and unpaid domestic work.

The past thirty years have witnessed dramatic changes in women's marriage patterns. Increasing involvement in postsecondary education and training as well as paid labour has led many women to postpone or even forgo marriage. In 1971 our young woman typically married for the first time when she was barely twenty-two years old; in 1997 she waited until she was about twenty-six (see Figure 10). The average age of a woman at first marriage rose even more dramatically in Canada as a whole than in New Brunswick during the same period, climbing from twenty-two in 1971 to twenty-eight in 1997. Over the past thirty years, however, one aspect of marriage behaviour has remained constant: women typically choose a mate who is on average about two years her senior.

**Figure 10.**
Average Age at First Marriage, by Sex, New Brunswick, 1971–97



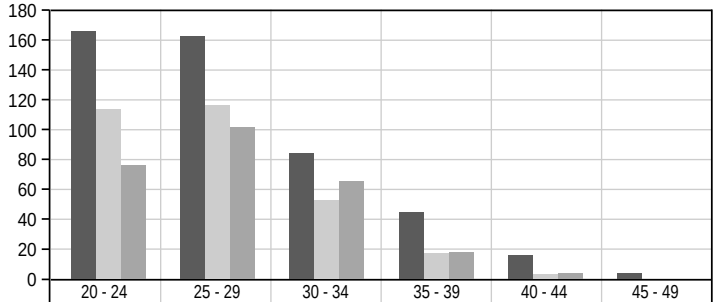

*Sources:* For 1971 to 1985, Ginette Lafleur, *Les femmes à l'heure des comptes* (1990), table 1102; for 1997, Statistics Canada, *Annual Demographic Statistics,* 1999, cat. no. 91-213-XPB.

The past thirty years have also witnessed an overall decline in the marriage rate in New Brunswick, falling from 9.7 marriages per thousand population in 1971 to 5.4 in 1997. This downward trend reflects in part the growing tendency of couples to live common-law, although New Brunswickers are somewhat less likely than other Canadians to adopt this practice: in 1996, 11 percent of New Brunswick couples were in common-law unions compared to the Canadian average of 12 percent. Evidence from Statistics Canada suggests that cohabitation is particularly popular among francophones wherever they live in Canada. Also, in the wake of the growing affirmation of lesbian identity since the 1970s, more women are choosing to live openly with same-sex partners. While the proportion of women living alone has grown significantly over the past three decades, most adult females in New Brunswick and the rest of Canada still live with a husband or a common-law partner and/or children.

The trend of later and fewer marriages has also contributed to another striking phenomenon of the past three decades: women are having fewer children and are starting their families later in life. The result since the mid-1960s has been a dramatic decline in fertility rates and therefore smaller families. In 1971 a New Brunswick woman had an average 2.7 children; in 1986 she had

only 1.5, and in 1997 just 1.4. The average age of mothers at the birth of their first child has risen fairly steadily since the 1970s, paralleling the rising ages of first marriages. And the birth rate among females under thirty has dropped significantly since the 1970s, the same period when the birth rate of females in their thirties has increased (see Figure 11). The New Brunswick situation parallels Canadian trends, although the birth rates for women in their thirties in this province are somewhat lower than Canadian averages.

**Figure 11.**
Births per Thousand Population for Selected Age Groups, New Brunswick, 1971–97




| | 20 - 24 | 25 - 29 | 30 - 34 | 35 - 39 | 40 - 44 | 45 - 49 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1971 | 164.5 | 161.2 | 82.9 | 44.2 | 14.2 | 0.8 |
| 1981 | 112.7 | 116.3 | 53.3 | 15.5 | 2.6 | 0.2 |
| 1997 | 76 | 101.2 | 64.9 | 17.1 | 2.4 | 0 |

*Source:* Statistics Canada, *Health Statistics at a Glance* (1999), tables 00060105.IVT and 00060107.IVT, CD-ROM.

The development of the birth control pill in the 1960s truly revolutionized women's lives in the following decades. This highly reliable method of contraception opened the way for women to choose when and if they were to have children. The desire by women to control fertility is also reflected in the rise in therapeutic abortions since the late 1960s. In the years that followed, however, the issue of reproductive choice has been mired in controversy. Women's right to control their bodies was a major issue in second-wave feminism, and the struggle to improve access to abortion services has been ongoing since the 1970s. Today, equal access to an abortion in all provinces and regions in Canada is still a goal. A woman living in rural New Brunswick, for example, may still have to travel a considerable

distance to an urban centre like Fredericton or even out of province to obtain an abortion in a safe and timely manner.

It goes without saying that the birth of a child is a major event in a woman's life. On the one hand, there is the obvious pleasure a mother takes in her new child and on the other hand there are the far-reaching consequences for her labour force participation, her career path, her economic status, and her personal freedom. Unlike her mother, however, our woman of the 1980s and 1990s is not prepared to let childbirth cause a lengthy interruption in her career. And yet Statistics Canada survey research has shown that employed women still do the bulk of household tasks and spend far more time than men looking after children. It seems that little has changed in thirty years in the division of household labour.

In 1961 when only about a quarter of Atlantic Canadian women over twenty-five were in the workforce, they were doing 67 percent of the housework. Today, more than half of all women are salaried workers, and yet they still perform 63 percent of the unpaid household tasks, which even in the age of domestic appliances and convenience foods still require long hours. Housework is especially onerous for parents who must devote considerable time and energy to cooking, cleaning, and unpaid child care whether or not they work for pay. It is estimated that today’s non-employed mother puts in an average of 57.5 hours a week of unpaid household work, while the married mother working full-time for pay returns home to do an additional 34 hours of unpaid work each week. Single mothers bear a particularly heavy burden of paid and unpaid work which is estimated at 75 hours per week.

In a recent report on women’s health in Atlantic Canada, researcher Richard Colman points out that society depends on unpaid domestic labour.

> Work performed in households is more essential to basic survival and quality of life than much of the work done in offices, factories and stores, and is a fundamental precondition for a healthy market economy. If children are not reared with attention and care, and if household members are not provided with nutritious sustenance, workplace productivity will decline and social costs will rise.

However, domestic labour and those who perform it are taken for granted by society, a situation that has far-reaching consequences for the status of women both in this country and around the world. Since the feminist discovery of women's "invisible" domestic labour in the 1970s, attempts have been made to quantify this important direct investment in human capital. Promising recent efforts include a national pilot project sponsored by Statistics Canada and headed by Ronald Colman in Nova Scotia, which focuses on developing the so-called Genuine Progress Index (GPI). Unlike the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which only recognizes goods and services exchanged for pay, the GPI measures and values non-monetary and natural resources, including unpaid voluntary and household work. The aim is to assess social progress through indicators such as reducing poverty and inequality, increased free time, and environmental quality.

A growing body of research indicates that our adult woman's leisure time has been declining in recent years while her stress levels have been rising. Today's woman is forced to juggle more responsibilities than ever before and with relatively little additional support. It seems that balancing the demands of work and family life is largely perceived as a women's issue in our society rather than the responsibility of both men and women. As a result, initiatives designed to help women reconcile the responsibilities of family and paid work have been few and far between over the past three decades. One wonders how many women in the labour force would opt to stay home with their children for a period of years, or even indefinitely, if they could do it without having to pay a heavy financial penalty.

The challenge we face as a society is to harmonize productive and reproductive work to make it easier for women to participate in paid labour and men in domestic labour. As the federal plan for gender equality noted in 1995, a more equitable sharing of family responsibilities requires a change in attitudes, practices, and structures. However, that message has yet to be heard by those responsible for developing public policies and policies for the workplace, who have failed so far to take into account the changing nature of family life. Some employers have experimented with flexible scheduling or offered more

family-friendly environments, but for the most part, women's needs are not a priority. In fact, a number of recent studies have shown that government cuts to the health system, community services, and social programs over the past decade have placed heavier burdens on women, who remain the primary caregivers for children, the elderly, and the disabled.

Nevertheless, some progress has been made in the area of job protection for pregnant women and of maternity/parental leave. By the early 1980s, federal and provincial human rights and labour legislation provided women with legal protection against discrimination by employers, and against employment dismissal because of pregnancy and childbirth. Since 1971, qualifying women have also had access to paid maternity leave under the unemployment/employment insurance program (UI/EI). A biological mother could take up to fifteen weeks off around the birth of her child while receiving a percentage of her earnings in benefits. In 1991 a new parental leave provision allowed for an additional ten weeks of unemployment benefits, which could be taken by either the mother or the father: both biological and adoptive parents qualified. This brought to twenty-five weeks the total time a parent might stay at home with a newborn or adopted child while receiving compensation. The federal government recently extended paid maternity/parental leave to one year for those eligible under employment insurance, offering new parents the choice to have one parent take the entire leave or to share it between them. The new scheme, which took effect on 31 December 2000, has been promoted in newspaper ads depicting a father feeding his young child.

The concept of family responsibility leave distinct from maternity/ parental leave, has also gained in popularity in recent years. Such short-term leave would allow working mothers (and fathers) to tend to sick children or elderly relatives, to take children or older family members to medical appointments, or to meet with school teachers or principals. The labour standards laws in some provinces currently provide for five unpaid days each year for such purposes. The province of New Brunswick recently amended its employment standards Act and now provides a family responsibility leave of three unpaid days per year, while British Columbia and Quebec provide five such unpaid days.

## HOME CARE AND THE SANDWICH GENERATION

Middle-aged women play a central role in intergenerational family solidarity. With their involvement in home care, the workforce and household tasks, they risk becoming overburdened by work, affecting them both physically and emotionally.

– Health Canada, *Population Aging: An Overview of the Past Thirty Years.*

Women form the majority of home care recipients, home care personnel and persons responsible for the care of elderly, disabled or ill family members. The extreme gender imbalance in every aspect of home care means that home care policies and practices have a significant and varied impact on women's lives.

– *The Changing Nature of Home Care and Its Impact on Women's Vulnerability to Poverty.*

Women in the nineteen to sixty-four age group, and especially those over forty, will increasingly become involved in providing care for the elderly. In the past decade, as health care in Canada has shifted from acute care institutions to community-based services – in many cases without sufficient funding being provided – families have had to take on greater responsibilities. Since women have always been the primary caregivers in families, the burden of this work has inevitably fallen on them. To make matters worse, some of these women are in the position of having to care for elderly relatives and their own children at the same time, a situation that has given rise to the expression the "sandwich generation". In addition, the "empty nests" created when children grew up and left home are in many cases becoming the "cluttered nests", as these same children, educated but unable to find work, return home, thus adding to the strain of these already overburdened women. Statistics Canada estimates that in 1996 one million Canadian women ages twenty-five to fifty-four, 15 percent of this age group, looked after children and cared for a senior at the same

time and without pay. And their numbers are growing. In comparison such work was done by only 9 percent of men.

