

Mothers Leading Change: Transforming Lives through Participatory Action Research
with Vivica Ellis (Centre for Family Equity) and Dr. Lea Caragata (UBC School of Social Work)

[Intro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee

0:05

This episode features Vivica Ellis, a founding member and Executive Director of the Centre for Family Equity, formerly known as the Single Mothers Alliance, a membership-based organization of women and all gender identities focused on addressing family poverty in British Columbia, as well as Dr. Lea Caragata, an Associate Professor and the Director of the UBC School of Social Work. Some of her research interests include gender, poverty, and marginalization. In this podcast, Lea and Vivica discuss several of their community-engaged research projects together, including the Making Mothers Matter and the Justice at Work for Lone Mothers in BC, and the ways in which women and gender diverse individuals' perspectives are included in the research to ground evidence-based public policy recommendations.

Dr. Lea Caragata

0:57

I'm Lea Caragata. I'm an Associate Professor at Research Stream in the School of Social Work and the School of Social Work Director. Um, and happy to be doing this, to share some of our research collaborations with the Centre for Family Equity and Vivica Ellis.

Vivica Ellis

1:13

Hello, my name is Vivica Ellis. I am the Executive Director of the Centre for Family Equity and actually a co-founder of the organization back in 2014 when we founded as the Single Mothers Alliance. And along with Lea, I'm just delighted to have an opportunity to discuss our collaborative research and how it has gone. Thank you for having me here.

Dr. Lea Caragata

1:34

I think we have a number of projects that we can talk about. Um, and just perhaps I'll mention that the nature of our collaboration has just recently been really reinforced because we were finally successful in getting CUES funding, the community-university funding that enables us to really kind of acknowledge and celebrate the kind of partnership, but that's after two other projects that have resulted in some significant research and lots of reports and maybe I'll let you talk about how we connected in the first instance.

Vivica Ellis

2:05

Yes, well, the Single Mothers Alliance, now the Centre for Family Equity, we were interested – we take a capacity building approach to all we do so we are a large membership-based organization of over 400 low-income parents and caregivers all around BC in about 41 locations. More than that, but last time we checked about 41. And, we are dedicated to public policy solutions to addressing child, youth, and family poverty and some targeted programs, and law reform and legal action.

And we do take a community capacity building approach. All of our campaigns, all of our programs, all of our projects seek to build leaders and to connect individuals who feel, you know, quite



disenfranchised from the systems that they're in, to civic engagement, and taking action, and building community all at the same time as we do all of that.

So, I was looking for some partners who shared the same values, that we have. And somebody actually at Pivot Legal Society said, have you heard of this amazing professor out at UBC who's very focused on lone parents and single mothers and gender inequality and labor rights? Sadly, one of the principal investigators on a research project that we had going did pass away so I was seeking a principal investigator to take on our project. So, I sort of cold emailed Lea and I got an absolutely immediate response because I think we have so many shared values when it comes to the research that we want to do, and how we do it.

Dr. Lea Caragata**3:33**

That was a nice beginning and it was a cold call and it timed quite well for me because I had fairly recently relocated to Vancouver after many, many, many years at Wilfrid Laurier University, and living in Toronto. And so most of my research had been based there, although I've always had a research site in Vancouver. So, I had some links here, but I didn't have the kind of community organizational linkages that I've always had in my work. So, it worked out extremely well and as Vivica said, we do share values.

My research work has always been participatory action based. I have a real strong belief that part of the role of the work has to be two things: to both build capacity and facilitate growth and leadership in the persons with lived experience that we're working with. Um, and also, I think their stories and their engagement and their advocacy in a project makes a huge difference to outcomes. And I've always been keen on outcomes.

One of the first big projects I had was around the time of welfare reform and we had 26 lone mother research associates, as we described them, across the province. And they made huge differences. Um, to this day, lone mothers are still involved in training welfare workers in Ontario, as a result of some of that advocacy. And I don't think just journal articles and messaging by a bunch of academics makes those changes. What helps to really make those changes are people who really have the experience, who can tell their own stories. And so when Vivica reached out, I so much appreciated both the fact that at that point in time they were the Single Mothers Alliance, so you couldn't have had a better connection with the work that I've been doing and since then, they've broadened into the Centre for Family Equity, which still fits perfectly with my work and my aspirations for social change. So it's been a great collaboration so far, and it's far from over.

Vivica Ellis**5:33**

Absolutely, just beginning.

Dr. Lea Caragata**5:34**

Beginning, exactly..

Vivica Ellis**5:36**

Well, no, we've done a lot, but we've laid a fantastic foundation to keep going.



