



***"We need to take care of each other, and that's what this program was helping to do:"***

**Disabled women's  
experiences in the Ontario  
Basic Income Pilot**

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# Outline



**Policy and literature context**



**Research questions and methods**



**Findings: Before, during, and after basic income**



**Discussion and implications**



# Policy and literature context

- From 2018-2019, the Ontario Basic Income Pilot (OBIP) disbursed \$16,989 and \$24,027 to singles and couples, plus \$500 monthly for those with disabilities (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2017)
- While a growing body of research illustrates the relationship between basic income and health, explicit attention to disability remains limited (Mays, 2020)
- Other critical scholarship has illuminated the punitive and inadequate nature of Canada's social assistance programs, including the Ontario Disability Assistance Program (ODSP) (Chouinard & Crooks, 2005; Lightman et al., 2009; Smith-Carrier et al., 2017, 2020; Tam et al., 2021)



# Research questions and methods

- Interviews with 15 women enrolled OBIP who identified as disabled, described experiences with impairment, or had previously accessed disability-targeted income support programs
- Narrative inquiry helping to “generate an emancipatory knowledge about disability, gender and oppression” (Malacrida, 2010, p. 675)
- Theoretically informed by critical disability and feminist disability scholarship (Minich, 2016; Goodley et al., 2019; Garland-Thomson, 2005; Kafer, 2013)



In what ways does disability shape or is shaped by the receipt of targeted income assistance? How is ableism produced, sustained, or challenged through income support programs? Finally, what about a basic income, if anything, interrupts or subverts these trends?



**Before: *"I realized I would never escape poverty"***

# Becoming disabled, becoming poor

“I started to feel unwell, and I got sicker and sicker...I was declared officially disabled... While receiving some mentorship around starting your own business... I did a cash flow statement and realized because of my disability and the number of hours I could actually work, I would never escape poverty.”

- Prior to basic income, women described disability and poverty as mutually-reinforcing phenomena, with explicitly-gendered implications
- Labels of 'sick' or 'disabled' motivated by necessity rather than choice (i.e., to access supports or care)

“I think fundamentally the poverty that I have lived in for the last 10 years, there are numerous factors...One of those factors is 100% the fact that I’m a woman, and the fact that I’m also a survivor of sexual assault and I consequently have PTSD and numerous...mental health issues around that that affect my ability to work.”

# Accessing support through ODSP

- Women recounted a demanding, dehumanizing application process that relies on "biomedical markers of difference" (Smith-Carrier et al., 2017, p. 1583)
- However, challenges persisted following proof of eligibility

"When I originally applied for ODSP, it was like sitting in front of a warden...They go into such in-depth personal information which they really don't need. It was degrading, completely degrading. It made me feel like I wasn't a mother...They have a doctor there that's supposed to be a specialist...They're the ones that decide, and they don't even know you...I swear my medical file was at least 3 to 4 inches wide."

"I think women are the ones that get the brunt of it: you're lazy, you have kids, you're staying home. I remember when I went on ODSP, all the parents at my kids' school are all married and have two incomes coming in, and I'm alone. It was always critical of me...The single mother thing is a hard thing to pull off, let's put it that way."



**During: *"I didn't have to  
justify surviving"***



# Contrasting OBIP and ODSP

“For the first time in 20 years I didn’t have to answer to anybody about how to spend it. I didn’t have to justify surviving, and that was a huge relief and a huge change from ODSP. Honestly, I remember that very first cheque and a couple of my friends calling and saying, ‘well, who do we report our income to now?’ And I said, ‘you know what, I don’t think we have to. I think we can just pay the bills.’”

