

“Support Pay Equity - Your Family Will Thank You”

By Mary Cornish, Chair, Ontario’s Equal Pay Coalition

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www.equalpaycoalition.org

Ontario’s families depend on women’s work and women’s pay. Its time we paid that work what its worth. As we celebrate time with our families on Family Day, take a moment to consider that Ontario women still bring home to their families a paycheque which represents 71 cents for every dollar men earn. While the failure to properly value women’s work is an urgent human rights problem, it is also a family, social and economic problem. Here are the facts from Statistics Canada:

Ontario women still receive less for their work regardless of where they work, the size of their workplace or the precariousness of their work. Two thirds of minimum wage earners are women. 60% of women are clustered in 20 out of 500 occupations and women outnumber men in nine of the ten lowest-paying occupations. For many women, their pay is not enough to lift them or their families out of poverty with all its devastating health and social consequences. Children are suffering because their mother’s work is undervalued. Making child and family poverty history requires strong pay equity enforcement.

Pay discrimination is also greater for the most vulnerable women – aboriginal women, women of colour or immigrant women, women with disabilities and non-unionized women workers. Racial minority women earn 36% less than men and Aboriginal women earn 54% less. Women with disabilities earn significantly less than women and men without disabilities.

Discriminatory pay also affects women and their families throughout their lives beginning with their first jobs and continuing into retirement. Young high school graduates earn 27% less than male high school graduates. And more education has not solved the problem, with women now being the majority of university graduates. Female university graduates earn 16% less than male graduates and this pay gap widens as their careers progress. It also continues into retirement. The median income of retired women almost half that of older men. 42% of elderly women are poor. Over a lifetime, all these pay gaps add up to enormous financial losses with US-based Working Women estimating the total for each woman to be between \$700,000 and \$2 million depending on education level.

In addition to the negative effects of the pay gap on women and their families, failing to enforce pay equity also harms businesses, communities and governments. With 29% less to spend on family expenses such as housing, groceries and clothes, pay inequities also mean less money spent locally. A province that allows women to be channeled into low paid, undervalued work when the economy needs their skills and their purchases will not be able to compete successfully in the global economy. The World Economic Forum’s 2007 Global Gender Gap Report highlighted the key role gender “remuneration gaps” play in impairing economies from realizing their full potential. Pay equity is not just a women’s issue. Businesses, communities and governments who rely on women’s purchases and productivity need strong pay equity enforcement.

On January 1, 2008, Ontario's *Pay Equity Act* turned 20 years old. While the *Act* helped reduce the gender gap from 38% in 1985 to 29% today, gender-based pay discrimination is still widespread with many employers in both the private and public sector ignoring their legal obligations to achieve and maintain pay equity. Ontario's persistent wage gap shows that many women never received the benefit of Ontario's pay equity law, others fell outside its coverage and others lost the gains they initially made. Approximately 100,000 women working in predominantly female public sector workplaces such as child care centres and small community agencies are currently owed over \$150 million in pay equity adjustments with millions more owed until their pay gap is finally closed. This money is owing because after 2005 the Ontario government failed to continue the pay equity funding which had been paid out as a result of the 2003 *CUPE et al. Charter* challenge. A further challenge is being considered.

Since the early 1990's the Government has also reduced by half the budget of the Pay Equity Commission and Hearings Tribunal by half and eliminated funding for a Pay Equity Legal Clinic denying many women access to pay equity justice. Many employers have also not taken the necessary steps required by the *Human Rights Code* to remove the barriers facing women in gaining access to the higher paid occupations dominated by men. Employment equity as well as pay equity measures are needed to address the full gender pay gap. Pay equity enforcement must be revitalized to deliver pay justice to the current generation of working women and their families.

Despite the global commitment of Canada to the ILO international labour standard of equal pay for work of equal value, women are repeatedly faced with the argument that redressing their inequality is too costly and therefore does not make good business sense or good government policy. For every year of inaction the cost of redress is higher, the damage inflicted by the discrimination is deeper and the systemic benefits of equality fail to materialize.

Over the last 5 months, nearly 6,000 Ontarians from all Ontario's regions and walks of life have joined the Equal Pay Coalition's 20th Anniversary Campaign by signing postcards and an online petition at www.equalpaycoalition.org calling for Government action. Women are being urged to contact their union or the Pay Equity Commission -www.pec.gov.on.ca if they believe they are being paid unfairly. Ontario's unions are committed to taking action to vigilantly enforce women's pay equity rights. The Coalition's campaign will continue throughout 2008 and beyond including actions on March 8, 2008 for International Women's Day and in workplaces throughout the year.

The Coalition, with its member organizations representing over 1 million Ontarians has called on the Government to take all necessary steps to enforce pay equity including: 1) increasing the minimum wage to \$10 per hour retroactive to January 1, 2008 as a pay equity downpayment; 2) full public funding of public sector pay equity adjustments; and 3) full funding of the Pay Equity Commission, the Hearings Tribunal and legal support services for those claiming pay equity violations.

With the Government recognizing the importance of families by today's holiday, let's also make sure the Government strengthens pay equity enforcement and keeps its promise of guaranteeing women and their families incomes which are free of gender discrimination.