Home care has become a growing industry in Canada as a result of the strain on the health care system during the 1990s and an aging population. People are living longer and therefore need more care, and with advances in medical and information technologies, that care, which was previously limited to a hospital setting, can often be delivered more cost-effectively in the home. Today, the public in general expects more from the health care system and is demanding the services they need regardless of where they are provided – in hospitals, clinics, or the home.

When we talk about home care and women, there are three issues that need to be addressed. First, women are the greatest consumers of home care, largely because they live longer than men and are often poorer than men. Income, as we know, is a major determinant of health. Second, women are the backbone of the formal home care system, which consists of organizations such as the Extra-Mural Hospital in New Brunswick, the VON, and, increasingly, private sector companies. And third, women perform the bulk of the work in the informal, unpaid, home care system.

In 1998 Health Canada and the province of Nova Scotia jointly organized the first national conference on home care which was held in Halifax. Increasingly, governments have begun to study the existing home care system, currently a patchwork of programs and services across the country, with a view to developing standards for both home care consumers and providers. For consumers, there is a growing recognition that home care services must inevitably be recognized as part of the health care system, that home care is an important way to keep an increasingly large population of elderly out of acute care institutions and even out of nursing homes.

For providers, there seems to be an increasing recognition that the formal home care system is performed largely by women and that many of these jobs are low-paid and provide few benefits. Indeed, as the private sector becomes more involved in home care, competition for contracts with government funders has depressed wages. Some researchers suggest that

there is a growing wage gap between jobs performed in a hospital setting and those performed in the home. Unless these issues are addressed, many argue, the nature of the formal home care system will contribute to the increasing impoverishment of women, particularly women between the ages of forty-five and sixty-four.

The Extra-Mural Hospital, which was founded in 1981, is part of New Brunswick's formal home care system, Canada's first government-funded home-hospital program. Staffed by a range of professionals, from nurses to physiotherapists, who visit patients in their homes, the Extra-Mural Hospital has been a model in Canada for allowing patients to cut short their hospital stay and be treated at home. Services delivered are insured by the province in the same way that in-hospital services are covered, but patients must be referred to the Extra-Mural Hospital by a doctor.

A second partner in home care is the New Brunswick Department of Family and Community Services, which administers long-term home support services as well as long-term residential care. Financial assistance under this program varies depending on assets. The family home is currently not recognized as an asset, although much to the dismay of seniors and their families, the government recently threatened to include it for purposes of calculating the ability to pay for home care services. In New Brunswick in 1997–98, 83 percent of long-term clients were seniors (Provincial/Territorial Home Care Programs report).

Little is known at this point about the informal home care system in New Brunswick – its size, shape, or the conditions under which people are working in it. It is assumed, however, that most informal caregivers are women. Nationally, Statistics Canada's General Social Survey in 1996 reported that there were 2.8 million Canadians who provided informal care in the home to someone with a long-term health problem or disability. Most informal caregivers were between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-four, with the largest group comprised of women ages forty-five to sixty-four. Statistics Canada reports that in 1991, 36 percent of all informal caregivers were employed. Among those employed outside the home, 33 percent reported

interruptions in their work because of caregiving responsibilities. Statistics Canada points out that contributions made by informal caregivers are extremely valuable. One study found that on average, family members caring for the elderly contribute unpaid services that formal services would charge between thirty and sixty dollars a day to provide.

Not much is known about the people providing informal home care in New Brunswick, but in an effort to shed some light on the subject, a 1998 study financed through the Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health interviewed rural caregivers throughout Nova Scotia. Attempts were made to include black, Aboriginal, and Acadian caregivers. The study found that these caregivers, most of them women, were extremely frustrated with the lack of support services available from the government. Many were providing around-the-clock care with rarely a break, and they complained that government has downloaded many health services onto the community and families but has provided few resources. The report noted that these women "are trapped in a downward spiral of stress and ill-health that impairs their effectiveness as caregivers. The service they most need is timely and appropriate respite care. They want services, information and training for caregivers to be as available and up-to-date in rural Nova Scotia as anywhere in Canada." Many of these caregivers had left paid employment in order to provide care, a decision with obvious consequences for their current and future income. While many of these women spoke about the positive aspects of caring for a loved one, most also feel very much alone and taken for granted.

As the population ages, the home care issue in New Brunswick and Canada as a whole will become more pressing. An essential part of the program and one that will increase in importance in the years to come, is the informal home care system. It is made up for the most part of women between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five who carry the added burden of a salaried job. Thus far, their sacrifices and the value of the work they do have gone largely unnoticed. This has been a serious oversight on the part of the New Brunswick government, which must take steps to acknowledge the contribution of these informal home care providers, to grant them the status of formal partners in the care of the elderly, and to include them in the development of home

care policies. Until this is done and until the formal home care system is expanded to support the informal system, the viability and sustainability of home care in New Brunswick will remain in doubt.

## MARRIAGE BREAKDOWN AND POVERTY

Marriage breakdown has been a reality faced by a growing proportion of New Brunswick and Canadian women since 1970. The liberalization of Canadian divorce law in 1968, and the further revisions in 1986, has contributed to the growing trend towards marriage dissolution. New Brunswick's divorce rates have more than doubled over the past three decades, climbing from 76.1 per hundred thousand population in 1971 to 182.1 in 1997; these rates parallel but trail slightly the Canadian average. A recent study commissioned by the Vanier Institute of the Family estimates that if the 1991 divorce rates hold true, almost one in three (31 percent) Canadian couples who married in 1991 will eventually break up. However, divorce statistics do not provide the complete picture of relationship and family breakups since neither the termination of common-law unions nor separations without divorce show up in the official figures. As a result, today's woman is far more likely than her counterpart of thirty years ago to be living in a "blended" family with his and her children, to be a never-married or divorced mother raising young children on her own, or to experience multiple relationships and living arrangements over the course of her life.

How does separation and divorce affect women? For most women, particularly those with children, ending a marriage has meant not only emotional upheaval but also major changes in economic status. In fact, even today a divorce is a direct cause of poverty for many women who may never return to a life of ease. The economic fallout traditionally begins with the legal costs of divorce proceedings. Little wonder that a do-it-yourself divorce guide produced in 1991 by the provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women quickly became a best-seller and library staple that has been updated and reissued many times. In the case of uncontested, straightforward divorces, women using the guide could save five hundred dollars or more

in lawyers' fees. However, women may still face high legal costs to end more complicated unions or to settle difficult custody cases. Access to legal aid has been very limited in New Brunswick since 1988, when civil legal aid was abolished. The partial program that later replaced it covers only a fraction of the need.

Far too many married women have traditionally been without any revenue of their own. Our young adult woman today is more likely than women of previous generations to be working for pay or profit, but she is usually earning significantly less than her male counterpart. In 1971 a New Brunswick woman over the age of fifteen who worked full-time, year-round earned on average just sixty-two cents for every dollar earned by her male counterpart. By 1997 the gap had narrowed slightly, but women in this province still earned only seventy cents for every dollar earned by men. And still, too many married women are unaware of what steps to take or are unable to take them to ensure their own economic autonomy – for example, by establishing their own credit history. Traditionally, ending a marriage left women in difficult economic straits, as the legal framework of marriage considered women to be subject to the authority of their husband and without their own legal rights to property.

Over the past twenty years significant changes have been made to family law provisions affecting the economic status of wives and mothers in New Brunswick. The introduction of the Marital Property Act and the Child and Family Services and Family Relations Act in 1981 were important victories for women. These two laws offered some economic security to women at the time of separation by guaranteeing them an equal share of the marital property and by clearly stating the parental obligation to provide financial support for children. Most mothers still get custody of children after divorce, although recent years have witnessed a growing trend towards joint-custody arrangements. An enforcement program for child support orders was introduced in New Brunswick in 1992, which helped reduce the rate of default on these much-needed payments. And since May 1997, parents who have legal custody of children are no longer required to pay income tax on child support benefits. But the amount of child support varies, in part according to the non-custodial parent's ability to pay,

and regular payments may fall victim to conflicts surrounding access or other issues involving the ex-spouses.

## LIVING IN POVERTY

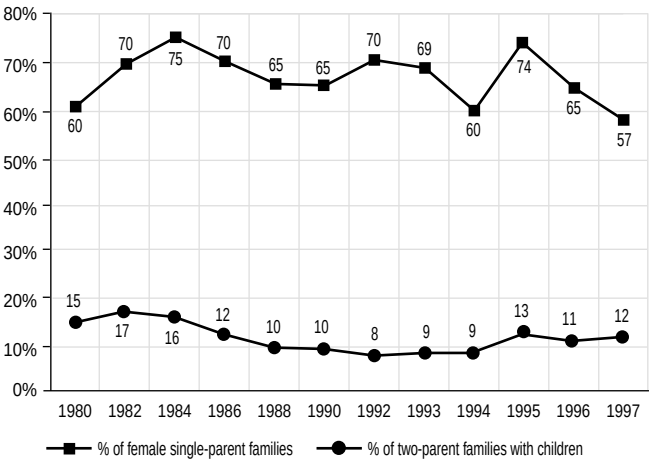
Women as a group have traditionally been, and continue to be, poorer than men. In 1970 the high incidence of poverty among Canadian women was considered an "unexpectedly significant finding" of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Since that time, numerous reports have highlighted the feminine face of poverty as a persistent feature of Canadian society. Poverty is usually measured in Canada using the Statistics Canada low-income cut-offs (LICOs), which are based on the relationship between the percentage of income spent on basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter and the level of disposable income. Statistics Canada data reveal that in 1997 close to one in five New Brunswick females (18 percent) had low incomes, about the same proportion as in 1980 (20 percent); for males it was 15 percent in 1997, down from 17 percent in 1980.

The gender income gap has narrowed over the past three decades, but it still stood at 64 percent in 1997 – versus 53 percent in 1980. As with earnings, a woman's income continues to be significantly lower on average than a man's and at all ages, even when they have the same level of education. Aboriginal women find themselves at the very bottom of the income ladder. Data from the 1996 census reveal that the average income of Aboriginal women in New Brunswick was $11,675 compared to $16,476 for their male counterparts – $15,295 and $26,285 for non-Aboriginal females and males respectively.