- Basic income widely perceived as everything ODSP was not: a reliable, unconditional, and more dignified source of income
- Distance from controlling, punitive, and invasive state mechanisms
- Despite bringing disabled participants only modestly above the poverty line, this was nonetheless a stark improvement for many

**Maximum  
monthly  
amounts:**

**\$1,169**

(ODSP, 2018)

**\$1,916**

(OBIP)

# Poverty and impairment

- Many women drew connections between their receipt of basic income and improved health and well-being (e.g., reduced stress, pain relief)
- In a context where “poverty itself may well be thought of as a form of debilitation” (Puar, 2017, p. 73), women's narratives depict this relationship as both avoidable and unjust

“I have fibromyalgia, and it feeds on stress. The worse my stress gets, the worse my pain gets, the worse my sleep gets, the worse my fatigue gets, the worse everything gets. So not having to worry about money constantly eased my stress level...I’m bipolar too, so even when my mania is under control, I still suffer from depression. Even the depression lessened a little bit because I didn’t have the stress and anxiety that was feeding it all the time. Some people certainly noticed that I seemed lighter to be around. I think that I just emanate these waves of stress when I’m on ODSP because you never stop thinking about money.”

# Space for subversion

- At the same time, basic income allowed some to be more unapologetically – or least, more comfortably – sick or disabled; material stability offered the opportunity to resist compulsory able-bodiedness/mindedness (Kafer, 2013)
- Chance to define "work" and "productivity" on one's own terms

**“I make my own hours, which means when I’m not well, I don’t work, and when I am well, I do work...I have workshops and I run them, but most of the time they’re from home, too. So if I have a flareup, then I can always excuse myself and I’m still in my own home...Making my own hours, having my own business, it worked around my limitations and my illness...I felt great. I felt great about working.”**

- While narratives of improved autonomy and independence were common, women's stories also depict how a basic income supported them to be able to pursue "a diversity of care tactics" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022, p. 154)

# A subtler form of ableism?

“It was just as hard on the pilot as it was on ODSP, just different comments. If you’re on ODSP it’s, ‘oh, you’re faking, you can work...’ Automatically thinking that you’re not disabled unless you’re in a wheelchair or missing both limbs...With the basic income, it was, ‘oh, money for nothing, how come you’re getting it and we don’t get it, it’s not fair, they shouldn’t give it to some and not others...’ Others saying, ‘oh yeah, the beer store will be busy, the crackheads are going to be happy this week,’ things like that...The words change, but the intent and what’s behind them is the same.”

- Less substantive in challenging how income security programs manage disability through categorization, inscription, and processes of il/legibility, including the "systematic bias against persons with the 'wrong' kinds of disabilities" (Abrams, 2015, p. 19)
- Ableist and productivist underpinnings are not necessarily challenged - alleviating the symptoms (but not necessarily the causes) of systemic oppression



**After: *"When do I get to  
take care of myself?"***

# The impacts of cancellation

- OBIP's premature cancellation dramatically altered the narratives women had authored about their lives post-pilot
- If experiences of poverty and ODSP were framed as disabling, so too was the pilot cancellation

“I had to go submit like 25 pieces of documentation to get back on to ODSP from basic income. I got out of the office and into the parking lot and burst into tears. I realized that all of a sudden, I didn't feel like the same person I was yesterday. My intellectual brain was like, 'you're the same person, you're still doing the same things!' But it's that label that is completely different, the difference between 'entrepreneur' and 'disabled.'”

**Basic income recipients feel shock, betrayal at Ford government's surprise move to cancel pilot program**

# Reading hope and resistance

“It’s really nice to hear Doug the slug tell me that the best social program is a job, but where would he like me to get one at my age, in my health, in Thunder Bay?...I have always believed that I earn my pay, even if it’s just ODSP. I don’t sit at home, and if I do, I’m not well. And even when I’m home, I’m doing something...I think you would find that the majority of people who live - try very hard to live - on a disability income, are the same way.”

“I am highly conscious of people’s belief that I should feel empowered from working...And how work is supposed to give me more dignity...But the question that runs through my head when I hear all this is when do I get to take care of myself? And do what’s best for me? When do I get to not be so exhausted that I fall asleep without making dinner? Or not be able to take care of my home and I’m too embarrassed to have people over? That’s quite literally - even with basic income - what happens to me, because working takes energy. This concept that work is the be-all, end-all for a person with a disability is wrong.”

