

A gender budget needs meaningful changes to parental leave and pay equity ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Budget 2018 is being advertised as a truly comprehensive gender budget ^[3], with two key pieces of that being use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave, and action on pay equity.

Last year's gender budget implemented the Liberal campaign promise to extend EI parental leave from a total of 12 months to 18 months ^[4], despite the fact that the idea was universally panned by feminists, Canada's unions and business groups.

The problem? Other than the fact it doesn't recognize that the primary issue facing parents of young children is the need for a national child-care system, the plan didn't increase the total amount of funding, it simply extended the current allotment over a longer period of time ^[5]. Instead of getting 55 per cent of your average earnings for 35 weeks of parental benefits, you can choose to get 33 per cent for 61 weeks. If you earn more than the maximum insurable earnings threshold of \$51,700, the 35-week maximum benefit is \$547/week, and the 61-week maximum benefit is \$328/week. The main benefit for parents taking the 18-month leave would be the accompanying change in the duration of job-protected leave, and some parents might have collective agreement top-ups that make the 18-month leave more attractive (although that will likely change rather quickly).

On the whole, an excellent example of how not to do gender budgeting.

So what should we be looking for to make sure that this year's changes to parental leave and pay equity will be meaningful?

Well, for any measure we should be looking for how it will affect differently located women -- women with disabilities, racialized women, women in rural areas, women with different levels of income ... you get the idea.

For parental leave specifically, it is useful to look at Quebec's program ^[6]. Andrea Doucet, Lindsey McKay, and Sophie Mathieu, have found ^[7] that Quebec's QPIP does a better job of reaching low-income families. There are several features that contribute to this -- lower eligibility requirement (\$2,000 of income vs. 600 hours of EI eligible employment), dedicated second-parent leave, and a higher 70 per cent replacement rate for both the dedicated maternity leave and the dedicated second-parent leave, as well as the first seven weeks of parental leave. Any modification of Canada's parental leave program that only does part of this will likely fall short.

On pay equity, many stakeholders are expecting stand-alone legislation to implement proactive pay equity at the federal level. In the budget, we might see set-asides for what this could be expected to cost the federal government as an employer, as well as funding for independent Pay Equity Commission and Hearings Tribunal, and a commitment to funding to support workers' and advocacy groups' access to advice, information, training, and participation in the pay equity process.

Last year I asked ^[8] how it could be a gender budget without "higher minimum wages, better employment standards enforcement, proactive pay equity legislation, and affordable child care." Those are still the questions I'll be asking this year.

-reprinted from Rabble

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