

# Canada's gender equality regression is a problem that must be solved: Olive <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

It was impossible not to be dismayed when Canada was reported late last month to have plunged from first place to 35th place in the global rankings of gender equality.

The decline has been gradual, dating from the 2000s, but steady. Today, Nicaragua and Rwanda outrank Canada — indeed, they are in the top 10 in gender equality. Rwandan law requires equal representation of women in parliament.

Women make up only 26 per cent of Canadian parliamentarians, even though in October 2015 Canadians elected a record number of women MPs (88).

That we are regressing in one of the chief measures of quality of life is evident from the following disturbing facts, some not included in the October report cited above by the Geneva-based World Economic Forum (WEF), which measures gender equality each year:

- Women in Canada earn about \$8,000 less per year than men doing work of equal value, according to the Canadian branch of Catalyst, the world's leading monitor of the status of women in the workforce. That is a key factor in the growing gap between rich and poor in Canada. And income inequality is likely the greatest threat to social stability here and abroad.
- According to the United Nations, the Canadian gender gap in pay is twice the global average.
- It will take 170 years to close the gender-pay gap in North America, based on the current rate of progress, according to the WEF.
- That latest annual WEF report also finds that women work more than men, taking unpaid, often backbreaking, work into account. Worldwide, women work on average 39 more days per year than men, or almost six weeks more per year.
- Nearly half of companies listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange, Canada's principal stock exchange, do not have a single woman on their boards of directors.
- As long ago as 2009, a Harvard Business School report found that "Women now drive the world economy," accounting for an estimated \$20 trillion (U.S.) in consumer spending. Obviously, that number was projected to increase significantly as women enter the Chinese and Indian middle class in huge numbers. Yet women are still largely absent from corporate decision-making. Canadian women account for only about 8 per cent of senior corporate managers. Their ideas often aren't taken seriously. And in 2016, women still suffer every type of workplace misogyny.
- Women play the leading role in an estimated 85 per cent of vehicle purchases. They do so either directly, as purchasers, or in exercising a veto in vehicle-buying decisions. And yet women comprise only 17 per cent of auto industry employees.

Women are conspicuously absent in vehicle design, the single biggest determinant of a vehicle's functionality and popularity.

Here are some of the causes of this social liability that holds both Canada and the world back from improvement in quality of life:

- Women are over-represented in the lowest-paying jobs in Canada. Most of these are jobs in the service sector — including caregiving, retailing, tourism and hospitality. In the developing world, the low-paying textile industry is among the chief industrial employers of women. The pay is minimal, job security is non-existent, and working conditions abysmal.
- During and since the Great Recession that began in the late 2000s, both public- and private-sector employers in North America have relentlessly reduced their workforces and imposed pay freezes. Those drivers of income inequality fall heavily on men, to be sure, but even more so on women trapped in low-wage ghettos.
- Women have a monopoly on reproduction. The maternity leaves they take interrupt their career advancement at unenlightened workplaces, which is still most of them. Women who take extended "mat leave" also risk having no job to return to.

Two of my close women friends, rising stars in their workplaces, were victimized in that way by superiors who felt threatened by them. One of them was victimized by a female superior. You sometimes hear about the “sisterhood,” but just ask Hillary Clinton, who lost the white-woman vote.

- Canada boasts among the world’s largest populations of aboriginal women and first-generation immigrant women. Each are over-represented in the lowest-income Canadian households.

How can we achieve full participation of women in decision-making, and obtain the full contribution that women want to make in building the country?

- As we did with Saskatchewan’s pioneering in Medicare, we can roll out Quebec’s model of affordable daycare across the country. Daycare is both scarce and unaffordable in most of Canada.
- For low-income parents, a guaranteed annual income would top up insufficient parental subsidies provided by Ontario and other Canadian jurisdictions.
- Women have made great strides in traditionally male-dominated fields like medicine, law and business administration. But not so in science, technology, engineering and math, collectively known as STEM. That is where so many of the high-paying, fulfilling and secure jobs of the future are.

If women are averse to STEM, girls certainly aren’t. We have to learn why girls and young women, who outperform males in STEM well into high school, abruptly turn away from it. One of the leading factors is a lack of women teachers in STEM. There is also a paucity of role models.

Girls Who Code is a volunteer-run after-hours program that teaches middle-school women to become computer programmers. According to the CEO and founder, about 65 per cent of its graduates opt for a career in STEM.

Justin Trudeau took a giant step last year in creating role models by insisting on the first gender-equal federal cabinet in the Western Hemisphere. And Trudeau has put women in some of the most demanding cabinet posts, where they have high visibility as role models.

Fully unleashing the intellectual resources of 3.7 billion women might be our only chance to successfully confront threats that range from income inequality to climate change. We don’t have the luxury of tackling these threats with an arm tied behind our backs.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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