

# Unity Statement of the Women's Groups

presenting to

## The Oppal Commission inquiring into Policing in British Columbia

on behalf of and directed by the attending women's groups  
May 4th, 1993, Vancouver

**Thank you for the invitation to hear from the women's movement as we are organised in the Lower Mainland.** You are correct that we have specific experience from which we view policing in British Columbia. We share the unequal status of women in relation to men B.C.

**It might be helpful for you to know that many of us have been meeting for several weeks to collect our thoughts and to explore what we might have in common as** advocates for those most in need of advances toward a more just society and as women who deal with police in both the living of our daily lives and the daily exercise of our work.

**It was helpful for us to be able to speak to you not as individual women or as individual groups but as the loose coalition that we are.** So we are grateful that you offered to meet our needs with this accessible space, with interpretation for the hearing impaired, and by offering a locale that suits us. We did make one mistake in not also asking for a weekend date. Some of our groups for instance the Committee for the Rights of Domestic Workers are unable to attend because of that oversight on our part. You will appreciate that for many women attending this day has meant the difficulty of taking a day off paid work.

**For most of us there has also been the difficulty of suspending our disbelief. We wondered aloud to each other if this presentation could make a difference?** If it is safe to come forward with our most bitter complaints? If our words will be used for some purpose not our own? There are those who have chosen not to speak. There are abused wives of policemen, prostitutes beaten and harassed, rape victims afraid to complain of their treatment by police, immigrant women afraid to speak without assurances of their status, lesbians afraid to bring down more discrimination on their heads, squatters too cynical anymore to complain to such a body. There are aboriginal women who are attending to the construction of a Native Justice system that simply will not cooperate in anyway with this system ' that has failed them so totally. There are disabled women yet to be reached by any of us.

**We have decided to put our own stories together as independent groups and as individual women.** In those presentations over the day you will hear our differences of emphasis, our differences of focus. But we believe you will also hear a litany of

complaints that individual officers do not believe women, do not speak and act respectfully to women, do not act to protect women, are not instructed to do so, and when complained about, both officers and their superiors dismiss the concerns of women, side track complaints and at the highest levels continue policies which are not effectively designed to respond to the concerns of women for the safety of the community and for fair and just treatment.

**We decided to speak with one voice on four specific points which every policy and procedure.** I would like to list them first and then tell you what they mean to us.

**1. The enormous amounts of money and energy spent in policing must be reallocated to secure the safety of persons particularly women.** We are saying that the police do not now make our safety a priority and that we insist they must make changes to do so. We suggest for instance that police respond by believing a woman who calls to say her exhusband is threatening her. If they believed her the first time and put energy into investigation and protection we might be spared the experience of swat teams surrounding her house because her husband has decided to kill her and her children.

**We do not suggest or encourage, more police or policing.** We do not think the police need more power or more money to do their job.

**We object to the deceitful addition of police power and money through private policing and through deputising the community.**

**We want the police to do their own job and to stop interfering with ours by creating victim services,** and by blackmailing women's groups to cooperate with unbudging police detachments rather putting the pressure of the Attorney General on police to change.

**2. The problems in our opinion are systemic.** You will hear the names of individual officers and of particular departments and detachments. But after discussions with each other we say together that we know of no part of B.C. where women can expect consistently fair treatment. There is no police detachment that operates free of bias against women. And that each situation is compounded by systemic racist and classist policy and practice. When we speak of women and the rights of women we mean all women. We refuse to tolerate that the poor women among us get even less cooperation or assistance and that Aboriginal women and women of colour face even greater resistance to the implementation of their rights.

**Further more we know that lesbians and women with disabilities and women speaking other languages** are hampered by discriminatory acts and practices from the police of B.C.

**3. We will use much of the day to fight for the rights of the women who call us but we also agreed that we want to say together that the police response to us as**

**feminists, as groups of women, as advocates for other women and as 52% of the public is completely unacceptable.** According to the federal justice statistics, it is clear now that women are the most often affected by violent crime and the least often guilty of violent crime. But we are not only women attacked we are also women who organise for our rights who organise neighbourhoods, build communities, and work to create a future that is better for us all. In that work we find the police too often obstructive, bullying, menacing destructive and violent. You will hear us call for independent bodies to review and oversee the police of the province.

**4. We wish to say jointly that while it is often impossible to engage the police to save the lives of women around us, we are often overwhelmed with misdirected policing which criminalizes women** for coping with violence directed at them and for coping with the poverty enforced on them. None of this creates public safety. We wish the police to respond as a first priority to every call of violence against women and to move to the bottom of their list any urge to police prostitutes who harm no one, to move to the bottom of their list poor women stealing bread and clothes, and to move to the bottom of their list the surveillance of and interference with the peace and justice making of the feminist activists this province is so lucky to have.