

It's time for a feminist policy approach ^[1]

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More informed and balanced policy is the way forward toward equality

As we approach International Women's Day on March 8, it's a good time to take a look at the status of women in Alberta.

The province's current NDP was elected in 2015 with a very strong feminist agenda. Some examples from their platform included the promise to create a Women's Ministry, move toward \$25 a day daycare, improving compassionate care leaves and time off for family responsibilities, and create more spaces in women's shelters across the province. Almost three years later, the NDP has delivered on pretty much all of these promises.

They have also introduced a number of other forward-looking policies that have a direct impact on the status of women and gender equity in the province. The move toward a \$15 minimum wage, for example, has a direct impact on gender equity, as the majority of minimum wage workers in Alberta are women.

Likewise with the government's resolve in refusing to cut spending on front line public services like health care, education, and social services. These are all female-dominated fields that, because of the high unionization rate and the nature of public service employment, provide Alberta women with high pay, good benefits, and good job security—all things that contribute significantly to a reduced gender gap.

All of this is, of course, enhanced by the government's high number of women MLAs and the premier's insistence on a gender-balanced cabinet.

Despite all of these advances, however, Alberta continues to have the highest gender pay gap in the country, and one of the highest in the developed world. A 2017 report by the Conference Board of Canada actually gave Alberta a 'C' for overall socio-economic performance, based largely on the province's high gender wage gap.

Previous research done by the Parkland Institute also points out that women in Alberta carry what is essentially a double workload, putting in 35 hours of unpaid work per week, making it even more difficult to take on paid work and further widening the pay gap. This includes the typical household chores, child-rearing, caring for other family members, such as aging parents and grandparents, and numerous other functions that largely go unrecognized as having any measurable merit or economic consequences.

There is virtually no economic policy, from education and seniors care funding to the degree of economic concentration in fossil fuel extraction, that does not impact on the social and economic well-being of women.

What this means is that in order to truly overcome the gender gap and begin genuinely working toward gender equity, governments must move beyond their current focus on just childcare and shelters and adopt a feminist approach to policy making that spans the entire government. This is the position promoted by Oxfam Canada in its ShortChanged program.

Tackling gender inequality requires a whole-of-government approach that recognizes the many interconnected factors that affect the gendered distribution of power, opportunities, and resources, and that ultimately impact women's lives. For example, the government cannot adequately address violence against women without recognizing that poverty wages keep many women trapped in economic insecurity.

Strong interdepartmental collaboration can help ensure that policy decisions are coherent and mutually reinforcing. The government must ensure that initiatives to advance women's rights in one area are not undermined by gender-blind policy making in other areas. Women's rights cannot be prioritized only when it is convenient; a commitment to gender equality must inform all of the government's policy and spending decisions.

Currently in Alberta, policies are under a gender impact analysis only after they have been fully written and articulated. A feminist policy-making approach requires that a gender based analysis be part of the entire policy-making process, from conception to development to implementation, in every government department.

In Alberta, beyond the obvious need for an affordable and regulated province-wide daycare framework, there are a number of policy areas where immediate work could be done to further reduce the wage gap. Adequately funding public long term care for seniors would allow many women to move back into the work-force. Eliminating family income tests for access to tax benefits and programs, relying instead on just the woman's income level, would increase the number of women benefitting from those programs and further reduce the earnings gap. Working to diversify the economy and shift away from a singular focus on male-dominated fossil fuel extraction work would help women move out of lower-paid service and hospitality work. And given the degree to which women are over-represented among Albertans living in poverty, developing and adopting a province-wide poverty reduction strategy would go a long way to improving the lives of women in Alberta.

All of these steps, and many others, require a government that fundamentally understands that every action it takes and every piece of policy it adopts impacts women in Alberta in some way or another. The only way to sustainably reduce the gender gap over time is for the government to be aware of which policies negatively impact the status of women and minimize those impacts, while ensuring that a majority of its policies is working to reduce the gender gap and improve the overall well-being of women in the province. That's what genuine feminist policy-making can and should look like.

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