Dr. Lea Caragata**5:43**

So, I think in terms of, some of the projects that we've worked on, and the ways in which the collaboration has been successful is, obviously, as Viveca described, they too have a real commitment to building capacity to working with their members and other people who are marginalized, equity deserving groups, to ensure that they've got a voice and a role, and it's I think this dual idea that when you engage marginalized people – I don't love the phrasing but – in in this kind of work, there's a benefit for them personally in terms of their own growth, as well as the opportunity for kind of more successful outcomes. And that obviously is a big part of the Centre for Family Equity's goal. They have these members. How do we kind of build capacity in them? Maybe we could talk a little bit about one of the projects.

Vivica Ellis**6:30**

Yeah, absolutely. I'd love to talk about the thriving groups that this research has led to. So, as Lea said, you know, this opportunity to also build community. So, the women in this case and gender diverse individuals that we're working with feel very socially isolated by the impact of poverty. They experience very high time poverty, sometimes working two or three jobs around the clock or on income or disability assistance and a lot of things going on for them all the time while raising multiple children, many of those children, special needs.

So, this opportunity that we have, first of all, I think, a shared value that Lea and I have is very, very fair compensation for their labor and effort, emotional labor, learning to contribute to the research and the data collection so to be able to create a group – it isn't just one or two peer researchers on the side of a project.

For these projects, we created a group of seven for our Making Mothers Matter research project, which was hatched around the time our previous government as of last week had rolled out a plan to implement 10 dollar a day childcare in BC. And as our government was embarking on systems building, we wanted to get in there and immediately look at the impact of universal 10 dollar a day childcare on low-income lone mothers, particularly in relation to their health and wellbeing – not just their ability to go to work, but their total health and wellbeing. We, you know, hired effectively seven peer researchers, very diverse group and this group still will not separate. The project is now over and many of them are engaged in many other activities with the organization but they bonded. They became friends. They shared all the learnings. We went on a research retreat to Kelowna, Lea came, Centre for Family Equity staff and everybody was there, you know, digging in, and I must say it's absolutely wonderful to work with a professor that just rolls up their sleeves and dives in with community on the ground. We all learned so much from that retreat. So there's a couple highlights there.

Dr. Lea Caragata**8:33**

Just to talk about the retreat, it was an amazing experience in that for many of these women just getting away. And an overnight, we were just gone one night, but for them to get away and manage childcare and all those things was a huge issue and an amazing treat for people. Um, the idea of flying to Kelowna was – it was extraordinary. Anyway, and when we got there, we did serious work.



We engaged in real data collection. It was fun. And not only was it fun, but, and I've had this experience every time I engage with peer researchers. Um, you know, I'm an academic. I'm trained to kind of analyze data. I know what I'm doing in those kinds of obvious academic ways. But the ways in which somebody at the front line who's done some of the interviews, who has that lived experience, sees the data is different. And I don't think you could ever persuade most academics who don't work that way to see that, but it's so true.

People really engage. They see different things. They see nuance, and they see connections that we wouldn't see. Um, so the Kelowna, um, workshop symposium was really – it was an amazing experience. It was learning for me. It was learning for the peer researchers. I think it was learning for all of the Centre for Family Equity staff, and a real collaboration because by the end of that, I mean, lots of the single moms were very hesitant at first to speak, to say, “Oh, gee, I don't think you're right, Lea,” but by the end, they realized that they actually had something to say. They had an equal voice, and they were kind of arguing and saying, “No, well, what about this?” And it became a really, really lively, engaged moment. So, I think we all came away with strength and belief in this as an important as a critical research value. And our data and analysis were better for it.

Vivica Ellis

10:21

Absolutely. They just bring an enormous amount of knowledge and also passion for the, you know, the action, participatory action research, right? The outcomes, the results because they get an enormous amount out of shaping the questions, carrying out the data collection. So that peer to peer transaction as well, very supported by Centre for Family Equity staff and Lea, of course, but the dialogue that they're able to have with other women that are sharing their lived experience, I think to a lot of them shared, you know, in our evaluation process, just how unbelievably rewarding they found that and how it was an important, you know, discussion and dialogue for them too. It wasn't just that they are there to extract data for a project and “bye bye, see you later”.

It was more so, “let's have this really rich dialogue”. Lea and I agree that the data is much stronger for that peer-to-peer opportunity. And then also they walked away just with really deep knowledge and feeling that um, you know, the work of, of this organization, of our organization, based on this research, that they built it. They shaped it. So, you know, we're not an organization that's downloading things onto community. You know, they participated in this and it really was their project in the end. We should talk about our much larger project that we hatched after that too, Lea.