Today, as thirty years ago, poor women generally share the common characteristic of not having a man to help support them. Among our pre-senior women, it is the single mother who is most likely to be trapped in poverty. Rising divorce rates and an increase in the proportion of mothers who have never married have made female single-parent families the most dramatically increasing family type over the past three decades. Some 13 percent of New Brunswick families with children at

home were headed by single mothers in 1996, up from 8 percent in 1971. The low-income rate among female single-parent families has remained stubbornly high over the past twenty years, rarely dipping below three in five such families and at times affecting three out of four (see Figure 12). In light of past fluctuations, it is not safe to say that the 1997 figure of 57 percent marks the beginning of a significant improvement for this group. As well, poor single parents generally experience a deep level of poverty. In contrast, the low-income rate among two-parent families with children in this province has always been less than 20 percent and in the past two decades, has generally hovered around 10 percent. (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12.**
Percentage of families with low income,
New Brunswick, 1980–97




*Source:* Statistics Canada, *Income Trends in Canada, 1980-97* (1999), table 807, CD-ROM.

Even in the year 2000, single-parent families headed by women are vastly overrepresented among welfare recipients. Clearly, existing financial aid and social services do not adequately address the needs of women raising children on their own. The province's social assistance rates are the lowest in the country, and a woman's social assistance payment may be reduced or cut off because she is sharing her apartment, even if she and the other person are not a couple pooling their incomes. This

economic unit policy (the so-called spouse-in-the-house rule) persists in New Brunswick despite widespread criticism. Subsidized housing and child care remain woefully inadequate to meet the need.

Even working full-time does not ensure that a woman will escape a life of poverty, since many women earn just minimum wage. Minimum wage rates have never been pegged to the cost of living, thereby trapping even the full-time earner below the poverty line. Recent comparative studies of family-support policies in industrialized nations reveal that Canada compares very unfavourably with many European countries. In Sweden and the Netherlands, for example, a strong social safety net largely equalizes the poverty rate of single- and two-parent families at about 7 percent.

For our female, living in poverty may mean a humiliating monthly visit to the food bank and having to eat less so that her child does not go hungry. She may see her electricity cut off, even in winter, when she relies on it for heating. Having a low income often means being denied a bank account, loan, or mortgage or being forced by the telephone company to pay a deposit for services. The single mother may be refused employment or rental housing because of negative stereotypes concerning her character. And in extreme cases, our woman may find herself on the streets, unable to receive government assistance because she has no permanent address. The growing homeless problem as it affects women in particular has not been systematically studied in the New Brunswick context, but shelter authorities in cities like Fredericton report that an increasing number of homeless women have been using their facilities in recent years.

The authors of a recent report on the dynamics of women's poverty in Canada highlight the troubling link between economic security and dependency through marriage or other personal relationships. According to Clarence Lochhead and Katherine Scott of the Canadian Council on Social Development, "The solution to women's poverty lies in providing a range of options that afford women choice over their lives." Women, they argue, should be given "the choice to pursue paid labour, the choice to care for others, or even follow

other personal interests without sacrificing their own well-being or the well-being of their families."

## FIGHTING TO RECOGNIZE FAMILY DIVERSITY

Over the past thirty years, certain groups of women have been involved in special struggles for recognition of their rights as spouses. A long and contentious battle was waged by First Nations women in this country against the discriminatory provisions of section 12(1)b of the federal Indian Act, which stripped an Indian woman and her children of her Indian status if she married a non-Native man. On the other hand, the non-Native wife of an Indian man gained Indian status for herself and her children. In adopting the original legislation in 1869, the Canadian government had argued that it wanted to prevent non-Native men from acquiring reserve lands through their Indian wives. Supreme Court rulings in the early 1970s confirmed that Native women who married non-Native men lost their Indian status and thereby their right to a voice in Native self-government, their right to reside on their home reserve, and their right to share in the economic and social benefits of their communities.

Indian women who had been stripped of their status continued the struggle throughout the 1970s. Their lobbying, sit-ins, and appeals to international organizations had the support of many national women's groups, but male Indian leaders were generally hostile to the women's claims. In 1977, Sandra Lovelace, a Maliseet of the Tobique reserve in northwestern New Brunswick, gained world attention by taking her case to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations. After divorcing her non-Native husband, Lovelace returned to the Tobique reserve and struggled to get housing. In preparing her petition, she had the help of the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission and the moral support of women from Tobique. In July 1979 the Tobique women's group organized a one-hundred-mile march of women and children from the Oka reserve, near Montreal, to Ottawa. The UN committee finally issued its ruling in 1981, and it found Canada in contravention of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which it had signed in 1976. However, the federal government

did nothing for several more years and when it did respond in 1985, it only partially revised the offending clauses of the Indian Act. Indian women marrying non-Native men retain their status, but their children cannot pass on Indian status unless they marry another Indian.

Law and public policy have been slow to accommodate the needs of the more diverse family types emerging in our society in recent decades. For example, common-law relationships are not covered by the province's marital property act. However, it is same-sex unions that have suffered most of all from official marginalization. The provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which came into effect in 1985, offered lesbians and gay men some protection against discrimination, at least on paper. And federal legislation passed in the spring of 2000 gave same-sex couples the social and tax benefits enjoyed by heterosexual pairs, while some provinces and private employers have extended certain economic benefits to same-sex pairs.

Nevertheless, as Kathleen A. Lahey argues in her recent study of law and sexuality in Canada, lesbians and gay people are still deprived of essential human rights, are barred from basic institutions such as parentage and marriage, and are highly vulnerable to various forms of discrimination and violence. There was a private member's bill introduced recently in the House of Commons that would grant same-sex couples the legal right to marry, but it had no chance of passing. However, struggles are ongoing in the federal and provincial arenas to have legislation provide a more inclusive definition of spouse, so that same-sex couples may fully share in the social and economic benefits offered to male-female unions. In a broader sense, after all, it is the issue of complete "legal personhood" that is at stake.

## FAMILY VIOLENCE

For many women, ending a marriage or common-law union is a way out of a physically or emotionally abusive relationship. Unfortunately, however, escape is often difficult, even for those who are able to muster the strength and financial resources to

leave the family home. Ex-husbands and boyfriends too often lash out against their partners, with sometimes tragic consequences. The latest Statistics Canada portrait of family violence in New Brunswick reveals that between 1979 and 1998, thirty-eight women and five men were killed by their current or ex-spouses or by common-law partners. The physical pain and emotional suffering inflicted on women over the past thirty years is impossible to quantify, especially in light of the continued underreporting of family violence.

The problem of family violence presents a serious and complex challenge to society. For a long time it was considered a taboo subject and was shrouded in secrecy and shame for its victims and ignored by public authorities. In 1979 the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women published a brochure on violence against women entitled *Battue/Battered*, the first publication of its kind in Canada. It was prepared in response to the many calls made to the council's toll-free line during its first year of operation by women complaining about the abuse they were suffering at the hands of their husbands or partners. The publication defined the problem in easy-to-understand terms and informed women of their rights and recourses in question-and-answer form. Asking "What do we mean by battered women?" the brochure noted that "contrary to popular belief, the definition of` wife abuse is not necessarily limited to severe injuries like fractured noses, black eyes or bruises. If you are being slapped, pushed, shoved or threatened, then you, too, are a victim of physical abuse." And it explained in concrete terms about the various forms abuse could take: physical, verbal, and sexual.

Thanks to the courage of female victims who have dared to "speak the name" of the problem and to the efforts of countless other groups and individuals, violence against women has gained its rightful place on the public agenda. Over the past two decades, public awareness has been raised to the point where violence against women is roundly denounced by the vast majority of men and women. The problem has been extensively studied in recent years, and many of the researchers in this area are associated with the Fredericton-based Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research, one of five federally funded centres created in the early 1990s to conduct

action-oriented research. Since that time, activists and policy-makers have been working to aid the victims of family violence. The province's network of shelters for abused women and their children now comprises twelve transition houses, including one for First Nations women and their children, up from just one shelter in 1980, which was located in Fredericton. The province currently finances 80 percent of the costs of these essential institutions.

A lot of progress has also been made on the judicial front. Today, police are much more likely to lay charges against abusive men, and the sentences handed down by judges are more severe than they were in the 1980s and early 1990s. Beginning in the late 1980s, the provincial government also established a Victims Services Program, which helps prepare women and child abuse victims for court testimony and offers some financial compensation to victims of violent crime. In order to discourage abusers who continue to assault their female partners even after they have left home, the federal government in 1995 added a provision to the Criminal Code forbidding criminal harassment, which has since given rise to numerous charges.

Yet too many women still face the reality of violence in marriage and in common-law unions. Conservative estimates of the prevalence of spousal abuse suggest that about one woman in ten is abused by her current or ex-husband or by her common-law partner. Statistics Canada's 1999 General Social Survey found that some 8 percent of women reported experiencing at least one incident of spousal violence in the previous five years, down slightly from the 12 percent reported to the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey. We cannot say for certain, however, whether violence has increased or decreased over the past thirty years, since there are no baseline data for 1970, and the problem was not discussed as openly then as it is today. Even now, many abused women hesitate to report their problem, and so they go uncounted in the official statistics.

Women's shelters and transition houses across the province are currently dealing with an increasing number of crisis calls and visits from battered women and their children. Economic pressures and fear of retaliation still discourage some women

from leaving abusive homes or push them into returning. Rural dwellers in this very rural province may even today have to travel long distances to reach support services. Recent studies suggest that abused immigrant women in New Brunswick face particular barriers in accessing victim support services and the justice system, since they are generally economically dependent on their partners and often experience linguistic and cultural isolation. For all women, legislative constraints on the violent spouse may not be sufficiently strong, and too few aggressors are actually tried and punished by the courts.

## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Traditionally in Canada, the medical profession assumed that men and women were the same and experienced health problems in the same way. Drug companies routinely tested new drugs on populations of men and generalized the results to include women. As well, research on women-specific health issues such as breast cancer was notoriously underfunded.

In the year 2000, after years of lobbying by women's groups across the country, those in charge of our health care system have finally begun to view health issues through a "gender lens." In the 1990s, the federal government created a Women's Health Bureau within Health Canada. It developed a federal plan for gender equality in preparation for the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in 1995 and included a section on improving women's physical and psychological well-being. In addition, Health Canada began funding five Centres for Excellence in Women's Health across the country (the Maritime centre was located in Halifax), and in 1999 it announced a Women's Health Strategy.

