

A \$15 minimum wage is a feminist issue ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Chances are you know someone working part-time, from contract to contract, or in a low-wage job -- and research shows that person is most likely a woman. Across Canada, women account for 70 per cent of part-time employees and 60 per cent of minimum-wage earners. There is a lot at stake for women -- and gender equity -- in the movement to end precarious employment.

In Ontario, community organizations, unions and activists are leading campaigns to bring fairness to workplaces, and they are proving that advocacy works. The Ontario government recently introduced legislation which proposes to raise the minimum wage from \$11.40 an hour to \$15 by 2019, among many other labour reforms. This commitment is being hailed as a game changer and a life changer.

In YWCA Toronto's Employment and Training programs, we see the challenges that women face in the labour market every day. As my colleagues, Andrea Reynolds and Catherine McLean, put it: "Precariously employed women are stuck in neutral while an affluent country prospers and advances around them... Most have no safety net if they fall out of work or if they or a loved one falls ill. Too many lack the stability to make financial plans. There is no quality child care. They are trapped in employment where flexibility is required of them, rather than for them."

Certain groups of women are impacted more than others by precarious employment. Racialized women, for instance, are over-represented in the 20 lowest-paid occupations, including cashiers, restaurant servers, food counter attendants and child-care providers. And a United Way Toronto and York Region study found that racialized women in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area experienced an increase of almost 20 per cent in precarious employment between 2011 and 2014.

Indigenous organizations have long been calling for increased opportunities for training and employment to enable Indigenous women to secure good jobs with benefits. A 2016 report from the National Aboriginal Economic Development Board points to economic gaps in income, education and training between Canada's Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

Newcomer women in YWCA Toronto programs tell us that the Canadian job market is hard to crack. Employers often require "Canadian experience" to qualify for jobs, even though women may have experience in another country, and even though 'Microsoft Word is the same everywhere' as one woman put it. This job market discrimination traps women in low-wage, precarious jobs and limits their options for building new lives in Canada.

Given this larger context, the commitment to a \$15 minimum wage gives us hope as it will help to lift women out of poverty. Let naysayers know that this move is good for women, and it is good for the economy, too -- a fact affirmed by over 50 leading economists. In a recent editorial, four economists write: "careful studies find that recent minimum wage increases are boosting spending power for low-income workers and reducing inequality."

Moving forward, there is a lot that we can do to take action. Join the movement for a \$15 minimum wage and workplace fairness in Ontario. Be a conscious consumer, shop at businesses that pay workers a living wage and benefits. And in the non-profit sector, which is challenged by a shift towards project-based funding, there is a decent work movement underway -- support it.

A \$15 minimum wage is a progressive step towards ending precarious work, a feminist issue that we should all champion. It is about fair wages, employment standards and benefits. It is about the right to join a union, to dignity and to security. And it is the recognition that when women thrive, children, families and communities are stronger. Now is the time for action.

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