

Leaders who truly support #MeToo should prove it at budget time ^[1]

Their decisions about where money will flow or be cut back have direct impact on the prevalence of gender-based violence, discrimination, and poverty.

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EXCERPTS

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Shocked. Disgusted. Disappointed.

These are just some of the reactions from politicians of all stripes as a growing list of high-profile colleagues face accusations of sexual misconduct and harassment.

In each case, women state that the accused had power over them, their careers and their livelihoods. This dynamic of power and control is a hallmark of the abuse that shapes the daily lives of many women, girls, and gender-diverse people across race, ability, religion, immigration status, sexuality and class in Canada.

There is a moral and economic imperative for change. The same politicians reeling in disgust at these allegations are far from powerless bystanders. They have incredible decision-making power and their choices affect the lives of women, girls and gender-diverse people in profound ways.

At this moment, our decision-makers are in the thick of municipal, provincial and federal budget processes that shape the realities of people across Canada. Their decisions about where money will flow or be cut back have direct impact on the prevalence of gender-based violence, discrimination, and poverty.

As the #MeToo movement opens up overdue conversations about sexual abuse and power, governments at all levels must engage immediately and meaningfully in gender-responsive budgeting.

There are multiple consequences of not having a gender analysis of government budgets.

Gender-responsive budgetary analysis starts by asking: does government spending move the needle forward on gender equity, safety, security and dignity? If not, the next step involves making investments to address gender inequity.

There are multiple consequences of not having a gender analysis of government budgets. For First Peoples, evidence includes law enforcement's neglect in addressing the violence and disappearances experienced by Indigenous women, Two-Spirit people and children

across Canada. For Indigenous families, the impact of colonization and inequitable funding for services has contributed to a child poverty crisis and disproportionate numbers of Indigenous children in state care.

The dearth of funding for safe, stable, affordable, accessible and adequate gender-responsive housing leaves too many in unsafe and precarious situations.

The result is a hidden and episodic crisis of women's homelessness where many remain in violent situations to maintain their housing. They live in crowded conditions. They stay in housing despite sexual harassment from landlords. They are unable to move because there are no wheelchair accessible units available, or they are afraid to move due to precarious immigration status.

This crisis is exacerbated for trans, gender-diverse and non-conforming youth and adults, who experience higher rates of homelessness and often face discrimination in accessing emergency shelter, housing and community services to meet their distinct needs.

The absence of commitment and funding for a universal child care system in Canada further causes mothers to endure unsafe relationships. With subsidies in short supply and full fees rivaling mortgage payments in Toronto, a new parent simply cannot enter the labour market to earn the money for first and last month's rent that could keep her family safe.

When survivors bravely seek help to leave unsafe situations, insufficient funding leaves them lingering on long waiting lists for counselling, legal information and representation and emergency housing. For example, the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre-Multicultural Women Against Rape has a 15-month waiting list, up from five months in January 2016.

For women and gender-diverse people living with disabilities who experience shockingly high rates of poverty and violence, the lack of funding for accessible housing, transit, employment opportunities and social services exacerbates the problem.

Solutions to gender-based violence are at hand. These include implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, workplace protections, investments in affordable housing, universal child care, public transit and holistic health coverage that should include mental health services, more counselling and more support services.

Elected officials should look themselves in the mirror and make gender-responsive choices at budget time and in their HR departments.

While Toronto city council approved a motion to do gender-responsive budgeting in 2016, we have yet to see a comprehensive analysis of the city budget from this lens.

In Ontario, a motion was passed to require the provincial government to incorporate an intersectional gender equity perspective in the 2017-18 budget but there was no bill created to implement the motion.

The federal finance minister is taking steps in this direction, but more action is needed.

Without making the badly needed investments in under-funded services and supports, the words of shock by many politicians will be nothing but empty rhetoric. Times are changing; our approach to protecting and investing in the public good needs to change, too.

Signed: Campaign 2000, Ontario Campaign 2000, YWCA Toronto, Toronto Women's City Alliance (TWCA), Toronto Rape Crisis Centre - Multicultural Women Against Rape (TRCC-MWAR).

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