

Lip service to equality ^[1]

Status of Women ministers say one thing but governments do another.

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EXCERPTS

I am confused. The ministers responsible for the Status of Women from across Canada met last month to discuss women's economic security (among other things).

New Brunswick representative Pam Lynch, legislative secretary to the Minister of the Status of Women, said after the meetings that she wants to, "reaffirm our province's commitment to working collectively with our counterparts in other areas of Canada to continue to address the common issues facing women."

Perhaps the next step is that government will introduce a distinct minimum wage for women and men, like in the good old days.

Well, I'm pleased that Canadian decision-makers responsible for the status of women continue to meet and that women's economic security remains on their agenda. But I am confused because there seems to be a disconnect between what the Ministers are saying - namely wanting to improve women's economic security - and the decisions that the Canadian and New Brunswick governments are making which affect their ability to measure improvements (or setbacks) in achieving women's equality, eradicating violence and improving women's economic security.

For example, how can we measure women's economic security given that the mandatory long-form census has been abolished, and replaced by the ineffective voluntary survey? Also, Statistics Canada recently announced that it will no longer be collecting data on marriage and divorce rates in Canada.

These government decisions mean that we will no longer know, with any reliability, women's level of income, the number of children in their household or if they are single, married, widowed or divorced. These data were used by governments and non-profits to design programs and policies to assist women. How will they know if their policies and programs are working and/or if they could be improved?

I am pleased to see that the ministers are committed to working to improve access to micro-credit, which involves small loans to women living in poverty to spur the creation of a small businesses, and to encourage women to enter non-traditional (often better paying) fields of work. Both of these initiatives can have positive effects on women's economic security.

But what happened to pay equity - paying women in traditionally female jobs (where most women are working) what they are worth? Achieving pay equity should be part of any plan to improve women's economic security. In this area, we seem to be moving backwards, not forward.

Federally, the Canadian Human Rights Act included the right to pay equity for employees working in the sectors under federal jurisdiction (mostly in the federal civil service, banks, telecommunications and interprovincial transportation). While women's groups and unions called for better pay equity legislation to ensure that women and men are paid according to their skills, education and job requirements, without having to file a complaint, the federal government did just the opposite.

In 2008, the Harper government adopted legislation relegating pay equity for public sector employees back to the bargaining table (something to be negotiated between the employer and the labour union) rather than a responsibility of the employer and a human right, protected by law.

In New Brunswick, we had been taking steps forward. Pay equity analyses are now complete for home support, child care and nursing home workers. Wage adjustments for nursing home workers are now underway, as the analysis showed that wage discrimination existed in this traditionally female field of work.

Although the pay equity analyses are also completed for home support and child care workers, the New Brunswick government recently announced that it will delay making their findings public. Wage adjustments for these workers will now have to wait until the process is completed for transition house and group home workers. Why should these workers have to wait? Ending wage discrimination for these workers would certainly have a positive impact on their economic security.

Here is another example of disconnect between what government says and what it does. The federal government is dragging its feet on the much-needed reform of the Employment Insurance program, especially when it comes to maternity/parental leave benefits. Many women cannot get access this program because of the eligibility requirements.

Women are already at a disadvantage because they must interrupt their careers to have children. EI provides low salary replacement rates because their wages are already lower than men's. Does having children need to mean a drop in standard of living and sacrificed earnings and career advancement opportunities for women? Lots of great research exists on this subject, backed by several years of lobbying and briefs to federal and provincial ministers.

Another conundrum is how to reconcile wanting to improve women's economic security with the provincial government's announced six-month delay in increasing the New Brunswick minimum wage to the Atlantic average, and its study of a two-tier minimum wage.

Most people working in minimum wage jobs are women and most of them are adults, not teenagers. In 2008, women represented six in ten of all minimum wage earners in New Brunswick and Canada. Forty-three percent (43 percent) were working full-time.

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Finally, our governments are failing to see the connections between their chosen priority issues. For example violence and the plight of Aboriginal women are on our governments agendas. Do they not realize that often women are trapped in violent relationships because of ongoing economic insecurity - which only continues if they leave?

Too many women are trapped in low wage jobs, which leads to lower pensions, lower maternity/parental leave benefits and poverty. Governments should have an overall strategy to improve the economic status of women.

Instead, they are playing politics by pitting one need against another. For example, the New Brunswick government says it had to chop the Advisory Council on the Status of Women to fund outreach workers, or by delaying fixes to women's decades-long wage disadvantage in the caring sectors such as child care, home support workers - letting them fall even further behind in earnings.

My mom always taught me "actions speak louder than words." I try to live by this philosophy. I wish that our governments would too!

- reprinted from Straight Goods

Region: New Brunswick ^[2]

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