



Toronto, ON

Community Conversation Summary

June 19, 2023

CAMPAIGN 2000
END CHILD & FAMILY POVERTY



FAMILY SERVICE TORONTO
For People. For Change.

Introduction

The conversation was hosted by *Family Service Toronto's* VAW and Social Action teams. The Social Action program hosts the national and Ontario offices of *Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty*.

This summary is in four sections based on the topics of discussion. Main themes with related content and quotes are presented for each topic. The conversation content will be further analyzed over the next year, alongside content from other conversations across the country, to help create a community-driven indicator framework and recommendations for action.

This summary was created after sending a draft to the participants and co-hosts to see if these points sounded right, offer an opportunity for corrections or clarification, and ensure that they had the chance to hold and use this information as soon as possible. This finalized version (September 2023) reflects the feedback we received, and the content will be further analyzed over the next year with attention to that feedback. Thanks to everyone who participated and responded!

The conversation was conducted in Tamil and translated afterwards to English to be summarized. We've tried to be true to the content and emotion of the conversation, which touched on the sensitive and difficult topics of experiencing poverty and discrimination, and that may come through in what's presented here.

Since this is a summary, we have listened to what participants shared and reflected that back here. With that in mind, there may be content presented here that does not align with Campaign 2000's values or platform.

The urgent need to lower the costs of rent, food, and childcare was clear in the discussion. Challenges with employment, housing insecurity, and discrimination were shared, including the impact of the language barrier, having to work multiple jobs to make ends meet, and difficulties affording adequate food because rent costs are so high. Participants expressed the particular discrimination and challenges they face as Tamil women, especially single mothers, but also emphasized that Tamil women are one of the major strengths of the community.

Prompt 1: Visions of a community with no poverty

Wellbeing

- Happiness: Everyone would be happy
- Being able to live how you want to, with health and wellbeing: "If there is no poverty we can live as we wish and no scarcity for food and good health and wellbeing."

Equality

- Gender equality
- Income and wealth equality: "No rich and no poor."

Basic needs met

- Income
 - Good basic income
 - No need to live within financial limits
 - Ability to save money and spend according to your needs
- Education and work
 - Good quality education
 - Everyone would be able to be employed and have their needs met equally
 - Free training and skills development
- Food: Everyone would have enough food
- Housing: Houses would be well-ventilated and there would be enough space for everyone

Children's rights realized

- Health, wellness, and food security: "If there's no poverty, we can raise kids with good behavior and healthy by giving them nutritious food."
- No child marriage

Prompt 2: Experiences of poverty as Tamil women in Toronto

Not being able to meet basic needs

- Meeting basic needs is a struggle: "Poverty has embedded in every way."
- Not being able to afford food or clothes and having to use a food or clothing bank

Discrimination and abuse

- Discrimination against Tamil women
 - E.g., not receiving adequate items or treatment at food or clothing bank
- People take advantage of women living in poverty
- Abuse of women, including sexual abuse and abusive relationships
 - "There is high chance of becoming a victim."

Language barrier affects poverty

- Hard to get jobs due to language barrier
- Challenges with access to services, institutions
 - “We cannot speak up.”
 - “If someone without language knowledge goes somewhere, they have to stay back ... it is hard to be at hospitals, banks or any public places.”

Stigma of material poverty

- Comparison with other people, especially for houses; can result in spending more than you have: “The reason why people are being poor is the comparison. When they visit a house and see their lavish lifestyle, [they] try to make theirs as good as them to avoid being laughed at. Even if they can’t afford it, they get loans and do, which makes them poor.”

Poverty for families and children

- Not being able to provide what children ask for: “Nowadays it is so expensive. We cannot afford food that kids like or we like. So when we take kids out, without knowing our income they would ask for things that we cannot afford.”
- High costs of children’s expenses: “Child expenses have kept increasing no matter what.”
- Childcare is expensive and limits other spending: “They pay half of their salaries to the daycares.”
- Child marriage can occur: “Some people marry their young children to elderly men for money.”

Being a single mother

- Being a Tamil single mother is very challenging
 - As a Tamil single mother, it is hard to communicate or advocate for children at school: “It is very hard at school... there is a language barrier and they don’t care about us... Also, there are cultural issues and because of that we face challenges.”
 - Struggling to make ends meet, e.g., for a single mother whose husband passed away, worker’s compensation is not enough.

Housing

- Can’t afford to buy a house because it’s too expensive and it’s impossible to save
- Rent costs are so high that it limits access to other essentials:
 - “Whatever we make goes towards to it and can't save money or buy other things.”

- Can't even budget: "We don't even have anything to divide [in a budget] as the income goes fully to the rent and the bills...the entire amount goes to rental."
- Can't afford varied, nutritious food: "Nowadays you can only have curry and cheese or bread, because having to pay rent, being at minimum wage, obviously you are only paying for the rent."
- Feeling powerless: "What can we do? We just pay the rent and eat bread."
- People are staying in housing that is too big for them because nothing smaller is affordable: "In some places, people still keep their three bedroom houses, even though their kids have got married and moved out."
- Landlords are exploiting tenants because tenants don't have any other options:
 - People owning multiple houses keep increasing rent for tenants
 - Difficult to find a rental just for yourself because landlords try to fill all the rooms with different tenants to make more money: "It is difficult to get one room alone for one person...If there are two or three bedrooms, they say you can stay and pay the amount but there will be another occupant for another room. So nowadays they give basement rentals for two separate people to double the rental income."

