


Shortchanged: Make work paid, equal & valued for women ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY
Full briefing note PDF ^[2]

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 2016_Shortchanged-Briefing-Note.pdf ^[3]	3.47 MB

Introduction

To support her aging parents Htet Htet Moe migrated from a small village in Megui state in Burma to neighbouring Thailand. She found work in a factory filleting fish, and now her hands are cut and bruised, her skin damaged by chemicals. Htet Htet is afraid to say a thing because her employer has taken her identity documents. Although she is in the country legally, she does not go out for fear of harassment by police. Htet Htet earns the official minimum wage (about \$11a day) but it barely covers her living expenses and she had to pay at least \$1300 to the agent that recruited her. In all likelihood she will return to Burma at the end of her two-year visa thin, unhealthy and exhausted, bringing with her only enough savings for a breather before being forced into another low-wage, deadend job. The dreams she contemplated during her short stint in university will likely never become a reality.

Htet Htet’s experience is sadly typical of the work women do around the world. She is exploited because she is poor, a migrant and, above all, because she is a woman. Gender inequality affects the jobs women have access to, the money they earn, and the way society values their work. Inequality at work is experienced most deeply by women living in poverty, but it affects women from all walks of life and is reflected across the many facets of their lives.

In the global economy, men are over-represented at the top of the income ladder; they enjoy access to better jobs and higher wages. Women, meanwhile, make up the vast majority of the lowest-paid workers, many in jobs that offer minimal security or physical safety. Women also shoulder the majority of unpaid care work – washing their children’s clothes, caring for aging parents or collecting water and firewood to cook for their families. Even in the poorest communities, where poverty wages are a reality for men and women alike, women perform a disproportionate share of the crucial, yet unpaid and undervalued, work of caring for children, the sick and the aging.

Women living in poverty are subsidizing the global economy with labour that is either free or cheap, a fact that helps explain why economic growth does not necessarily reduce inequality or even provide hope of escaping poverty. Addressing the unequal economics of women’s work is essential to closing the gap in earnings and opportunities between women and men, and between rich and poor.

Women across the world now enjoy higher levels of education and increased access to the workforce, yet their efforts to build a better life continue to be hampered by the unequal distribution of unpaid work, the gender barriers to many fields of work, the undervaluing of jobs held predominantly by women, and the often unspoken social norms that offer men higher wages and rates of promotion from the moment they enter the workforce.

In developing countries, the combined impact of these factors, along with lower levels of education, often traps women in precarious jobs without formal protections. For example, in Mali over 89 percent of women are in informal employment, compared to 74 percent of men.

In Canada, the pay equity gap is a reality for women across all sectors, and it is compounded by other forms of discrimination. For Aboriginal women, for example, the gap actually increases the more educated they are. All Aboriginal women employed full-time earn 26 percent less than non-Aboriginal men, but Aboriginal women with a university degree earn 33 percent less.

Gender inequality does not happen by accident. It is rooted in long establish norms, attitudes and beliefs, and it can be exacerbated by laws, policies and government spending. Government action can, however, act to reduce inequality between men and women at work. Government has a fundamental responsibility to do so, especially when markets and the private sector fail to.

In a global economy that appears to constrict policy options, many governments have taken the low road, enacting measures that are gender-blind or that further widen the gap between women and men, between rich and poor. Other governments have taken the high road, making policy and financing decisions to ensure that men and women are paid equally, to create economic opportunities for women and to reduce women's burden of unpaid care.

Canada is well positioned to take the high road. It can take immediate steps to make women's work paid, equal and valued here at home, and to stand up for women's rights worldwide. With a feminist Prime Minister and a government committed to inclusive growth, what other road is there to take?

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