Dr. Lea Caragata

11:35

Just one, one last thing about that one and the experience of bringing people together like that is that it was fun. And I think there was a real sense of building equality of the peer research should be beginning to see us, um, not as kind of the executive director of an NGO or an academic, but as fellow researchers with them. And I think every time we can plant that seed in somebody who's part of an equity denied group, it's a powerful, powerful social change message. So I think that was one of the other things about that event is that it was really an equalizer and there aren't enough of those in the world.



Vivica Ellis**12:16**

Well, breaking down this bizarre wall between academia and community, which I think often, you know, community feels particularly when it comes to socioeconomic inequality, that, you know, very wealthy institutions with a lot of people with very high salaries, and there's a lot of wealth around academia, and then those impoverished and marginalized are the subjects and so to sort of break down those barriers and feel their sense of agency and control in the research process, I think a lot of them came out with a very different understanding and relationship with academic research, with how it can be done and with, just how we can build community and add so much value to this.

Dr. Lea Caragata**12:55**

We followed that up with a project called Justice at Work and Vivica deserves all of the credit for the very clever naming of both our projects and our reports: A Whole Life and No Way to Escape. So, Justice at Work is, as the name would suggest talking about precarious labor again with low-income, marginalized women, gender diverse people, and a recognition that during the pandemic, it had, of course, enormous impacts on all of us, but the more marginalized and poorer you are, the more significant the impacts in many ways.

We again – it was a participatory action research project. We brought together a group of peer researchers again, and as Vivica noted, And this is all due to Vivica, the ways in which the peer researchers are paid is rather than an honoraria, which is what I used to do, they're paid a monthly honoraria, so they've got that bit of financial stability, which is, I think, a brilliant and much more adaptive, respectful way to honor people's time.

So, we brought that group of people together, we did some training with them around how to interview. We had lots of fun with that. Many of them were very afraid of the idea of interviewing. We did little practice one to one sessions and stuff like that. And then we began with a survey. And then we began a process of one-to-one interviews with women across the province to understand the impacts of the pandemic on their work experiences. And as one can imagine, the pandemic had incredibly deleterious impacts on them. Many of them had had jobs, marginal jobs, but sustaining jobs. They had hours cut because of their vulnerability. They were often taken advantage of and told they could keep their jobs, but they had to do more work for less money or, yeah, bad working conditions.

So, it was an extremely important project to really acknowledge what's happening with the kind of precarious labor market, which is an area of focus, that I think is so important. We had one story which resonates and, you know, the power of stories I think are what persuade politicians too. But one woman talked and I think it was, it was such extraordinary innovation born out of desperation. But one of the ways in which she could see herself being able to sustain herself was doing food delivery. She had a crappy old car. But she could have her kids. She had no childcare, no schooling, so she could throw the kids into the car and do food delivery all day. And the kids, of course, would spend – I mean, it's not an ideal way for children to spend 6 or 8 hours in the back seat of a car counting on the fact that they're going to get a cookie.



Vivica Ellis**15:37**

They would get a candy at each restaurant, right?

Dr. Lea Caragata**15:40**

Yeah, but on the other hand, she found a way to keep her kids safe, and with her and have some work, but what a story in terms of the power of "I have no other choice".

Vivica Ellis**15:51**

And this project, at the height of the pandemic – this project was funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada, so federally-funded, government-funded research and project, and at the height of the pandemic, the Women and Gender Equality Canada put out a, I think it was about a hundred million grant call. It was quite a lot of money to look at the impact of the pandemic and gender equality so on women and gender diverse individuals. So we had surveyed our members and just on our own conducted some community engagement because we were hearing "my boss is making me work double hours," "I've been fired and I have no job", "I need to go on income assistance, "I'm home with two kids to kids with severe autism with all our social, all of our supports, the school, everything has fallen apart". We heard about a huge mental health impact and eroding poverty.

So, we had surveyed our members and had this quite rich data already that led us to submit a full application for a three-year funded project that included some real research to dig in because we need to know how to get it better next time. We wanted to look at how, what we learned from, I have another story, you know, in terms of the CERB. So, Lea's talking about, you know, your, your extended work in precarious labor, and how those, the poverty line often are working poor, right? Those on income and disability assistance, I think, have some of the greatest depths of poverty. But many are working below the poverty line but in an, you know, undocumented way, pulling it all together, a lot of them.

So, one of the peer researchers is now, um, she had been cleaning houses and doing all these different things, trying to - majority of our members are also impacted by gender-based violence and intimate partner violence so she was trying to get herself out of an abusive relationship when the, you know, her abuser had controlled all the finances and controlled the bank accounts and controlled everything so she was just scrambling to make cash to get out and her job wasn't feasible during the pandemic. So, she applied for CERB because she thought, I've made more than \$5,000 in the previous year. But now she is living far below the poverty line and has to pay the federal government back \$14,000 because she didn't have her paperwork quite in order around the jobs that she was doing so we look at the impact of the policy we had in place and what worked and what didn't.