The Maritime Centre for Excellence in Women's Health (MCEWH) is now generating a wealth of information about the state of women's health in the Atlantic region. We know, for example, that women today are much more stressed than men. According to a MCEWH report, in 1985 women across the country registered lower levels of stress than men – by more than 10 percent in the Atlantic provinces and 6 percent nation-wide. By 1991, however, female stress levels in Atlantic

Canada had increased markedly and exceeded male levels by more than 7 percent. In 1994–95, female levels of chronic stress had become markedly higher than male levels – by over 20 percent right across the country. And in 1998 female levels of stress in Canada were more than 30 percent higher than male levels. A similar pattern has emerged in New Brunswick since 1985, so that in 1998 female stress levels in this province were 30 percent higher than those of males. In the 1994–95 National Population Health Survey, 20 percent more Atlantic Canadian women than men also registered low levels of psychological well-being. Some researchers note that higher stress levels are inevitably suffered by women who not only work outside the home but also are burdened with a disproportionate share of child, household, and, increasingly, elder care.

We know as well that women suffer more from depression than men and are more likely to attempt suicide. According to Statistics Canada, a greater percentage of Canadian women in all age categories suffered at least one episode of clinical depression in 1996–97, compared to men. The highest rate was registered by women ages eighteen to nineteen (9 percent, compared to 4 percent of men in the same age group), dropping for women ages twenty to forty-four (7 percent compared to about 4 percent of men). At age fifty-five, the rate drops to 3 percent (2 percent for men) and continues to drop over the rest of their lives. By age seventy-five, only 1 percent of Canadian women in 1996–97 reported an episode of clinical depression. Canadian women also tend to have higher rates of suicide attempts than men although men have higher suicide death rates. For women the highest period of risk is ages forty to forty-nine, when the rate in 1997 was 8.2 suicide deaths per hundred thousand compared to 27.5 deaths per hundred thousand men. Suicide death rates are higher for some groups of women, in particular for Aboriginals.

As a consequence of these differences, women end up in hospital more often than men. The MCEWH report says that the Atlantic region has been bucking the national trend towards shorter hospital stays and has been showing an upward trend in the average length of hospital stays for the treatment of mental disorders. Women in particular have a 14 percent higher rate of

psychiatric hospitalization than men and a 21 percent higher rate of admissions to general hospitals for mental disorders.

The leading causes of death for women are heart disease and cancer. Statistics Canada data reveal that death from heart disease has dropped significantly for Canadian women in the past two decades, from 203 per hundred thousand in 1981 to 130 per hundred thousand in 1997. Heart disease is still less common among women than men, for whom the rate in 1997 was 231 per hundred thousand. Between 1981 and 1997 the breast cancer death rate for Canadian women decreased from 30 to 27 per hundred thousand, while the lung cancer death rate for women increased from 18 per hundred thousand in 1981 to 32 per hundred thousand in 1997. Many lung cancer deaths are a consequence of smoking. In 1997, 21 percent of all deaths from cancer among women were attributable to lung cancer compared to 18 percent attributed to breast cancer. This varies by age: women between thirty and fifty-nine are more likely to die from breast cancer, while women ages sixty to seventy-nine are more likely to die from lung cancer. Again, the death rate for all cancers for women is lower than for men, 149 per hundred thousand compared to 230 per hundred thousand in 1997.

Breast cancer is still the number one cancer to be diagnosed in women. Research done for the Maritime Centre for Excellence in Women's Health points out that increased use of mammography has reduced the breast cancer mortality rate in Canada, but that the Maritime provinces still have among the highest incidences of breast cancer in the country. For women ages thirty-five and older, the Atlantic region still registers the lowest mammogram-screening rate in the country, although for women ages fifty to sixty-nine, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island register higher screening rates than the rest of the country. The establishment of wellness clinics in the past few years, such as the Katherine Wright Family Wellness Centre in Moncton, has made regular mammograph testing almost an automatic procedure for women in this age group.

Some good news is that the widespread adoption of pap smear testing in the past three decades has dramatically decreased the incidence of cervical cancer, and as a consequence, mortality rates for the disease have fallen. Between 1969 and 1998,

according to the MCEWH, the incidence of the disease nationwide fell from 21.8 to 8.3 cases per hundred thousand, and the mortality rate from 7.4 to 2.2 deaths per hundred thousand. The report points out that most cervical cancer today is found in women who have never been tested or who have not been tested within the past three years. A higher percentage of women in the Atlantic provinces have been tested than in Canada as a whole. However, women in this region are the least likely to have been tested recently, and New Brunswick women are the least likely in the country to have been tested in the last three years.

Women, especially as they age, face many other women-specific health issues and problems. Menopause marks a turning point in a woman's life that can have both positive and negative connotations (in many ways, menopause is still treated as a medical phenomenon). Women often face barriers in getting information and support to manage their menopause – to understand the risks and benefits of hormone therapies, the risk of chronic conditions (such as heart disease, cancer, osteoporosis, stroke, diabetes), and the availability of health services to monitor, prevent, and treat menopausal discomfort. Osteoporosis continues to be a major enemy of women as they age, with falls and resulting bone fractures a frequent cause of hospitalization.

Another area of concern, particularly in New Brunswick, is obesity. A recent report by the Maritime Centre for Excellence in Women's Health noted that New Brunswickers have the highest rate of unhealthy body weight in the country. Fully 20 percent of New Brunswickers are obese compared to 12 percent in Canada: obese is defined as having a body weight in excess of 30 BMI (body-mass index), which is calculated by dividing weight by height. Overweight people have a much greater chance of suffering from high blood pressure, which is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease. The report suggests that obesity is related to lifestyle issues such as smoking, diet, and physical inactivity.

Women as they get older are more likely to suffer from obesity than men. A study carried out in Quebec found that one woman in four, twice as many women as men, between the ages of sixty

and sixty-four was obese. The study notes that obesity is closely associated with poverty, and that women ages sixty and older who are alone and often poor tend to be more obese, more frequently sick, and suffer from higher levels of psychological stress. The study also suggests that many elderly women, after a lifetime of making three meals a day for their families, lose interest in cooking and become malnourished.

Exercise helps keep people healthier as they age and provides both physical and psychological benefits. A report by the MCEWH notes that fifteen years ago Maritimers were more physically active than most Canadians, exercising more frequently in their spare time, while today all four Atlantic provinces rank significantly below the Canadian average. When the statistics are broken down by gender, however, they reveal that it is Atlantic Canadian men who have become sedentary. Women, in fact, have generally increased their rates of leisure-time physical activity quite dramatically since 1985 – by 24 per cent in Newfoundland, 15 percent in Nova Scotia, and 8 percent in New Brunswick. In recent years our adult female has increasingly taken charge of her own health and wellness, and a visitor today to local community centres or health clubs in towns throughout New Brunswick will see large numbers of women, from their twenties through to their sixties and beyond, enthusiastically lifting weights, running on treadmills, or participating in aerobics or acquasize classes.

Making a contribution to the community is another way of keeping healthy. The MCEWH, in fact, uses volunteerism levels as an indicator of mental health and points out that one of the great strengths of the Atlantic region has always been the willingness of its people to care for one another. This is reflected in Atlantic Canada's volunteerism rates, which are the highest in the country. The report estimates that New Brunswickers volunteer nearly a hundred million hours of their time per year. And while there has been a decline in formal volunteering since 1987 (by 4.7 percent across the country, 3.9 percent in New Brunswick), there has been an overall increase in informal volunteering, mainly by women, in response to changes in the health care system and reductions in hospital and social service spending, which have necessitated an increase in informal care. Statistics Canada reports that nation-wide, an

estimated 75 percent of women ages fifteen and over participate in some form of unstructured volunteer activity – outnumbering men in every age category except seniors – helping especially with housework, looking after children, or taking care of the sick and the elderly.

In 1970 our pre-senior woman nearing retirement age would probably have spent most of her life raising children and looking after a husband and home. If she did work for pay, she was probably a teacher, a secretary, a nurse, or a fish plant or farm worker. Such jobs rarely paid well, however, and her economic well-being, like that of her children, depended largely on the quality of her relationship with a man. In the year 2000, on the other hand, our woman in her early sixties could be in any number of situations. She might have stayed home with her children for a number of years or spent all of her active life in the workforce. Then again, she might have returned to school as a mature student, made one or more career changes, or even launched her own business. She may be well-known in her community as a volunteer, as an artist, or as a political leader or social activist. Or she may lead a less visible but quietly purposeful existence that revolves around her work, her hobbies, and her family and friends. As she enters her senior years, our woman, if she was both lucky and prudent, has consolidated her finances and made provisions for a decent retirement. One thing is likely, however – whether she is in a relationship or living alone, her ongoing domestic and caregiving obligations have tended to set her back in the struggle to achieve economic independence. In the next two decades of her life, she can look forward to new opportunities and new challenges as she enjoys the benefits of more leisure time and deals with the physical and social consequences of aging.

# CHAPTER 6

# The Senior Years (Age 65+)

A New Brunswick woman turning sixty-five in the year 2000 will have a life that is markedly different from what her counterpart might have experienced three decades earlier. Not only has there been a minor revolution in the way people age in Canada, but there has also been an equally profound change in the way people think about the older population. The elderly today have more money compared to three decades ago, they are in better physical and mental shape, and they play a more central role in today's society. They also have more political clout. Who will ever forget the feisty elderly woman berating the then prime minister Brian Mulroney and calling him Charlie Brown on national television in 1985, when his government was attempting to lower the indexation of the old age security?

There was a time when the subject of aging conjured up images of physical decline, poor health, social isolation, and poverty, but today the senior population is vital and active. They are changing the perception of old age, as are movements like the "third age," which originated in France during the 1970s, and "gray power" in Canada during the 1980s. Seniors are also better organized than ever before, and their organizations are attempting to redefine the social role of retirees. Many people no longer consider age sixty-five as old.

In New Brunswick, these movements were reflected in the establishment of the Université du troisième âge at the Université de Moncton and in the New Brunswick Senior Citizens Federation, which has existed since the early 1970s and which a decade later was meeting regularly with the premier and his cabinet to give them a list of demands. Throughout the 1990s, both the federation and its francophone counterpart continued to be politically active and to have the ear of government.

Seniors, however, are not a homogeneous group. In fact, there are a variety of things that can make their living conditions and quality of life very different. In 1967, at the New Brunswick Conference on Senior Citizens held in Fredericton, there seemed to be little recognition, at least in the conference report, of the different issues facing senior men versus senior women. Instead, their problems were being addressed holus-bolus.

