

Federal budget stresses need for gender equality but offers little cash ^[1]

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The Liberal government's new economic plan extolls the need to create more space for women in the Canadian work force but offers little financial assistance to make that happen.

Finance Minister Bill Morneau named the budget he released Tuesday "Equality + Growth," and many of its pages contain measures aimed at making it easier for women to get jobs and hold them while balancing family responsibilities.

"We believe that Canada's future success rests on making sure that every Canadian has an opportunity to work, and to earn a good living from that work," Mr. Morneau told the House of Commons. "And that includes Canada's talented, ambitious and hard-working women."

The Finance Minister points to some lamentable realities. On average, women earn 69 cents for every dollar earned by men on an annual basis, even though three-quarters of young women have a postsecondary certificate or degree. And even women who graduate from high-demand fields such as science, technology, engineering and math earn, on average, \$9,000 a year less than their male counterparts.

The government proposes to tackle the gender gap with a variety of measures.

It is promising, for instance, to take what Mr. Morneau describes as a "historic and meaningful" step by introducing pay-equity legislation in federally regulated sectors.

Making the act of paying women less than men for work of equal value illegal would go a long way toward achieving gender equality in the workplace, says Kathleen Lahey, a law professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., who has studied the issue. "Iceland seems to have done that without too much difficulty," she said, "so why not Canada?"

But there is no dollar amount attached to the proposed law in the budget documents and there are no plans to introduce the legislation until the fall at the earliest.

A new EI Parental Sharing Benefit, based on a program currently in effect in Quebec, encourages a second parent (often the father) to share in the caregiving of a baby by providing an extra five weeks of employment insurance benefits on top of the 35 weeks that are already available to the family.

"The hope is that, in the long run, it nudges dads toward taking on more primary caregiver responsibilities," said Tammy Schirle, an expert on gender wage differentials at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont., who added she is not certain the measure will be as effective as the government hopes.

But it will not cost Ottawa much money because increases to EI premiums and other factors are expected to make the benefit revenue-neutral.

The government is also increasing the amount that low-income workers can obtain under a Canada Workers Benefit (formerly known as the Working Income Tax Benefit) by \$170 a year next year and increasing the amount they can earn before that benefit is phased out completely.

But advocates for the working poor had hoped the government would also change the rules to allow both partners in a two-income family of low-wage earners to collect it. That did not happen.

"Right now, only one person in the family can claim the benefit and, more often than not, it's the men," said Dr. Schirle. "If more than one person in a family could claim it, that would make it better in terms of supporting women's work."

The government has promised to help women enter trades or get apprenticeships. It is giving an extra \$10-million this year and \$15-million next year to women's organizations. And it says it is taking steps to ensure that more women get academic funding, appointments to the judiciary and financial help for starting businesses.

But the biggest incentive the government could have offered to help women enter and stay in the work force – increased availability to affordable child care – was not in this budget.

Last year's federal financial plan committed \$7.1-billion over 11 years for child care, which the government said "could" create 40,000 spaces over the next three years. But there are regulated spaces available for only one in four children under the age of five, and hundreds of thousands more are needed.

Dr. Schirle said the government could have introduced a refundable tax credit that would have subsidized the cost of child care, even for low-income earners who do not benefit from the existing tax deductions.

Ms. Lahey said she believes the government needs to introduce, as quickly as possible, a fully subsidized child care program that would provide spaces for children of all ages.

But the budget introduced Tuesday did neither. There is no new money for child care – only boasts about agreements that Ottawa has made with provinces to spend the money it has already committed.

Real assistance in child care and real pay equity are both needed if Canadian women are ever to have the same job security and economic advantages that are enjoyed by Canadian men, said Ms. Lahey.

"The fact that Canadian governments refuse to take firm and rapid steps on those two points," she said, "is a real indication of lack of concern for gender equality despite many, many affirmations to the contrary."

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