# Motherhood, social norms behind gender wage gap in Canada: Finance Canada docs [1]

**Author:** Smith, Joanna
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EXCERPTS

OTTAWA - Motherhood and the societal expectations that come with it are major factors in Canada's wage gap between men and women, concludes an internal government analysis that suggests Ottawa should take this into account when it thinks up new ways to address the problem.

"Since gendered expectations and social norms are clearly important factors in the gender wage gap, closing the gender gap will require broad societal changes," says the Aug. 28 briefing note prepared for Paul Rochon, the deputy minister of finance.

The memo given to the most senior permanent official at the federal Department of Finance outlines several reasons why progress on closing the gap between men and women when it comes to participating in the workforce, and the money that comes with it, has largely stalled since the 1990s.

According to Statistics Canada, female employees between the ages of 25 and 54 earned, on average, $0.87 for every dollar earned by their male counterparts last year, which is also one of the largest gaps among countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The memo says that while Canadian women now achieve higher levels of education than men, and are beginning to pursue high-earning careers in greater numbers, the fact that women bear children — and bear the bulk of responsibility to raise them — remains a factor in lower pay.

A presentation attached to the briefing note shows that while there is a higher proportion of women in lower-paying fields, such as education, this is not enough to explain the discrepancy. The document says calculations by the Department of Finance showed that in 2018, only 22 per cent of the gender wage gap stemmed from women working in different fields from men. The rest was due to women making less than men in the same occupations.

Social norms that expect women to prioritize family life, the memo suggested, can also get in the way of career advancement.

"Because of social norms, women take on a greater share of household and familial responsibilities, which conflicts with paid work responsibilities," says the memo, which The Canadian Press obtained through the Access to Information Act.

The briefing note says the responsibilities associated with motherhood play an especially important role in the wage gap, which the analysis shows becomes much more pronounced, and never fully closes again, when women reach childbearing age.

"Lack of workforce continuity and loss of human capital have negative consequences for women's labour market outcomes," says the memo, adding that the gender wage gap is roughly halved for women who do not have children.

"Expectations that women will leave work for a more extended period than men to take on childrearing responsibilities may also explain the lower probability of being hired and lower wages," it says.

Little of the analysis is new or surprising — except for its origins.

Sheila Block, a senior economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, said it is interesting to see finance officials dig behind the numbers, although she would also like to see more intersectional analysis that takes into account how much bigger the gap can be at lower income levels.

"What I'm hopeful about is this will result in the federal government actually stepping up to the plate and acting on the public policy that we need to reduce the wage gap," Block said Tuesday.

The memo notes that advancing gender equality has been a top priority of the Liberal government.

That includes requiring the federal budget to undergo a gender-based analysis, which involves thinking about how measures might affect

men and women, or boys and girls, in different ways, while taking into account other factors such as income, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation.

"However, improving gender equality will ultimately require identifying and tackling the key factors that sustain gender gaps," the memo states.

Pierre-Olivier Herbert, a spokesman for Finance Minister Bill Morneau, pointed to recent government moves including proactive-pay-equity legislation and dedicated leave for non-birthing parents, which is meant to encourage couples to better share the burden of parenting responsibilities.

"The reasons behind the gender wage gap are deep-rooted and complex," he said in a statement Tuesday. "There is more work to do to close that gap and doing so will require a comprehensive approach, involving multiple tools and action from all segments of society."

Armine Yalnizyan, an economist and a fellow studying the future of workers at the Atkinson Foundation, said the dedicated leave for second parents, who are most often male, could help to normalize the need to accommodate family responsibilities in the workplace outside of gender lines.

But she also thinks that Canada should be thinking about how to better support unpaid labour at home, instead of just helping more women work more.

"That can't be the future in an era where you've got a shrinking labour force supporting more people that are too old and too young to work," she said.

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