Today, however, with agencies such as Statistics Canada beginning to collect statistics by gender, it has become obvious that there are significant differences in the way older people live, and a lot of them have to do with gender. Senior women in New Brunswick today live longer than men, and many live poorer. And because they have longer life expectancies, many will be alone in their declining years.

There is a continuity in life that links a person's working life with her retirement. Those who had access to a good job and good living conditions before retirement will, in all likelihood, enjoy a comfortable life after retirement. Because many of the women in New Brunswick who are over sixty-five today faced a segmented labour market, limited accessibility to good-paying jobs, and discrimination on the job, and because many spent much of their lives involved in unpaid labour at home, they will not fare as well in retirement as many of their male counterparts.

As Pierre-Joseph Ulysse notes in a 30-year overview of population aging in Canada: "It is the opportunities or constraints encountered specifically on the labour market that determine the quality of life at retirement and the level of dependence on government transfer payments." As we will see, senior women in New Brunswick today are still much more dependent than senior men on government transfers such as the old age security, despite the fact that seniors' incomes overall have improved dramatically in the past three decades.

Support services for seniors in New Brunswick have also changed dramatically in the past thirty years. There are more good quality nursing homes for the small minority who will need them in their final years, and more support services to help seniors stay in their homes. These include private home care services, volunteer-run services such as Meals on Wheels, and, of course, the informal home care network which has always existed, composed largely of women who assume the burden of caring for aging family members.

Their work in the cash-strapped 1990s has increased, as governments, faced with debt reduction and deficit control, have downloaded many services onto the private sector and/or

the community. As the new millennium begins, the health care system is under strain, creating the possibility that some seniors, especially those unable to fend for themselves, will fall through the cracks. The most vulnerable among these in New Brunswick in the year 2000 are senior women living alone.

## SENIOR WOMEN: DOMINATING THE 65+ AGE GROUP

### Snapshot of New Brunswick Women Ages 65 and Older

- Of New Brunswick women ages 65 and over in 1996, 43.7 percent had less than grade nine; almost 68 percent had not finished high school. This compares to 55.2 percent of men with less than grade nine and 70.2 percent of men who had not finished high school. Of Canadian women ages 65 and over in 1996, 36.8 percent had less than grade nine; almost 63 percent had not finished high school. This compares to 36.9 percent of Canadian men with less than grade nine and 59 percent who had not finished high school.
- In 1996, only 3.1 percent of New Brunswick women ages 65 and over compared to 5.6 percent of New Brunswick men had a university degree. In 1996, 6 percent of Canadian women ages 65 and over compared to 10.7 percent of men had a university degree.
- In 1996 in New Brunswick, only 2.3 percent of women ages 65 and over were in the paid workforce compared to 8.0 percent of men in this age group. In 1999, 3 percent of Canadian women 65 and over were in the paid workforce compared to 10 percent of Canadian men.
- In 1999, 22 percent of Canadian women ages 65 and over had never been part of the paid workforce compared to 11 percent of women ages 55-64 and 5 percent of women ages 25-54 who had never been part of the paid workforce. Only 2.6 percent of men ages 65 and over had never been part of the paid workforce.

*Source:* Statistics Canada, 1996 Census.

Increased life expectancies and decreased fertility are contributing to the "greying" of the population in both New Brunswick and Canada as a whole. According to Statistics Canada, people ages sixty-five and over represented 8.6 percent of the province's population in 1971 and 12.9 percent in 1998. This compares to 8 percent in Canada as a whole in 1971 and 12.3 percent in 1998. The slight difference between the two sets of figures is explained mainly by the outmigration of youth from New Brunswick.

The fastest-growing segment of the population is women over sixty-five. In 1971 women ages sixty-five and over represented 9.5 percent of the total female population in New Brunswick and 9 percent of the total female population in Canada. In 1999 they represented 15 percent in New Brunswick and 14 percent in Canada as a whole. This will increase as the baby boom generation turns sixty-five. According to projections by Statistics Canada, 16 percent of Canadian women will be sixty-five and over by 2011, and 23 percent will be sixty-five and over by 2026.

Women represent roughly 50 percent of each age group in Canada until the age of sixty-five. In 1999, according to Statistics Canada, Canadian women represented 57 percent of the population sixty-five years of age and over. Broken down by age within the senior population, Canadian women represented 53 percent of the population ages sixty-five to seventy-four, 60 percent of people ages seventy-five to eighty-four, and 70 percent of people ages eighty-five and over. Women have a greater life expectancy than men – eighty-one years compared to seventy-five – and will therefore increasingly dominate the senior population.

What are the implications of the fact that women represent a growing proportion of the aging population? We know that a large percentage of senior women live in poverty, and we also know that there is a direct correlation between poverty and poor health. Women are significant consumers in the health care system, and this will increase with the size of the female population over sixty-five. Together, these facts have worrying implications for a health care system already in crisis.

Like other Atlantic Canadians, New Brunswickers have a reputation for being friendlier than people in the rest of the country, for being more caring and more willing to lend a helping hand to those in need. But will this be enough to sustain and support the population of the province as it ages? Many elderly people in New Brunswick live in rural areas where there is little public transportation and limited or non-existent support systems. Given the present economic conditions, what will be needed and what will be done in the coming years to ensure that seniors, and especially senior

women who are the most vulnerable, continue to enjoy a good quality of life in the new millennium?

## INCOME: SENIOR WOMEN LIVING IN POVERTY

Old women's poverty is not the result of an accident. They are poor in old age because most of them have devoted their lives without pay to their husbands and families and were led to believe that if anything happened they would be taken care of. When they become widows ... the vast majority find that the promised security does not exist.

– Louise Dulude, *Women and Aging: A report on the Rest of Our Lives.*

The incomes of elderly people in Canada have improved significantly over the past few decades, largely because of a number of policy and program changes made at the federal level since the 1950s. It began with the introduction of a universal public pension scheme, the old age security (OAS), which was established in 1952 to guarantee a minimum income for all seniors. The OAS was initially targeted to those over seventy – no means test was required – but the age of eligibility was gradually reduced to 65 in the late 1960s. Because of the poverty of many seniors, OAS benefits were tied to the consumer price index in the early 1970s.

Two other programs were later added to remedy the situation of those worse off: the guaranteed income supplement (GIS) in 1967, to supplement seniors with no source of income other than the OAS, and the spouse's allowance (SA), which was introduced in 1975 and is paid to sixty- to sixty-four-year-old spouses of GIS recipients as well as widows who have never remarried (low-income single and divorced people ages sixty to sixty-four are not entitled to have these benefits nor are low-income married people with spouses under sixty-five). Benefits of both are also indexed to the consumer price index. The OAS, GIS, and SA are funded by the national treasury.

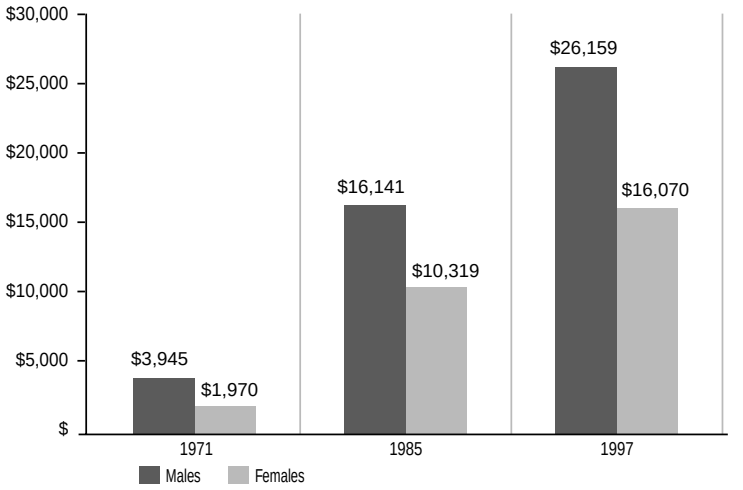
In 1966 the federal government launched the Canada Pension Plan (the Quebec government launched the QPP at the same

time); participation in the plan is compulsory for all workers ages eighteen to seventy. Contributions are made by employers and employees based on earnings, and benefits are related to contributions. The C/QPP provides benefits, although reduced, to a surviving spouse upon the death of a beneficiary. For people who have been part of the workforce since the mid-1960s and therefore have had a chance to contribute to the plan, the C/QPP has become an increasingly significant source of retirement income.

The 1970s and 1980s also saw a growth in private company pension plans, although many were not indexed to the consumer price index, nor did they necessarily provide benefits to surviving spouses. This trend has been reversed in the 1990s, with fewer jobs in Canada providing access to company pension plans.

Figure 13 and table 6 are interesting because they show the gender income gap for seniors and how income sources have changed in relative importance over the years as a result of these measures.

**Figure 13.**
Income for Canadians Ages 65 and Over,
by Gender, 1971, 1985, 1997




*Sources:* Statistics Canada, *Pensions and Incomes of the Elderly in Canada, 1971-85*, cat. no. 13-548; for 1997, Statistics Canada, *A Portrait of Seniors in Canada, 1999*, cat. no. 89-519-XPE.

**Table 6.**
Sources of Income for Canadians Ages 65 and Over,
by Gender, 1971, 1985, 1997

| | 1971 | | 1985 | | 1997 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sources** | **Males** | **Females** | **Males** | **Females** | **Males** | **Females** |
| Private pension | 16.5 | 8.6 | 20.5 | 9.0 | 26.5 | 13.2 |
| CPP/QPP | 2.2 | 1.1 | 15.5 | 10.1 | 21.1 | 21.8 |
| OAS/GIS | 29.3 | 60.5 | 26.1 | 45.2 | 21.2 | 38.1 |
| Investment income | 20.5 | 19.7 | 21.2 | 28.0 | 10.7 | 12.7 |
| Other income | 31.6 | 10.1 | 16.8 | 7.8 | 12.1 | 5.5 |
| RRSPs | - | - | - | - | 4.7 | 4.5 |
| Other govt. transfers | - | - | - | - | 3.7 | 4.2 |

*Sources:* Statistics Canada, *Pensions and Incomes of the Elderly in Canada, 1971–85*, cat. no. 13-548; for 1997, Statistics Canada, *A Portrait of Seniors in Canada, 1999*, cat. no. 89-519-XPE.

In 1971 the OAS/GIS represented 60.5 percent of income for females ages 65 and over and 29.3 percent of income for males. By 1997 the relative importance of the OAS had dropped. Although the federal government tried to reduce indexation of the OAS in 1985 (it backed down following political pressure from seniors) and began to claw it back from wealthier seniors in the late 1980s, the OAS continues to be a significant source of revenue for women, representing 38 percent of their total income in 1997 compared to 21 percent of the income for males.

