

Canada lags behind Western nations in bridging women's wage gap^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada is lagging behind the leaders in the Western world in terms of the presence of women in company boardrooms and bridging the wage gap between genders.

Data from PricewaterhouseCoopers' 2016 Women in Work Index says between 2000 and 2007 there was a 19.2 per cent shortfall between a woman's median wage and a man's.

And in Canada, women only made up about 13 per cent company boardrooms.

The numbers place Canada in a tie with Spain for 19th for boardroom representation among the countries examined, just one spot ahead of ahead of the U.S.

In terms of wage equality, Canada finished in the bottom third, coming in at 24th, just ahead of Switzerland.

Souha Ezzedeen, a professor at Toronto's York University who researches the role of gender in management, told Yahoo Finance Canada that she's unsurprised by the findings and classified the country's results as "low."

She said women's participation in lower levels of organizational hierarchies, as well as their graduation rates from undergraduate programs, are at parity with men.

And, in some graduate programs, women's completion rates exceed those of their male counterparts.

But as women advance in their careers it becomes more difficult to climb up the organizational pyramid.

Ezzedeen said these challenges arise from lingering systemic discrimination as well as "push and pull factors," that either force a women to leave because of difficulties from within an organization or outside variables that draw them out.

She said many women are confronted by organizations that do not offer them the flexibility that they need to balance work and family, and end up underemployed or at home.

Or, if their employer can offer them flexibility, it becomes a double-edged sword because it causes them to be seen as someone who is not taking work as seriously as others who have not made the same sacrifices.

"Unfortunately, there's always going to be someone out there who is obsessed with work -- who is going to be happy to work all day, all night, then make parents automatically look not as committed," said Ezzedeen.

She added that over time, many women face a slower pace of promotion in comparison to their male counterparts, and that on average there's evidence that for every child they give birth to there's a corresponding drop in wages.

Pull factors often manifest themselves in Canadian society as lack of support at home or arise because of a dearth of quality and affordable childcare options that drag women off the corporate ladder and back into the home.

The Government of Canada currently allows new parents to split up to 35 weeks of leave between them, in addition to the up to 15 weeks available to biological mothers.

But Ezzedeen said some employers consider women "less committed" to their career if they take time off.

More support sought for moms and dads

Labour Minister MaryAnn Mihychuk also indicated earlier this year that the government was interested in introducing a form of dedicated paternity leave as part of changes to the Employment Insurance program.

However, Ezzedeen said North American society is still “trapped” in traditional notions of manhood and womanhood, and that many men shy away from asking for paternity leave.

“Childcare is not a woman’s issue but its been continuously portrayed and packaged as such, and therefore not taken quite as seriously, but it affects entire families,” she said.

“When we make it ... not a bad thing for a man to take time off, we are also helping women and families.”

She said revisiting this concept of childrearing and “making it OK for men to take time off” frees up women to “pay attention to their careers,” and doesn’t force them to “foot the entire bill of having a child.”

But the burden faced by parents doesn’t end after 35 weeks.

According to Statistics Canada data from 2011, 46 per cent of parents reported using some form of childcare for kids aged 14 years or younger in the past year.

That number jumped to 54 per cent for parents with children aged four and under. Of those parents, more than 52 per cent of them paid \$200 or more per month for child care.

The heaviest burden is placed on parents in Ontario where the median cost was \$677 a month. In contrast, parents in Quebec faced a median cost of \$152 a month, thanks to a provincially subsidized daily rate of \$7 per day.

These costs of paying for childcare outside the home often relegates women back to their homes.

“It is those extended times away from the workforce that undermine their advancement over time and their ability to close that wage gap,” said Ezzedeen.

Ezzedeen said women also start to pull away from their careers in anticipation of parenthood, and if they stay at home need to feel as if their employers care in order to “make it worthwhile” to leave their child at home with a nanny, grandparent or in childcare.

She said many also feel pressure to be a “good mom” and shuttle their children to and from all their activities.

“If you’re not the soccer mom who is constantly devoted, going to all sorts of lengths for your children, then you’re not good enough mother,” said Ezzedeen.

Caring for parents takes a toll, too

Ezzedeen said it’s also often overlooked that many women face the added burden of having to take care of their aging parents or relatives.

A PEW study from 2013 found that 47 per cent of American adults in their 40s and 50s have a parent age 65 or older and are either raising a young child or financially support a grown child (18 or older).

These findings were echoed by a BMO study from 2014, which indicated that the numbers are similar in Canada, with more than half (55 per cent) of this “sandwich generation” caring for their children, aging relatives or both.

Hope for the future

Ezzedeen said flexible work policies, a change in office attitudes towards gender, shared parental leave and access to quality childcare can help “minimize the impacts of women’s exits from the workforce and help close the wage gap.”

She added that this would in turn boost the country’s overall GDP and economic performance.

This sentiment is echoed by RBC, which found that increases in female labour-force participation over the past three decades has added \$130 billion to Canada’s annual economic activity.

Furthermore, the bank estimates that bridging that gap even further over the next two decades would boost GDP by four per cent in 2032.

“It is actually ... astounding the amount of impact that women’s contributions create,” said Ezzedeen.

“There’s hopefully the economic realization by companies that this is in our economic best interest (to have a) diverse workforce all the way up.”

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