

Canada leads on wage equity, but there is still a gap to close ^[1]

Editorial

Author: Toronto Star

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EXCERPTS

First the really bad news: across the Group of 20 industrial countries, women get paid less than men, do most of the unpaid labour, are most likely to be in part-time work and suffer discrimination at home, in the workplace and institutions. At the rate things are changing it will take 75 years - a lifetime - for women to reach wage equality.

Now the less bad news: Canada is at the top of the gender equality wage scale, according to the latest study. On average the 9 million women in our labour force earn 71 per cent of the wages of men. That puts us 10 points ahead of the average for members of the club.

Even so, Canada doesn't have a lot to crow about, says Oxfam, which released the wide-ranging study Monday with the Berlin-based Heinrich Boll Foundation. "Progress in women's labour force participation has slowed to a halt over the past two decades and the gap between men's and women's shares of earned income has remained virtually unchanged," Oxfam says.

It needn't be that way. Canada is one of the wealthiest G20 nations, and can afford to invest in policies that would narrow those gaps. But policy-makers from Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government on down haven't done enough to address some of the main factors that contribute to gender inequality.

As a result more Canadian men continue to be fully employed, with better jobs and larger pay packets. The proportion of full-time working men aged 25 to 64 is 76 per cent, compared to 57 per cent for women. Aboriginal women's rates are 15 per cent lower than the female average.

Women's progress in the job market is slowed by lack of federally funded child care facilities, and some working women have been thrown onto the mercy of unregulated home daycares, as the Star has written. Nor are fiscal policies that are an incentive to stay at home - think of the Harper government's \$2.5 billion annual cash giveaway for child care - any help in redressing the wider income imbalance. Such women end up contributing less to pensions and employment insurance. Many have lower salaries on re-entering the workplace, and if divorced or widowed are more likely to end up in poverty in their older years.

Women are disproportionately hit, too, by government downsizing. That's because they make up more than half the public workforce, and have less seniority than male counterparts. The shrinking of unionized jobs also hurts.

Government funding cuts for women's groups that exposed inconvenient truths about gender inequality have also taken a toll, reducing the public exposure that this issue gets. So has slashing the long form census, making it more difficult to track the disproportionate unpaid work women put in each week, and to identify ways to ease that burden.

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