

# McInturff: The budget is a first step to better the lives of women in Canada <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Men and women are different. That shouldn't be news, but today it is. Today, the government released the first federal budget that includes a look at the differences between men and women. Differences like the fact that women are twice as likely to work part-time, do more hours of unpaid care work, are less likely to qualify for Employment Insurance and are more likely to be the victim of a violent crime.

For public spending to be effective, we need policies and programs that respond to those differences. More targeted policy is more effective policy. Otherwise we could just divide up the budget by 37 million Canadians and send everyone a cheque.

When economic policies are made based on this kind of gender analysis, we have the opportunity to reduce the number of women experiencing violence and poverty. We have a chance to clear the way for women to have equal access to decent work and decent pay.

Narrowing the gender gap benefits everyone. Women make up 47 per cent of our labour force. Nearly one million women are working part-time right now for involuntary reasons – reasons like they can't find childcare. When more women work, they earn more money, they spend more money, they pay more taxes, and they invest in their families and their communities. That means growth. Growth you can feel. Growth that makes a difference in how we live our lives day to day.

Gender-based analysis of economic and tax policy is not about catering to a special interest group (which women are not). It is about better, more effective policy. It is about building a more effective and productive economy. It is about realizing the promise of equality for half the population.

The 2017 federal budget does a very good job of providing analysis of how measures in the 2016 budget reduced poverty among single mothers and senior women. It gives concrete breakdowns of how income transfers like the Child Benefit affect women and men differently. This is good work. But this is a look back at the greatest gender hits of 2016.

There is some good news to found in Budget 2017. Not groundbreaking. Not life-changing. But welcome.

The government will spend \$100.9 million over five years to establish a National Strategy to Address Gender-Based Violence. That's about \$20 million a year. To address a problem that currently costs our economy \$12 billion a year, according to Justice Canada. A problem that has directly affected more than one million women in the past five years.

There is \$3.6 million over three years to establish an LGBTQ2 Secretariat and support the work of the Prime Minister's Special Adviser on LGBTQ2 issues.

There is \$40 million for women-led technology firms. That's more than the annual budget of Status of Women Canada – the department tasked with making sure all this gender-based analysis happens.

Finally, there is \$7 billion over 10 years to increase access to affordable childcare. This is a huge issue for women and for our economy. Research in Canada and across high-income countries demonstrates that a lack of available and affordable childcare is one the biggest barriers to women's employment. Increased access to paid work is important for women, it's important for their families and it is a significant driver of economic growth. So when the International Monetary Fund came to town last year to evaluate Canada's economy, what did they want to talk about? Childcare.

So far, so good. Here's the trickier part.

There are some very big investments here in technology, science and all things innovative. The government points out that women only comprise 19 per cent of those who have training and are currently working in those sectors. Sad face. It invests billions in research and innovation, particularly in science and technology sectors. Innovation: happy face. And the measures that would ensure women benefit from more than 19 per cent of that? The benchmarks for narrowing the gap between men and women working in this high-paying and

growing occupational sector? Not so much detail there.

In general, there are no specific benchmarks for narrowing the wage gap, increasing women's employment or lowering rates of violence. The six economic sectors identified as the budget's priorities are all predominantly male employment sectors. There are no parallel investments in predominantly female employment sectors. Support for unpaid care work is delivered through a tax break – which many female caregivers will not qualify for, because they don't have the time left to do enough paid work to raise their incomes to a level that would qualify them for that break. Further supports to caregivers and new parents are delivered through the Employment Insurance program, which many women don't qualify for, because they tend to work part-time, because they do more unpaid caregiving work.

Perhaps most unfortunate, the department that is tasked with supporting gender-based analysis across the entire federal government, Status of Women Canada, continues to be dramatically underfunded. Its budget represents .01 per cent of federal program spending. This year. Last year. Every year for the last decade. As one public servant put it, it's budget dust.

The government's commitment to do this analysis is something to celebrate. This year's budget makes an important first step towards better policies for Canadians and better lives for women.

There is one sentence in the 2017 federal budget that gives me more cause for optimism than anything else. It is this: "More than 60 Budget 2017 measures were identified as having differential gender impacts, but there remain many areas where data is not readily available." That is the sound of Finance Canada asking questions that it has never asked before. That is the sound of our government realizing how much more it needs to know before it can deliver real change for women in Canada. That is a cause for hope. See you in 2018.

-reprinted from Ottawa Citizen

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