Table 6 shows the increasing importance of the CPP/QPP as a revenue source. In 1971 it was an insignificant source overall because the plan had only been introduced in 1966. By 1997, however, the plan had matured, and it represented 21 percent of total income for both men and women. (According to Statistics Canada, this figure is a bit deceptive, because in actual dollars, senior men received, on average, over two thousand dollars more per year in CPP benefits than senior women.)

Private pensions account for a much greater proportion of income for men than women – 26 percent and 13 percent respectively. This reflects the fact that jobs with pension plan benefits are more accessible to men than to women. "Other

income" in table 6 refers mainly to income from employment or self-employment.

Because of these measures, Statistics Canada reports that since the early 1980s the incomes of seniors have risen faster than those of people under sixty-five. In fact, with inflation taken into account, the average income of people ages sixty-five and over in 1997 was 18 percent higher than it was in 1981, whereas for people ages fifteen to sixty-four in 1997, it actually declined. As many writers have noted, the face of poverty in Canada in the past few decades has shifted from the elderly to single-parent families consisting mainly of women and children.

However, while there have been improvements, seniors still have lower incomes, on average, than people in almost all other age groups except for fifteen- to twenty-four- year-olds. And when we break down the statistics on seniors by gender and living situation (married, unattached), there are still striking inequalities.

There is no official "poverty line" in Canada, although Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off (LICO) is widely used as an indicator of poverty. LICOs are calculated based on the percentage of income that a family spends on food, shelter, and clothing as well as on the size of the community where a person lives. On that basis, unattached seniors (defined as living alone or in a household with no relatives), and particularly unattached women, have one of the highest poverty rates of any group in Canada.

Statistics Canada figures show that 49 percent of unattached Canadian women over sixty-five and thirty-three percent of unattached men of the same age were living below the poverty level in 1997. The 1970 report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women found comparable figures, noting that about half of all women age sixty-five or older who were on their own were living in poverty. These figures were actually higher in 1982, when 70.4 percent of unattached Canadian women sixty-five and over were found to be living in poverty compared to 52.3 percent of unattached men of the same age.

In New Brunswick, 74.5 percent of unattached senior women were living in poverty in 1982, dropping to 45.9 percent in 1997.

Table 7 illustrates these changes. It shows, for example, that in 1997 only 6 percent of senior couples in Canada lived in poverty, down from 13.3 percent in 1982. Overall, 24 percent of Canadian women ages sixty-five and over and 11.7 percent of men of the same age were considered poor in 1997 compared to 19.7 percent of New Brunswick women ages sixty-five and over and 8 percent of men. Poverty rates are lower in New Brunswick than in Canada as a whole because of higher rates of home ownership and a greater proportion of the population living in rural areas, where living costs (and thus LICOs) are lower.

**Table 7.**
Percentage of 65+ Living below LICOs, by Gender and Living Arrangements, 1982, 1997

| | 1982 | | 1997 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Living arrangements** | **NB** | **Canada** | **NB** | **Canada** |
| Eldery, married couples | n/a | 13.3% | n/a | 6% |
| Elderly female | 34.7% | 36.1% | 19.7% | 24.1% |
| Elderly male | 24.3% | 20% | 8% | 11.7% |
| Elderly female, unattached | 74.5% | 70.4% | 45.9% | 49.1% |
| Elderly male, unattached | 62.9% | 52.3% | 36.3%* | 33.3% |

*Source:* Statistics Canada, *Income Trends in Canada*, 1980-97 (1999), CD-ROM.
* Figure for 1994; later years not available.

According to Statistics Canada, in 1997 New Brunswick women ages sixty-five and over had an average annual income of $14,604 compared to $22,423 for their male counterparts. Nation-wide, the figures were $16,070 for senior women compared to $26,150 for men. What are the reasons for this disparity? Why are so many women living in poverty in their senior years? One reason is that New Brunswick women ages sixty-five and older today were expected, by and large, to spend a good part of their lives as homemakers – taking care of children, a home, and husband. Many were never a part of the paid labour force, so they had no opportunity to contribute to the CPP. A second reason is that those who were part of the labour force often had low-paid, part-time jobs that limited their CPP contributions, jobs that were not covered by private pensions. As a result, many New Brunswick women have never been able to set aside money for retirement.

Some see a light at the end of the tunnel, that given the dramatic increase in the number of women in the paid workforce over the past three decades, the economic situation of senior women should improve in the future. To some extent this is true, although such optimism is tempered by a number of factors.

First, women in New Brunswick still dominate in the low-paid, part-time, seasonal occupational sectors, where pay equity is non-existent. In addition, they continue to shoulder the disproportionate share of child care and family responsibilities which leaves them with less time and energy to devote to a career. And in what can only be regarded as an insult to these women, there is still no recognition of the value of such unpaid labour, the amount of which will only increase as they assume the burden of caring for aging parents.

Another factor that tells against the likelihood of any sudden improvement in the lot of senior women is that there was a structural change in the paid workforce in the 1990s: jobs increasingly became nonstandard, nonunionized, and contractual or were created through self-employment. Consequently, job security, and especially jobs accompanied by pension plans, is becoming a thing of the past. And finally, women live longer than men, with the result that most women will eventually be living on their own. All of these factors combined point to a need to reexamine the existing support system for poor seniors, the majority of whom in New Brunswick are unattached women, in an attempt to reduce poverty and ensure the financial security of women in old age. However, this is not what happened in the 1990s.

During that period, as governments on both the federal and provincial levels struggled with fiscal restraint by dramatically cutting health and social programs, some right wing groups attempted to redefine poverty. Researchers, for example, at the Fraser Institute in British Columbia began questioning the validity of Statistics Canada's low-income cut-offs, claiming that they are set too high and are not a real indication of poverty. The result was a proposal sponsored by the provincial and territorial ministers of social services and Human Resources Development Canada to develop a needs-based

measure of poverty. It was called the market basket measure (MBM), and according to some writers it was an attempt "to define away poverty."

If during the 1970s and 1980s in Canada there was a real concern about the poverty of seniors, the government focus in the 1990s was on reforming programs to, in effect, reduce the overall amount of money going to seniors (or at least to those in higher income brackets). In the 1995 budget, the federal government announced it would abolish the OAS and GIS and replace them with a new tax-free, income-tested seniors benefit to take effect in 2001. A key element of the proposed change was that income testing would be based on family income rather than on individual income, which is to say that a married woman's right to benefits would depend on the income of her spouse or partner.

Women in New Brunswick and the rest of Canada were outraged, since the change would reduce the amount of income they would receive, given that men generally have higher incomes than women. To understand their reaction, we have to remember that for women who have never worked outside the home, the OAS is often the only money they receive in their own names. The plan has since been scrapped, but pension reform remains on the government agenda. Given its preoccupation with cutting costs, few are optimistic that any future changes to these programs will benefit senior women.

If governments had the will, there are a number of ways it could improve the financial situation of elderly women, starting with an increase in the level of the OAS/GIS. Statistics Canada figures for 1996, for example, show that the maximum benefit available to a single individual through OAS and GIS combined was $10,426. The LICO for a single individual in that year, based on 1992 expenditure patterns, ranged from $11,839 for those living in rural areas to $17,132 for those in cities with a population of more than five hundred thousand. Clearly, a person whose only income is the OAS/GIS will inevitably be poor.

The government could remedy the situation by simply increasing these benefits. Over the years, women's groups, including the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status

of Women (NBACSW), have made this argument and have also urged that the OAS should be re-designed in such a way as to recognize women's unpaid caregiving work. Others have argued that a homemaker pension should be built into the CPP.

Monica Townson, in her report *Reducing Poverty among Older Women*, argues that since most women do not have access to private employer-sponsored pension plans or RRSPs, the CPP is an integral part of their retirement income. She suggests that the CPP offers a number of advantages not found in private pension plans that are particularly important for women: the CPP covers all sectors of the economy, it includes part-time and self-employed workers, it is completely portable, it is indexed to inflation, and it recognizes family responsibilities (i.e., periods when a worker had a child under the age of seven may be excluded from the calculation of average earnings on which the pension will be based). CPP pensions can also be shared on divorce, and spouses may share CPP pensions at retirement.

For all these reasons says Townson, reform of the CPP could be a key element in a comprehensive strategy to improve the incomes of elderly women. The NBACSW has made the same argument time and again over the years and has also recommended that the CPP be reformed to ensure that same-sex spouses receive the same survivor benefits as heterosexual spouses.

In any event, the conclusions of Louise Dulude in her 1978 report on women and aging for the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women still seem pertinent in the year 2000. Solutions, she writes, should be directed at changing the conditions that at present are responsible for plunging many senior women into destitution: "Educators, career counsellors, governments, labour unions and employers must launch major programs to ensure that women are properly trained and given equal access to jobs and pension plans in the paid labour force. We must also reach a consensus on the importance of women's child-caring and home-making roles and on the extent to which all or part of these activities should be promoted by public policy."

## HEALTH AND SENIOR WOMEN

Improved health care has increased the life expectancy of both women and men in New Brunswick, but it has not always guaranteed that those additional years will be spent in good health. One of the determinants of a healthy old age is a comfortable income, and that, as we have seen, is enjoyed by more men than women. We can conclude, therefore, that health in later life is often a product of income, which is often a product of gender.

There is in fact, convincing evidence that people with higher incomes are more likely to be in good health than those with lower incomes. As Pierre-Joseph Ulysse notes in a thirty-year overview of population aging in Canada, low-income seniors have more physical and mental health problems than seniors who are well off, and women experience more of these problems than men. In short, those who are poor, non-Causasian, and less-educated are more likely to suffer ill health than the affluent and the well-educated. Even at age eighty, he says, women in the top income category are more likely to enjoy better health than seventy-year-old women who are semi- or unskilled.

Coronary heart disease is still the number one killer of both senior men and women, although a greater percentage of men than women are affected. According to a study by Stokes and Lindsay, mortality rates for coronary heart disease in Canada have fallen since the mid-1970s, largely because of advances in technology and better lifestyles, although the disease continues to kill thousands each year. As well, there has been a decline in the prevalence of infectious illnesses over the past three decades and a corresponding increase in degenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's disease and various forms of cancer. Women over sixty-five are twice as likely as men to get Alzheimer's. According to Health Canada, in 1996 coronary heart disease was the leading cause of death among senior Canadian women ages sixty-five to seventy-four (unchanged since 1951), followed by lung cancer, breast cancer (fifth in 1951), stroke, and colorectal cancer. Women are also more prone than men to suffer from osteoporosis, chronic diseases, broken bones from falls, and vision problems.

