

Ottawa names gender equality task force in run-up to federal budget ^[1]

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Source: The Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 8 Mar 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

As the pandemic continues to have a disproportionate economic impact on Canadian women, the federal government has unveiled its gender equality task force — women who will advise decision-makers on creating jobs and growth through a feminist and intersectional lens.

Coming on International Women's Day, the announcement fulfils a throne speech commitment by the Liberal government to address economic inequality, in part through the creation of an expert committee to help develop an action plan on women in the economy.

Composed of 18 women, the task force represents a variety of sectors — including business, health, child care and labour — and a “diverse range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds,” according to a statement from the Department of Finance.

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The committee will have its inaugural meeting in the coming days, just weeks before the federal government is expected to deliver its budget, though the task force will continue to advise the government throughout 2021.

“Over the past year we have seen the alarming impact of this pandemic on women’s economic participation,” said Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, who will co-chair the task force alongside Mona Fortier, the minister of middle-class prosperity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a devastating blow to women across Canada, especially those who are racialized and immigrants.

Mothers have had to step back from work to take on child-care duties. Others have been laid off or had their hours cut back while working in sectors where women are overrepresented, including low-wage essential jobs and the service, retail, hospitality and tourism industries.

According to Statistics Canada’s most recent labour force survey, January 2021 saw twice as many job losses for women aged 25 to 54 than for men of the same age — a similar phenomenon seen in March and April 2020, at the outset of the pandemic.

Since February 2020, approximately 80,000 women have left the labour force, more than triple the 25,000 men who have left it, according to the Department of Finance.

Meanwhile, women — and in particular racialized women — have been at the forefront of the COVID-19 fight.

According to Statistics Canada, more than 30 per cent of Black women who were employed between November 2020 and January 2021 were working in health care or social assistance; of the Black women in this sector, more than a third “were employed in the relatively low-paid occupational group of nurse aides and orderlies.”

“We know that women have paid a particularly high price due to the impacts of the pandemic,” Fortier said in a statement.

Fortier added that the government must make smart investments in its upcoming budget and beyond to advance gender equity and tackle the inequities “faced by vulnerable women, including Black, Indigenous and people of colour.”

Among the women on the task force are Maya Roy, chief executive officer of YWCA Canada; Dr. Gaynor Watson-Creed, with Dalhousie University’s faculty of medicine; Jocelyn Formsma, executive director of the National Association of Friendship Centres; and Armine Yalnizyan, the Atkinson Foundation fellow on the future of workers.

The task force is scheduled to meet four times in the next two months. Asked if the task force’s work is coming late, considering the federal budget is likely to be presented next month, spokesperson Katherine Cuplinskas said Freeland has been consulting on the issue of women and the economy since the beginning of the year.

“Since January, the deputy prime minister has been meeting with Canadians from diverse regions, sectors and backgrounds — very much including women — to discuss how best we can make investments in Budget 2021 and grow our economy during the recovery from the pandemic,” Cuplinskas said.

According to the task force terms of reference, following the budget, the panel “will consider broader and longer-term issues related to gender equality,” including the gender wage gap and the under-representation of women in leadership positions.

A November report suggested that Canada’s best option for economic recovery from the pandemic was an affordable, national child-care program, thanks to a combination of job creation and increased participation in the workforce.

In September’s speech from the throne, the government committed to a “significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early-learning and child-care system.”

Region: Canada ^[3]

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