But one thing I wanted to mention too is that working with Lea, we did have a mandate from Women and Gender Equality and we wrote this into the project to really dig into rural and remote areas of British Columbia. We do still have a staff person up in Prince George who is doing quite extensive outreach to rural and remote communities, to smaller places, Indigenous communities, coastal communities. So we did, you know, overall, we engaged over 160 lone mothers in this research



through the various methods and real regional diversity, which was fascinating to hear, especially because many of them were working in frontline jobs. And now, just to mention, we have two years of funding, again, from Women and Gender Equality Canada to scale this project with two years of knowledge mobilization. So, we have four committees, 18 Lone Mothers total, one in Northern BC, Interior BC, Vancouver Island and the Coast, and the Lower Mainland. Each committee has a coordinator. They receive monthly honoraria, and they are conducting all forms of knowledge mobilization for the next year and a half – meeting with ministers, holding webinars, just bringing the data to light in creative ways and with their voices.

Dr. Lea Caragata**19:21**

Maybe we should talk a little bit about our reflections on our work. I think one of the things that has probably already been stated is that we have a real set of values, and that makes a giant difference I think to how we work. When we just have a new SSHRC application, which we've just submitted, and there's a lot of trust that goes with moving ahead with any kind of proposal. What are my roles going to be? How much is this going to cost? Especially for Vivica, who's running a pretty tight non-profit organization without a lot of extra resources. How much am I going to rely on them to do things? How are we going to kind of share both responsibility, work, and funding?

I think we've established over our now almost four years, I suppose, of working together, a base that we can trust each other, that we can move ahead with these things because we have a common goal. And I think that driving common goal is social change, improved equity, and we come at that with the same kinds of values. On the daycare issue, for example, we want non-profit daycare provision at \$10 a day. We don't want vouchers in individual family pockets. So it's not only a question of outcome and social change, but the process by which we get there. So for me, I just I feel in tremendous trust in Vivica and in that organization to say we're going to go about this the same way. We have the same values. We want to include people in the same way and a lot of personal trust. And I think that makes a huge difference.

Vivica Ellis**20:57**

I couldn't agree more. And I think that when it comes to these community partnerships that, you know, when you put time and energy into developing a really coherent, cohesive working relationship, that's worth it, right? You know, you don't want to feel like – I understand professors and researchers are unbelievably busy people. You all have an enormous amount every single day. You know, we have a way though of fitting each other in and it might be, “okay, let's jump on zoom here. There's 10 minutes. Let's grab 10 minutes here,” rather than sort of a very, very formal relationship. I mean, obviously we've been working together for many, many years now on multiple research projects. Just tying into what Leah's saying about our values and the recommendations.

As an organization, with the approach that we take, it's, it's unbelievably incredible, actually, to be able to work in partnership and in deep collaboration with an academic institution to provide us with this opportunity to base all we do in evidenced-base data. So, to locate all of our recommendations in our own collaborative partnered research is – I still feel that it's a rare opportunity. It's not easy to find partners in academia, to be honest. People are very, very busy. It's a unique way of doing research. I would just say that it's, there's so much to gain from this way



of doing things for us to be able to make, you know, evidence-based, research-based, data-based recommendations and to say in all our lobbying, and recommendations, "this is what we found" and "this is what we're recommending", just builds so much power for all we do when it comes to the social change that we're seeking.

Dr. Lea Caragata

22:33

I think those are fantastic last words. Yeah, and as I say, I hope we're going to continue to work together. We have a SSHRC application out that will look at the intersection of disability, poverty, families. Really looking at the family as a unit headed by a disabled parent or a parent with a disability, which is a quite unique structuring. So, we're hopeful that we will be successful at that and continue another four years.

Vivica Ellis

23:00

We're up for it because the wonderful thing is when you have – now we know how we work together and I'm sure there'll be a journey with this new project, but fingers crossed we get to keep working together. So, thank you so much for having us here.

[Outro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee

23:13

Thanks for listening to The Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast! This podcast is a University of British Columbia Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholars initiative funded by the UBC Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation's Knowledge Exchange unit. I'm Dr. Barbara Lee, the Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholar for the School of Social Work, podcast host, and executive producer. Michelle O'Kane is the podcast producer. Cathy Jiu and Qian Zhou is the podcast producer. Podcast cover was designed by Cathy Jiu. Podcast music is open source, called Motivational Day, Audio Coffee by Denis Kyshchuk. Thanks for listening!