Women in Canada may live, on average, six years longer than men, but their later years are marked by disability and illness. According to Health Canada, women spend more days in hospital than men. In the year 2000, some 88 percent of women ages sixty-five and over have a health problem. The department acknowledges that many of these problems can be attributed to the fact that women are, on average, poorer than men and more vulnerable to inadequate nutrition and to difficulty in accessing uninsured health care for such things as medications. Older women are also more likely to live alone and with inadequate social and material supports. And when living with their spouse, they are usually the one providing care in the event of illness or disability.

On the other hand, when asked to rate their own health, 1996–97 data from Statistics Canada indicate that 78 percent of Canadian women over sixty-five considered their health to be good to excellent. This changes as a person ages, however. Almost 83 percent of women ages sixty-five to seventy-four considered their health good to excellent compared to 73 percent of women ages seventy-five to eighty-four and 70 percent of women ages eighty-five and older.

Statistics Canada reports that in 1997, 47 percent of women aged sixty-five and older and 53 percent of men of the same ages took part in regular physical activity. Senior women in New Brunswick today are more likely to be involved in programs to keep healthy, from Elderhostel learning adventures to exercise programs geared specifically to women to shopping mall walking clubs. Services such as blood pressure clinics offered in drug stores have become a regular part of life in many New Brunswick communities. (For the results of a study by the Maritime Centre for Excellence in Women's Health on the fitness of senior women in Atlantic Canada, see Chapter 5, "Health and Wellness.")

There is also a difference based on gender as it affects mental health issues faced by the elderly. Two of the major problems are depression and suicide. According to Statistics Canada, the suicide death rate is higher for elderly men than elderly women, and has been rising continually since 1978. In 1997 the suicide death rate for men ages sixty to seventy-nine was roughly 20

per hundred thousand population compared to 5 per hundred thousand for women. The suicide death rate drops dramatically after age eighty. The reasons for suicide are related to living alone, physical illness, widowhood/widowerhood, and social isolation. According to Statistics Canada, a greater percentage of women in every age category suffer from depression compared to men, and that includes, of course, the population over sixty-five. (For more on depression and suicide as they affect senior women, see chapter 5, "Health and Wellness.")

However, there has been an interesting change in the mental health of seniors in the past few decades. In a study by Stokes and Lindsay published in 1999, it was reported that psychological well-being among Canadians increases with age. In fact, the odds of seniors reporting a high sense of psychological well-being were as much as five times those of teens. The report notes that the opposite was the case in the late 1970s, when there was an inverse relationship between psychological well-being and age – that is, that well-being declined with increasing age. The authors attribute these changes to the overall improvement in the social and economic situation of seniors in Canada over the past three decades. Poor mental health is now most common among youth.

The report does not give provincial breakdowns by age group, although it does assign overall scores. Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island respondents reported the highest sense of coherence, the most happiness, and the least amount of depression and distress of all the provinces in Canada. In New Brunswick, overall, 75 per cent of people said they were happy and interested in life, and 4 percent said they were depressed. This compares to 74 percent of people in Canada who reported being happy and interested in life and 6 percent who said they were depressed. There is obviously something to be said for living in Atlantic Canada.

## SOCIAL BONDS, COMMUNITY INTEGRATION, AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

There is also a relationship between income, health, social status, and social integration. Senior women in New Brunswick

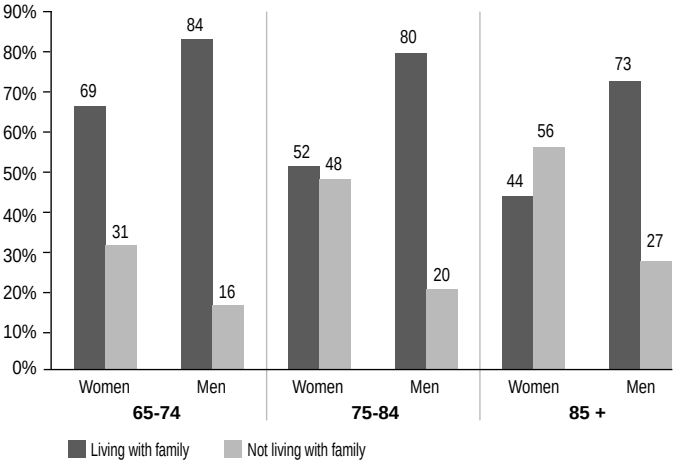
who have family and friends and who are integrated into social networks in the community are much more likely to enjoy good health and to report feeling happy than those who are not. Lilley & Campbell, in a report on aging in Atlantic Canada, point out that low self-esteem among the elderly can lead to feelings of powerlessness and uselessness, which can undermine a person's desire and ability to care for herself. There are many factors that contribute to low self-esteem, including social isolation, ageist attitudes, forced retirement, and lack of family and community support.

A New Brunswick study carried out in 1999 by a St. Thomas University researcher found that widowhood is a major life experience that often has a negative effect on an individual's self-image. For many women, especially after a long and happy marriage, becoming a widow means taking on an unwanted and stigmatized social status: "Widows communicate this lower status by characterizing their social world as a 'couples world' in which they need to develop strategies to maintain relationships with their friends, with men, and with their children. Their friends often 'drop them,' their children may treat them like children, and men may misinterpret their actions." Given the greater life expectancy of women compared to men, widowhood is inevitably a common experience for many senior women and one that demands major adjustments in behaviour and lifestyle.

Another factor contributing to low self-esteem is the abuse and even violence suffered by some seniors, especially if family members are involved. A 2000 report by Statistics Canada found that in 1997 adults ages sixty-five and older in Canada accounted for 2 percent of all victims of violent crime, and in almost one-quarter of the incidents, family members were the perpetrators. Police statistics reveal that older men are more likely to be victimized by their adult children (41 percent) than by their spouse (28 percent), while older women are victimized equally as often by their adult children (40 percent) as by their spouse (40 percent). The report suggests that victimization of older women by their spouses is a continuation of violence that began earlier in the relationship and that women are reluctant to reveal such abuse because of self-blame, fear of exposing family problems, and anxiety about leaving a long-term relationship.

It goes without saying that living arrangements are extremely important to everyone, including the elderly, and though the common view is that seniors inevitably finish their lives in institutions, that is not the reality for most of them. In New Brunswick in 1996, 92.5 percent of women ages sixty-five and over lived in private households, and only 7.5 percent lived in institutions; this compares to 95.4 percent of men who lived in private households and 4.6 percent who lived in institutions. Women are more likely than men to end up in an institution, again because they live longer. New Brunswick closely follows Canadian trends in this respect, although senior women in this province are somewhat more likely to live at home than in an institution. In Canada as a whole in 1996, 91 percent of women ages sixty-five and over lived in private households, and 9 percent lived in institutions; for men 95 percent lived in private households and 5 percent in institutions. Figure 14 breaks down the living arrangements of senior women and men in private households in New Brunswick in 1996.

**Figure 14.**
Seniors Living in Private Households, by Gender,
in New Brunswick, 1996




*Source:* Statistics Canada, Data files from 1996 Census.

It will be noted that only 18 percent of New Brunswick women over eighty-five still live with a spouse compared to 59 percent of men (in Canada, l1 percent and 56 percent respectively); 39 percent of women ages seventy-four to eighty-five live with a

spouse compared to 75 percent of men (in Canada, 31 percent and 73 percent respectively); and 61 percent of women ages sixty-five to seventy-four live with a spouse compared to 80 percent of men (in Canada, 55 percent and 80 percent respectively). Interestingly, senior women in New Brunswick are more likely to continue living with a spouse and/or family than senior women in Canada as a whole.

The percentage of New Brunswick women living alone almost doubles from ages sixty-five to eighty-five, from 29 percent to 52 percent, compared to 14 percent of men ages sixty-five to seventy-four and 24 percent of men over eighty-five. In Canada as a whole, 29.8 percent of women lived alone at ages sixty-five to seventy-four, compared to 57.8 percent of women over eighty-five. This compares to 13.8 percent of men ages sixty-five to seventy-four and 28.6 percent of men over eighty-five.

Again, New Brunswick women, as they age, are less likely to live alone than their Canadian counterparts. The differences between New Brunswick and Canada as a whole reflect, perhaps, a lower divorce rate and more family supports in New Brunswick compared to the rest of the country.

Living arrangements of the noninstitutionalized elderly have changed since the 1970s. More now live with their spouses or as unattached individuals, and fewer share a household with younger relatives. According to Health Canada, 16 percent of seniors over sixty-five lived in an extended family in 1971 compared to 11 percent in 1981, and 7 percent in 1996. Seniors in Newfoundland are the most likely to live in an extended family setting (12 percent in 1996) compared to 9 percent in the rest of the Atlantic provinces including New Brunswick. The rate is higher in the Atlantic region, perhaps because stronger family ties make it more natural for an elderly parent to move in with a child. Overall, the elderly are able to live more independently than they did in the past because of better incomes.

In any event, as Pierre-Joseph Ulysse notes in his thirty-year overview of population aging in Canada, the myth of abandonment of the elderly by younger members of their family cannot withstand the empirical evidence presented in the literature. Despite the structural transformations it is

undergoing, he argues, the family is still a source of interaction and support for a large proportion of the Canadian population. It provides a high quality of help to its oldest members and offers them emotional, social, and practical support. In fact, he believes that during this period of limited resources, the family is in the process of taking over from the state by providing continued home care and social supports for family members as they grow older.

## HOME CARE AND INSTITUTIONS

As noted above, only a small percentage of seniors in New Brunswick live in institutions, 7.5 percent of women over age sixty-five compared to 4.6 percent of men. This varies by age, of course, as shown in table 8.

**Table 8.**
Percentage of Seniors Living in Institutions versus Private Households, New Brunswick, 1996

| | Women | | Men | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | Private households | Institutions | Private households | Institutions |
| 65–74 | 98.2 | 1.8 | 97.9 | 2.1 |
| 75–84 | 92.3 | 7.7 | 94.1 | 5.9 |
| 85 & over | 69.1 | 30.9 | 80.0 | 20.0 |
| Total: 65 & over | 92.5 | 7.5 | 95.4 | 4.6 |

*Source:* Statistics Canada, data files from the 1996 census.

The living arrangements of senior women can change for a variety of reasons. A 2000 study carried out in Moncton among the francophone population, published in *L'Acadie au féminin*, found that senior women today often change their living arrangements not because of frailty but because of economics. Abrupt widowhood may mean that a woman who has worked at home all her life is suddenly without the finances to keep and maintain a home. For whatever reason (her husband's poor planning or lack of insurance) a woman may be forced to sell

her home and move in with one of her children or into a small apartment, or her children may move in with her.

