

Toronto Star's View: Ontario is right to address pay equity gap^[1]

Author: Our Windsor.ca

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EXCERPTS

After decades of fighting for parity in wages between men and women, isn't the gap well on its way to being closed? Surely the bad old days when women lagged far behind men must be receding quickly.

But as Ontario's Equal Pay Coalition puts it: "Isn't the gender pay gap so 1970s? Sadly not."

Indeed, the most recent statistics available indicate that women earned a staggering 31.5 per cent less than men in Ontario in 2011, up from a gap of 28 per cent the year before. That's right: despite all the talk and effort, women in this province have actually been going backward in achieving something as basic as pay equity with men.

That's why Premier Kathleen Wynne's new push for pay equity is a hopeful sign for underpaid female workers.

In "mandate" letters to her ministers, the premier has directed Labour Minister Kevin Flynn to work with Women's Minister Tracy MacCharles to develop a strategy aimed at closing the stubborn earnings gap. It won't be easy.

Despite protestations to the contrary, the gender gap cannot be explained away by the suggestion that men are more likely to be in higher-paying skilled jobs or ones that require a greater education.

If that were true then licensed practical nurses, a category that is 90 per cent female, might earn at least as much as cable television service and maintenance technicians, who are 97 per cent male, the coalition suggests. Instead, the better educated and more skilled nurses have median earnings of only \$38,261 while the comparable figure for the technicians is \$51,030.

And achieving wage parity isn't simply about paying men and women the same for work of equal value. It's about creating conditions that allow women equal access to the workplace.

For example, while women's lower salaries can be partly explained by the fact that about two-thirds of part-time workers are female, that isn't the whole story. In Ontario, women make up 94 per cent of part-time workers who say that caring for children is the reason they don't work full-time. Given affordable, available child care, many would opt for full-time jobs - further closing the gap.

Wynne and her ministers don't have to look far to address one part of the problem: a continuing gender gap in the public sector.

As the Canadian Union of Public Employees put it in a 2011 study: "Women in the public sector still face a significant pay gap in relation to men." While the gap is 4.5 per cent "smaller" than in the private sector, it still exists, the union found.

The premier's goal of narrowing the wage gap is a good one, and long overdue. The recent set-backs in the fight for gender equity make it all the more urgent.

Region: Ontario^[3]

Tags: pay equity^[4]

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