

Women at work: still behind on the bottom line ^[1]

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Canadian women best their male counterparts in high school, college and university, but they fall starkly behind on the bottom line - in their paycheques. And the disparity looks even worse when compared with other developed countries.

The findings, contained in Education Indicators in Canada, a wide-ranging collection of data released by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, are partly the result of women often choosing less lucrative occupations than men - social work, say, as opposed to engineering - as well as entrenched biases in the workplace.

Less clear is why, when compared to the 30 other countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Canada lags in pay equity. Experts, however, point to Canada's less generous parental benefits and the fact that a higher percentage of Canadian women hold part-time jobs.

The report shows that Canadian women posted better academic achievements than men at all levels - in high school, women have a graduation rate 8 per cent higher than men, which rises to 11 per cent for college programs and 18 per cent for university degrees. However, women with a postsecondary education still earned on average just 63 per cent of the salary of similarly educated men, up only slightly from 61 per cent in 1998. The number is identical for women with only a high-school education.

College and university-educated women in the OECD countries on average earn about 71 per cent what men do.

Beatrix Dart, associate dean at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, argues Canadian women are still mainly responsible for childcare and place more importance on family than men, causing them to work fewer hours or even part-time. Other countries, she says, are more equitable, with men shouldering more of the responsibility of raising children.

"We are a more traditional country," she said. "If a man chooses to take his parental leave instead of the wife, I think it would still cause raised eyebrows, whereas in other cultures this becomes more acceptable."

Other countries offer more generous parental leave programs - Denmark and Sweden, for example, provide far more money for parents taking time off to raise their children - which also raises the overall income of women on maternity leave.

Statistics Canada figures from July showed that more than twice as many women as men worked part-time jobs in this country. This fact likely accounts for much of our country's lag on pay equity: Canadian women in full-time jobs earn about 73 per cent of what men do; the OECD average is 76 per cent.

"We know that women work more part-time than men," said Patrice de Broucker, a statistician with Statscan. "It is possible across countries the number of people working part-time is different."

Others, however, say women still face a bias in the workplace. A study by Catalyst, a non-profit organization that promotes women in business, showed that women with MBAs from top business schools around the world earned an average of \$4,600 less as a starting salary than men with the same credentials. Women also were less likely to move into leadership roles than men.

Deborah Gillis, a Catalyst vice-president, said things like a lack of role models and exclusion from informal networking create a glass ceiling for women.

"The numbers are very disappointing," she said of the figures released by the OECD and CMEC. "Over a 10-year period, you would hope to see that gap close."

Diane McGifford, Manitoba's Advanced Education Minister and CMEC's chair, said the challenge is to identify all the reasons for the pay gap and speak with industry groups to start fixing the problem.

"Perhaps companies are willing to pay men more than women," she said. "That might tell us something about our culture. It might tell us our labour market needs to pay women more."

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