For a senior woman ages sixty-five and older, living in New Brunswick who needs help with everyday chores, whether in her home or in an institution, there are many more options in the year 2000 than there were three decades ago. Since 1981, for example, New Brunswick has had the Extra-Mural hospital, a "hospital without walls," which allows patients to cut short their hospital stay and be treated at home instead.

Thirty years ago, nursing homes for seniors were relatively unknown in New Brunswick. Today, the province has a network of 530 special-care homes and another 61 nursing homes. The Family and Community Social Services Division of the Department of Family and Community Services administers long-term home support services and long-term residential care for seniors under the Long-Term Care Program.

In the early 1990s, the province introduced what it called a "single point entry" for senior care, with those needing the lowest level of care (levels 1 and 2) going into the special-care homes and those needing higher levels of care (levels 3 and 4) being eligible for nursing homes. A senior applying to the provincial Department of Family and Community Services (her family may apply for her) will be assessed physically, mentally, and financially (her ability to pay). The province will cover up to $2,040 per month for those in need, while seniors with means are expected to pay their own way.

In the year 2000, there are almost four thousand residents of nursing homes in New Brunswick, of which 70 percent are women and 30 percent are men. The average ages are 82.9 years for women and 79.6 years for men, according to the provincial nursing home association. All but one nursing home in the province are nonprofit, and they are run by volunteer boards of directors. The special-care homes are privately owned and run for profit – although like daycare centres, there is little profit to be made from caring for the elderly – with 80 percent having fewer than ten residents.

The Long-Term Care Program applies as well to home care services. The province will cover the cost of private home care services such as Red Cross homemakers or Meals on Wheels, although seniors with money are again expected to pay. In New Brunswick, 83 percent of long-term clients in 1997–98 were seniors, with the rest being disabled adults and children with special needs. According to the Provincial/Territorial Home Care Programs report, New Brunswick spent $105 per capita on home care in 1997–98 compared to a high of $124 in Manitoba and a low of $33 in Prince Edward Island. The report cautions, however, that it is difficult to compare spending on home care between provinces because the existing system is relatively new and includes a mishmash of programs which vary from province to province.

New Brunswick's support system for institutional care and home care for seniors was streamlined throughout the 1990s and is now considered fairly comprehensive, although like the rest of the health care system, it is facing major challenges. In 1997, for example, eligibility criteria for nursing home care became much more restrictive, that is, a person's needs must be much greater now than ever before for them to be accepted into a nursing home. In the special care homes, level 1 and 2 care used to be subsidized at $36 and $68 per day respectively (the level 2 subsidy is higher because the level of care is greater), but the Liberal government eliminated the level 2 rate and provided the same subsidy for both levels. The $68 rate was reinstated when the Conservatives were elected in 1998 pending a review. The provincial government has occasionally threatened to include the family home when calculating a patient's ability to pay, but it has not done so yet because of opposition from seniors and their families.

It is clear that institutional and home care support for seniors in New Brunswick is strained, and the situation will only get worse as the population ages. In the latter part of the 1990s, federal, provincial, and territorial governments began to focus on home care. In 1998 the first national conference on home care was organized jointly by Health Canada and the province of Nova Scotia and held in Halifax, where initial attempts were made to begin developing the home care sector as an important part of the health care system in Canada.

Women have always been major providers of informal home care in Canada. Statistics Canada's General Social Survey in 1996 reported that there were 2.8 million Canadians who provided informal care in the home to someone with a long-term health problem or disability. Most informal caregivers were between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-four, with the largest group consisting of women ages forty-five to sixty-four, although senior women are also major providers of home care, in particular for ailing husbands.

Women also provide much of the home care in the formal home care system – in New Brunswick represented by the New Brunswick Extra-Mural Hospital or Red Cross homemakers. And as they age, women are also the greatest consumers of home care. There are problems with the system, however, and according to most observers, the solutions involve standardizing home care (for both consumers and workers), recognizing the value of the informal system, and giving some status to families and particularly to women in the home care system. In the coming years, home care will of necessity become a significant part of the health care system if senior women in New Brunswick, many of whom are poor and living alone, are to remain in their communities and out of institutions.

## WHO WILL CARE FOR THE CAREGIVER?

In the past three decades, seniors in New Brunswick have made many gains. Overall, their incomes have improved, their health is better, and as a group they command more respect and recognition. Seniors are also living longer and many are living better. And the percentage of senior couples living in poverty in New Brunswick today is very small, around 5 percent.

Senior women, however, and especially those living alone, remain vulnerable. Almost half of unattached senior women in New Brunswick live in poverty, based on Statistics Canada low-income cut-off levels, although the situation has improved significantly since the early 1980s, when three-quarters of New Brunswick senior unattached women in the province were considered poor. Services to seniors have also improved, from nursing and special care homes to home care services and a

variety of programs that help them exercise, live actively, and enjoy life.

The common theme that runs through the lives of women is that they are the caregivers. Most senior women in New Brunswick in the year 2000 have devoted their lives to raising children and taking care of their families and the people around them, often neglecting their own needs in the process. Therefore, the question in the year 2000 is, who will care for the caregiver when she is no longer able to care for herself?

New Brunswick women over sixty-five and especially those over eighty are the fastest-growing segment of the aging population. Given their greater life expectancy compared to men, many women will spend their declining years living alone. Will the support services be there that will allow them to stay in their own home, to connect with other people socially and emotionally, and to live with grace and dignity? Will they have affordable and accessible housing options? And will their health needs be met?

Given the overwhelming research that exists about the relationship between income and health, will governments find ways to ensure that those in need are provided for and that the fate of elderly women is not a life of poverty? Senior women in New Brunswick have made many gains in the past three decades, but the fiscal realities of the 1990s have threatened and continue to threaten those gains. As the curtain rises on the new millennium, the challenges that await are many.

# CONCLUSION

The publication of Growing Up Female in New Brunswick 1970–2000 records part of the history of the second wave of feminism in this province. The late 1960s are often referred to as the consciousness-raising period, which led to the development of a solid legislative framework as a basis for social equality. During this time, many laws aimed at leveling the playing field for women were enacted, including the equality provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. One of the more important manifestations of the era remains the massive entry of women in the work force. These extraordinary events must not go unnoticed and must be recorded.

The New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women knows from experience that women's history has not always been included in the province's public record. In the early 1980s, a book project on women's history during the period 1784–1984 in New Brunswick made it clear to the researchers that much of women's history had been ignored. This lack of documentation can only lead to speculation about what really happened within the women's suffrage movement during the first wave of feminism at the turn of the century.

This publication is meant to assess how far women have come in the last thirty years and to identify some of the issues which still need to be addressed. It is now the responsibility of New Brunswick's young women, women of the third wave, to shape the social, legal, economic and cultural framework of the future.

## ISSUES

– **A universal childcare system is a necessary component to a healthy economy.** High-quality, flexible and affordable child care available to all New Brunswick families ensures that society reaps the long-term social benefits of investment in early childhood development; facilitates economic self-sufficiency for families.

– **Social assistance rates need to be increased and periodically adjusted according to some objective standard, such as the poverty line or Statistics Canada Low-Income Cut-Offs (LICOs).** Families in New Brunswick are entitled to live in decent conditions. It is unacceptable to tolerate a high child poverty rate and the poverty of women, in particular, single-parent mothers.

– **Support groups and programs for girls should be introduced in both elementary and high school.** Awareness and empowerment must begin at an early age. Girl-friendly forums led by strong and compassionate adult women can help pre-teen girls and their teen sisters develop into independent and self-confident young women.

– **Family responsibility curriculum must be made compulsory for all high school students.** All young people need to be made aware of the importance of their shared contribution to family living and care giving.

– **Social equity demands that women's education and training initiatives be enhanced and financially supported.** Women's struggle for economic self-sufficiency depends in part on their ability to access employment opportunities, which offer decent salaries and benefits.

– **The provincial Employment Standards Act must reflect today's reality.** The majority of female workers are not protected by collective agreements. As outlined in an Advisory Council on the Status of Women brief presented to the government in April 2000, legislative amendments should include limits on hours of work, new provisions for overtime and call-in pay, revision of the minimum wage rate, guaranteed rest breaks as well as paid sick leave and family responsibility leave entitlements.

– **New Brunswick must adopt mandatory pay equity legislation covering private as well as public employers.** An enforcement and monitoring mechanism needs to accompany the legislation in order that pay discrepancies can be identified and eliminated.

– **Women's Wellness Centres or Community Health Centres must be established to offer disease prevention programs, health education and facilitate community well-being initiatives.** Such centres offer cost-efficient services responsive to the needs of women in their own communities and easing the pressures on a heavily burdened health system.

– **New Brunswick's homecare system for elderly and dependent citizens must be expanded and standardized.** Women are both the major consumers and providers of homecare and must have access to high-quality, affordable care themselves as they age.

– **Amendments must be made to: a) the Canada Pension Plan to recognize women's unpaid caring work, b) to Old Age Security (OAS)/Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) to increase benefit levels.** It is essential that a homemaker's pension be built into the CPP, while OAS benefits paid must ensure that senior women do not live in poverty.

And the work continues…

Advisory Council on the Status of Women
Conseil consultatif sur la condition de la femme

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# NEW BRUNSWICK ADVISORY COUNCIL ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN 2000-2001

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Advisory Council on the Status of Women
Conseil consultatif sur la condition de la femme

*Growing Up Female in New Brunswick* represents an overview of women's popular history in New Brunswick during the last thirty years of the 20th century. Although the statistics and the research will give readers an opportunity to measure women's progress during that period of time, more importantly, this document becomes an official chronicle of the work carried out by various women's organizations including the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women since its inception in 1977.

What is remarkable about this report is that the women who were the activists in the 70s, and who were the pioneers in their respective private or public lives, are still actively involved and able to share their experiences first-hand. The report reveals that women entering the 21st century are more aware, more self-sufficient, better educated and better prepared to play an exciting role in the continuing development of women in this province.

The struggle to reach total social and economic equity is an ongoing one and the symbolic torch is being passed on to the women who will become tomorrow's leaders. *Growing Up Female in New Brunswick* is our tribute to all the women who came before us, an accolade to our female peers and a bequest to all the women who will follow. The story goes on and it will continue to be progressive and exciting. This is our legacy.

Lucille Riedle, Chairperson
NBACSW, 1998-2001

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