

The BC disadvantage for women ^[1]

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Full report in pdf ^[2]

Summary:

Women in BC may well decide who becomes the next premier. According to a recent Ipsos Reid poll, most are not inclined to support Christie Clark, and this could make all of the difference in the election. There is much speculation about why Clark is having such trouble with female voters. These explanations sometimes relate to the economy (women do not rate economic performance as highly as men), or to women's "quirks" (women are less forgiving about Clark's mistakes), or to their disapproval of her style of leadership.

These are simply guesses and while some may have a ring of plausibility, there is a more obvious explanation. In general women have fared poorly under the governments of Gordon Campbell and Christie Clark, and many would have noticed this in their paychecks.

The problem is evident when comparing the earnings of BC women with women in the rest of Canada. The average earnings for all women in BC in 2010 (last available data) were \$2,700 below the national average for women in Canada. In both BC and Canada wages (adjusted for inflation) have improved slowly over the past two decades and the income gap between women and men has been reduced a little. But throughout the 21st century's first decade BC women's average earnings have remained substantially below the national average, whereas women in BC used to track the national average for most of the 1990s. Women's earnings also lag far behind men's. On average they earn only 65% of male earnings, while the figure for all women in Canada is 68%.

For women working full-time, full-year the picture is somewhat better than the average for all women (including part-time workers), although for all but three years in the decade this group of working women in BC received less than the national average.

The low earnings of women in BC may be partially explained by economic recessions that have different effects on provinces, but in BC economy recovery did not improve women's earnings relative to the Canadian average, as could have been expected. This is probably because of significant public policy changes that have restrained wages in BC.

When the current government was elected in 2001 it began concerted efforts to make labour more 'flexible' and responsive to employers' needs. It also instituted measures to reduce what it considered to be a high wage economy. The effect on labour was direct and brutal and it often had the effect of targeting women. These changes mostly related to the minimum wage, contracting-out, changes in labour legislation to favour employers, and changes to other programs for women.

Since women predominate among low-wage workers either at or near the minimum wage, keeping the minimum wage at \$8.00 an hour for 10 years affected them. So too did the \$6.00 'training wage,' for the first 500 hours of work. While designed for teenagers, it also affected female immigrants. Christie Clark did change this in 2011 and the minimum wage is now \$10.25, but it is still far below a living wage, and there is no plan for future increases.

Direct government action negatively affected the wages of public sector workers, who are predominately women. Early in the mandate the government rescinded a collective agreement and privatized many hospital jobs, an action that affected more than 8,000 workers, most of whom were women. The wages of these workers dropped dramatically and many lost their jobs altogether.

Other unprecedented legislation made the work of teachers an essential service, which affected their right to bargain on issues like wages and class size. The majority of teachers are women. In 2009 a two-year wage freeze was instituted for all public sector workers. Also, the reduction in labour standards affected many women's ability to work. One of the most difficult changes was the elimination of the requirement for 24-hour notice of shift change, but also significant was the reduction in minimum work shift times from four to two hours. These changes are hardest on women with childcare to organize.

Many programs and institutions that supported women were either eliminated or dramatically underfunded. Included in this was any capacity the government had for dealing with women's issues by eliminating the Ministry for Women's Equality and the Human Rights Commission.

Christie Clark has initiated both a 'families first' policy and policies to increase employment in the province. Until these kinds of programs are designed to recognize the needs of working women, and have specific goals to improve women's wages, women in BC will continue to trail the nation in earnings. Women are unlikely to support any government that continues the restrictive wage policies that so

dramatically affects them.

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Region: British Columbia ^[3]

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