

Fingas: Overburdened and underpaid ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

We've heard plenty over the past week about how a number of Saskatchewan employers have illegally fired women for getting pregnant.

There's ample reason for outrage that businesses are both flouting the law, and devaluing their female employees, but the cluster of pregnancy related firings in Saskatchewan represents only a very small part of a much bigger picture of systemic discrimination against women.

This past weekend, Oxfam released a report on gender equality across the G20, which paid lip service to gender equality in a 2012 declaration. Oxfam's study found that any progress in closing the historical gap between men and women has come to a halt in Canada, while moving painfully slowly in other countries.

To start with, Oxfam points out the continued failure of governments to recognize and properly value unpaid work, including caring for family members and domestic labour. The burden of that essential, but unrecognized work is disproportionately borne by women, to the tune of two to five additional hours per day.

Unfortunately, Canada is actually taking steps backward in its ability to assess that unpaid work due to the erosion of the long-form census and other important data-gathering tools.

And in case there's any doubt, unpaid work should be valued fairly in all kinds of households - not defined solely in terms of another spouse's income, as the federal Conservatives plan to do through an income-splitting scheme that would transfer free money to one-income, two-parent families while doing nothing for one-parent or two-income families.

The drain on time and resources created by unpaid work in turn feeds into lower employment rates and wages for women. Oxfam notes that every single country in the G20 continues to have a stark wage gap - and at the current, glacial pace of wage equalization, it doesn't expect pay equity to become a reality for another 75 years.

So what does Oxfam suggest to help close the continuing gender gap?

For Canada in particular, it emphasizes the need for a universally accessible public child care system that can both ensure that one prominent type of care work is actually treated as having economic value, and also facilitate a stay-at-home spouse's return to work.

Across the G20, it also points out the gender impact of universal social protection. As women bear an unfair share of the effects of precarious employment and poverty, a strong social safety net serves to close the gender gap.

And finally, Oxfam notes that our current employment policies fall well short of the mark in achieving equality of opportunity. It means that in addition to prohibiting the type of discrimination that we can all recognize as unwarranted, policymakers should also consider how our current, trickle-down economic model creates systemic barriers to equal opportunity for women who don't start from the top of the pyramid.

We've heard plenty about these types of solutions in past elections, and indeed few parties will disavow them entirely. But it's telling that we've seen little to no progress in making them a reality over a period of decades - as gender equality has all too often been shunted aside when it comes to government budgeting and planning.

By all means, we should demand that employers follow the law when it comes to discrimination against pregnant women. And indeed, we should consider it a serious problem that our corporate class seems happy to undo even the progress toward gender equality that was made in the past.

But we should also expect the law itself to move us toward employment equity - and preferably in time for the children whose mothers are facing wrongful discrimination today to benefit from truly equal opportunities.

Fingas is a Regina lawyer, blogger and freelance political commentator who has written about provincial and national issues from a

progressive NDP perspective since 2005. His column appears every Thursday. You can read more from Fingas at www.gregfingas.com [3]

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