# Discussion and implications

- The sinister relationship between disability and poverty feature prominently in women's narratives as well as contemporary Canadian policy debates
- Compared to existing (inadequate) policy responses, basic income made it easier for disabled women to survive in an ableist world, while creating space for resistance, interdependence, and collective care
- Income support programs - including basic income - emerge as sites of struggle where ableism and interlocking forms of oppression can be either challenged or reproduced

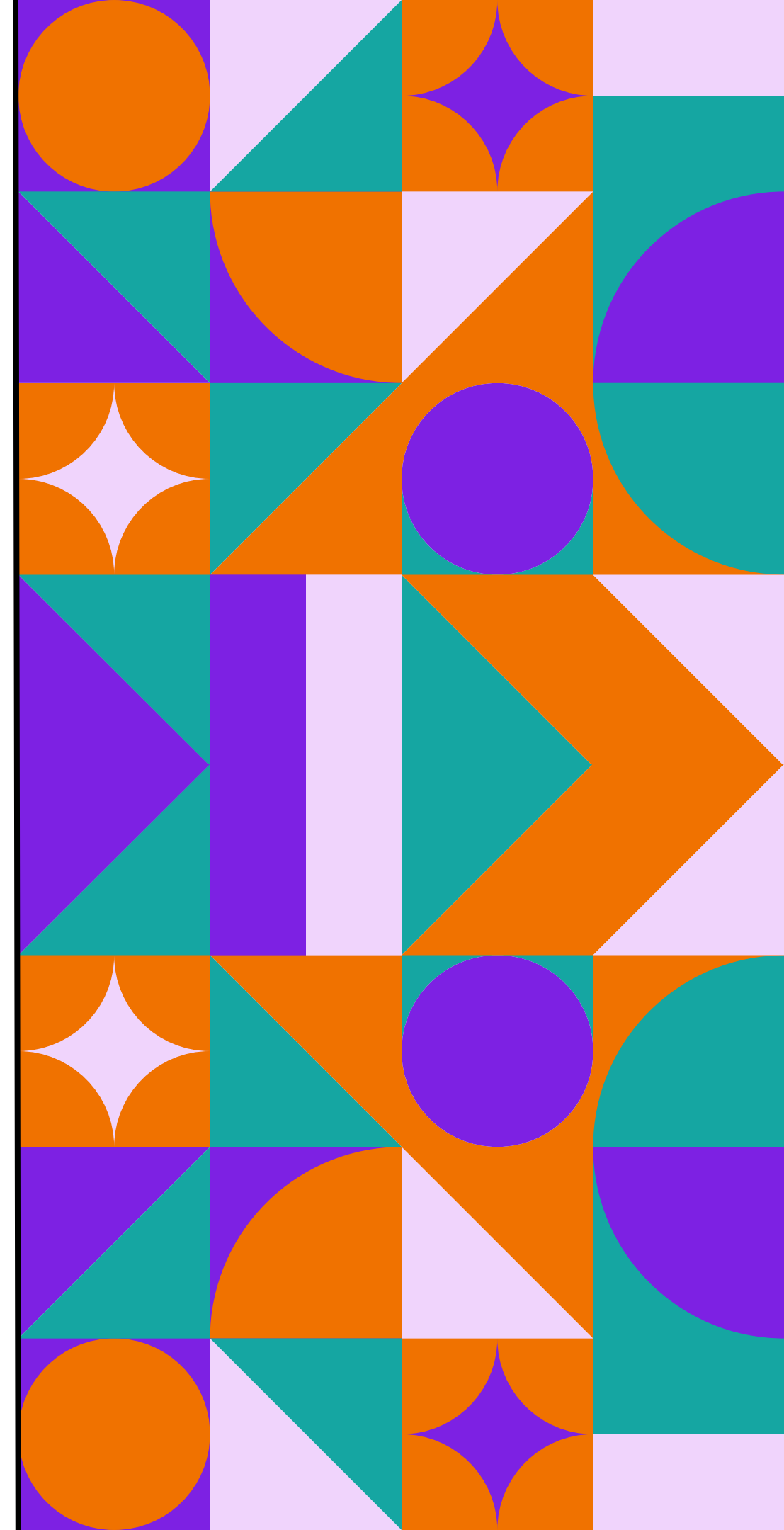




# Thank you!

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