Work

- Wages do not match rising costs of living, so people have to work more than full-time or with multiple jobs to make ends meet:
 - "Housing rent, property taxes, water bill, electricity bill and gas bill... all are out of control, just increasing only and not getting lowered. But the salaries haven't been increased to match those expenses. Therefore a person has to work two jobs, going for night shifts. They usually could sleep on the bed for 4 hours only."
 - No time to enjoy life: "Because of poverty some people go to work for seven days. They don't enjoy the summer."
 - No time to spend with family: "Some people sleep only four hours, if they have kids they don't even have time to see their faces, because the father leaves home before the kids wake up and comes home at night after the kids go to bed. They don't even have time for having a meal together as a family ... even during the weekends."
- No equivalencies for education and training, so people are working in lower-paying fields: "Teachers from Sri Lanka are going for factory jobs and doctors are going for restaurant jobs."
- Difficulty gaining training or education
 - Exploitative volunteer opportunities that say they will lead to jobs but don't
 - Challenges with accessing education

- Some Tamil businesses also don't pay workers enough, but "because there are no opportunities, people go there ... I don't know what to do for this. It seems that Tamil people also pushing down the other Tamil people."

Mental health and hopelessness

- People are experiencing mental illness and depression because of poverty
- Hopelessness and suicide as a result of poverty and debt: "Some people commit suicide because they cannot pay the debt. They get depressed ... and they are not able to make any decisions, therefore the situation of the wife or the kids at home also gets worse."
- Having to hold it together even in desperate situations, because it feels like there's no way out, and all you can do is try to keep working: "Like others, we have to wear a dress and all, but inside there [is] poverty running in their lives. It is just that we came to this country, but it's like a machine. People are running as machines here."

Food

- High cost of food: "People who used to buy groceries for \$100, now pay \$300."
- No choice but to pay: "It is a mandatory need."
- Limitations to food banks, e.g., expired food.

Seniors

- Lack of support for Tamil seniors
- Tamil seniors often have increased language barriers, but translation is too expensive and sometimes exploitative.
- Old age homes for seniors are very expensive, people have to choose alternate options sometimes, e.g., bring senior parents to stay in your home because nursing home is so expensive.

Disability assistance rates

- ODSP rates are too low:
 - For families with children: "ODSP is not enough for me and my kid."
 - For caring for parents: "I am an ODSP recipient. If I need to send my parents to senior homes, neither me nor them are able to pay the amount. Even the pension money is very low."

Healthcare

- High costs of drugs and healthcare without benefits, or without being told that ODSP would cover them: "Whenever buying medicine, it goes beyond the income."

Prompt 3: What is working in your community?

Women's strength and skills

- "Women are the strength of the community."
 - Strength in the face of major challenges, like being a single mom without other support, living on ODSP, working as a cashier.
 - Strength of Tamil women to manage the household financially and educate the children.
- Strength of Tamil single mothers:
 - "Me being a single mom or my mom being a single mom, I feel like the strength we have, that we lead each other in a strong way."
 - "There are so many single mothers in our community. They face many challenges, overcome them, raise their kids, educate them well, and live as good role models. So this is our strength in our community."
- Optimism, knowledge, independence, and child-raising skills: "Women are more optimistic than men. More educated here than back home. Standing on their own feet. Guiding their kids in a good way and raising kids with good behaviours."

Hard work

- Community is hard-working, frugal, and persevering

Children's education

- Even in conditions of poverty: "In Sri Lanka if they are under poverty, they rarely educate the kids. But in this country ... they show the strength by educating their kids and making them in a good employment position... they let their kids study and get good jobs."

Faith

- Temple services, having faith, believing in God, following your conscience

Services and supports

- "Free voluntary organizations like this [VAW program at Family Service Toronto]."
- Free food services like food banks
- Volunteer opportunities that give varied experience and lead to paid jobs

Prompt 4: Actions that the government needs to take are...

Increase incomes

- Increase employment income to match cost of living

- Increase social assistance and ODSP rates
- Flexible benefits that address people's situations, e.g., families with children should receive more.

Better employment training, support, and opportunities

- More employment opportunities
- Support for self-employment
- Higher wages
- Training and education for immigrants
 - Provide free job training, work experience, and education in people's own fields or office jobs, not just low-paying jobs like factory work.
 - Training should be in reputable colleges, and/or allow qualifications from home country to stand.
 - Training schools that teach English.
 - Training locations should be in each neighbourhood so they're accessible and easy to get to.

Address housing crisis

- Lower, more regulated rental costs, housing prices, and mortgage rates – make these affordable.
 - Addressing high rent costs is a big priority.
 - Bills and property taxes should be decreased.
- Shorter wait time and more availability for social housing
 - The "government has to build more apartment buildings and provide housing for low income families."
 - Build affordable community housing on empty land: "They are building so many condos. They need to stop that. In those spaces they need to build housing for us."

Children

- Childcare costs need to decrease
- Better and more accessible education for children
- Prevent child marriage

Seniors

- Ensure affordable translation support for seniors
- Ensure affordable transportation for seniors
- Increase PSW availability for seniors to allow them to keep living at home