

Tory census change will undermine value of women's work^[1]

Unpaid work in Canada is mostly women's work, a vital contribution that will be more difficult to assess in future

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EXCERPTS

It's said that a woman's work is never done.

As far as Stephen Harper's government is concerned, it need never be measured either.

All but lost in the controversy over the Conservatives' impending elimination of the mandatory long-form census is how, in the proposed \$30 million replacement - the voluntary National Household Survey - Question 33 from the long form has been cut.

Question 33 (let's call it Q.33) is a three-part query that has been in place since Canada made commitments at the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing. The question gathered data on how much time people spent on unpaid work: domestic chores, child care and attending to the needs of elderly relatives and friends. It helped make Canada a world leader in "time-use" data.

The results have also been showing how women are faring, socially and economically.

For example, the results indicate that despite a higher volume and percentage of women in the workforce over the past 20 years, changes between men and women in respective unpaid workloads have merely been "marginal."

Based on information gathered in the 2006 census, StatsCan reports that, on average, "Women spend about an hour a day more on basic housework chores than their male counterparts. In 2005, women aged 25 to 54 averaged 2.4 hours daily cooking, cleaning and doing other basic unpaid household chores, compared with 1.4 hours per day for men in this age range."

Two-thirds of Canada's unpaid work is being performed by women. No matter how the value of that is evaluated -anywhere between 30 to 45 per cent of Canada's \$1.5 trillion GDP. That's a heck of a lot of productivity that is being completely discounted.

"Question 33 has made it possible to understand that productivity does not consist in producing dollars alone," says Queen's University law professor Kathleen Lahey, author of *Removing Fiscal Barriers to Women's Labour Force Participation*.

"Productivity also consists of producing the human beings who grow up, if they are healthy, to become functioning members of the workforce, who help drive innovation, develop technology, etc. And it includes the work that produces day-to-day life that sustains human growth and evolution.

"Why don't we want to know about that part of our productivity anymore?"

In order to convince the Conservatives to keep the long-form questionnaire, which the government claims is too invasive, experts at the National Statistics Council proposed jettisoning Q.33 as a compromise. The 40-member council, which has been advising Statistics Canada since 1985, also said that the annual General Social Survey is adequate for gathering data on family, social support and retirement.

It is not adequate at all, Lahey says; the survey does not drill down deep enough, nor is the sample size adequate, to assist in making major policy decisions affecting women.

"The census information helps researchers go off and feel quite confident as they use smaller samples to get more precise data and still get answers that will be useful and good for formulating social policy decisions," she explains. The full existing census data help pinpoint women's employment and financial well-being, as well as track other disadvantaged groups.

Oddly, Q.33 has nothing to do with the level of "intrusiveness" that Industry Minister Tony Clement repeatedly says disturbs Canadians. What's more, according to Lahey's analysis, StatsCan's own documentation shows that, during a 2007 consultation on the 2011 census, there was really no substantial evidence that Canadians want the question eliminated.

Tellingly, the new optional survey maintains queries about unpaid work performed by spouses and partners in family-owned business such as farms. This leads Lahey to conclude that the Harper government is preparing the political ground to introduce income-splitting for farm and small business couples. This would benefit higher income earners more than those who make less.

"From the perspective of women, income splitting is the ultimate incentive to economic dependency," she wrote in a recent paper on the

subject.

"At the same time, it would be extremely costly, endanger funding available for existing and future social programs and would also exclude single individuals as well as any couples not falling within the terms of the provision."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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