

Study launched on parental benefits [CA-PE] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Women's Network of P.E.I. has launched a regional study on how to make the maternity and parental benefits available under the Employment Insurance Act more equitable for all women.

In January of last year, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) increased the parental benefits payout period for eligible parents from 10 to 35 weeks, making the combined maternity and parental benefits period a total of 50 weeks.

Initially, the change was welcomed by women's groups throughout the region, since it allowed new mothers to invest more time in their child's first year.

It gave women the option of prolonging breastfeeding, if they wished, and because the benefits also apply to men, gave new fathers the chance to participate more actively in child-rearing.

On second glance, however, Women's Network officials say there are inequities built into the system because only individuals eligible for employment insurance benefits can qualify.

"We really want to look at this situation and come up with some policy recommendations for government on how to make these benefits more equitable for all women," says Laurie Ann McCardle, executive director of Women's Network P.E.I. and project manager.

"It's clear right now that there is a lack of fairness."

Those not as likely to be eligible for the benefits include the large number of women in Atlantic Canada who are unemployed or have non-standard work arrangements, such as working seasonal, part-time, temporary or contract jobs.

One study suggests that 41 per cent of all employed women in Canada have such "non-standard" work arrangements.

Other women less likely to qualify for benefits include some of the most vulnerable: teenaged mothers, aboriginal women, low-income women and single mothers.

Women who are self-employed or own their own business, with the exception of self-employed fishers, do not qualify at all because they do not pay into the EI plan.

McCardle said the low wage replacement, roughly 55 per cent of a recipient's regular earnings, makes it difficult for most women and their families to take advantage of the full 50-week leave.

There is also a concern that the employment insurance system overall has become more inaccessible for women.

In 1999, the EI monitoring and assessment report showed that claims for regular benefits made by women decreased by 3.8 per cent in 1998/1999, compared with a 1.5 per cent increase for men.

Women's Network representatives will be working with co-ordinators in each of the Atlantic provinces to carry out focus groups with women who have recently had babies, those currently pregnant, women wishing to start a family or anyone with an opinion on the subject.

Discussions will also be held with equality-seeking women's groups throughout the region.

The study, which will include a literature review, will make recommendations to appropriate government departments, policy makers, unions and private employers.

-Reprinted from The Guardian (Charlottetown)

Region: Prince Edward Island ^[2]

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