

Diversity and Inclusion in Our Unions

Women Workers

The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 11 Component and 3 affiliate unions. Taken together we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 390,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

Larry Brown, President

Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer

Background

In January 2015, there were approximately 19.1 million people over the age of 15 employed in Canada. 48% were women. Women account for 70% of the total employment growth in Canada in the last 2 decades.¹ It is also notable that the proportion of women in a wide range of fields is growing faster than that of men. Despite the increase in women's employment, ensuring women's work is equally valued remains a struggle in workplaces and policies across the country.

While most provinces have legislation governing pay equity, there are still employers that have not evaluated their employment process to ensure it is fair to everyone. This means that, in practice, a gender pay gap continues to exist.

Pay equity is based on the principle that workers should receive equal pay for work of equal or comparable value. Pay equity is a way to eliminate discrimination in the wage-setting system, wherein women tend to earn less than their male counterparts.

Gender-based discrimination in the workplace begins long before an employee is even hired. It can influence almost every aspect of a job: recruitment, wage setting, training, professional development, career progression, leave, flexible and part-time arrangements.

One factor contributing to the gender wage gap is that employers (and our society) often devalue the work done by women. This is particularly the case for care work, or those types of work that are similar to the work traditionally done by women in the home.

Gender bias is also evident in occupational segregation, where average earnings tend to be lower in those job classifications with a higher percentage of female workers. Jobs in teaching, nursing, clerical work, health care, child care, administrative positions, and retail suffer from this historic discrimination in wages.

Pay Equity in Legislation

To address these inequities, the labour movement has campaigned for legislation guaranteeing pay equity. Activists have worked hard for legislation that would reduce income inequality and prevent employers from undervaluing the work women do. Combating wage discrimination has been an important issue for the National Union and for the labour movement in general.

Currently, most provinces have pay equity legislation that applies to the public sector, with the exception of Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Where pay equity legislation does exist, there are some important differences between jurisdictions. For example, in Ontario and Quebec, pay equity rules apply to both the public and private

sectors. British Columbia has a pay equity framework that governs the pay equity process.

Despite these steps forward, Statistics Canada reports that, in 2015, Canadian women still earned 87 cents per hour for every dollar made by men, regardless of age, education, experience, labour market attachment, or occupation. The pay gap is even larger for Indigenous women, racialized women, immigrant women, transgender women, and women with disabilities.

At the federal level, in December 2018, the Canadian government introduced new legislation—*An Act to Establish a Proactive Pay Equity Regime within the Federal Public and Private Sectors (Pay Equity Act)*—as well as amendments to the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and the *Parliamentary Employment and Staff Relations Act* to include the right to pay equity in federally regulated workplaces.²

Intersectionality and Gender Inequality

It's impossible to talk about gender inequality without positioning the topic alongside other forms of discrimination. In 2016, Statistics Canada found that racialized women had a higher unemployment rate (9.6%) than racialized men (8.8%), non-racialized men (8.2%), and non-racialized women (6.4%).³

Worse still, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that between 2005 and 2015, little progress was made on reducing the earning gap. In 2005, for every dollar earned by a non-racialized man, a racialized woman earned only 56 cents. In 2015, the earning gap for racialized women only closed by 3 cents, meaning racialized women earned 59 cents for every dollar earned by a non-racialized man.⁴

The same publication also states, “non-racialized immigrants do better in the Canadian labour market, and sooner, than racialized immigrants do.” The income inequality faced by racialized immigrants also shows signs of extending into the second and third generations of the family, and sometimes even longer. In a different report, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives states that, on average, Indigenous women in Ontario earn \$31,000 less a year than non-Indigenous men.⁵

All people with disabilities face steep barriers when looking for employment in Canada, but these barriers have more of an impact on women with disabilities. This makes the rise of the gig economy and jobs that prioritize speedy services even more worrisome. Companies that profit off of the gig economy, like Uber, are able to circumvent labour laws by arguing their staff are independent contractors, and therefore aren't covered by regular worker protections. Should the gig economy continue to grow, women with disabilities will find themselves in jobs without much-needed medical benefits, with employers who refuse to make accommodations, or worse yet, shut out of entire sections of the job market.

The consensus reached by researchers across Canada is that despite Canada having laws to protect against discrimination, women who are racialized, immigrants, Indigenous, living with disabilities, or are members of the LGBTQI2S communities face greater challenges in their working lives than women who don't belong to any of those groups.

Many women in Canada belong to multiple groups listed above, and therefore must deal with discrimination on multiple fronts. Too often, these women are segregated in low-wage jobs that offer little to no job security, no benefits, and inflexible working hours (forcing these women to pay for child care services or rely on other family members to provide child care).

Women account for two-thirds of Canada's minimum-wage earners; more must be done to protect the most vulnerable segments of our population.⁶ As we tackle gender inequality, NUPGE is committed to working through an intersectional lens to ensure we address the barriers facing all women.

Caregiving and Inequality

In addition to pay inequity, there are other factors that contribute to gender discrimination and inequality in the workplace.

Research by the federal department for Women and Gender Equality shows that while more women are entering the labour force (91% in 2015), and more women with children are employed (69.5% in 2015), the majority are finding only part-time work. Women make up 76% of all part-time workers. 25% of women cite child care responsibilities as their reason for working part-time, compared to just 3% of men.

The lack of access to affordable child care is a barrier to women entering the workforce. According to the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, fees for most child care spaces in Canada cost over \$1,000 per month, which are some of the highest among OECD countries. In fact, 44% of non-school-aged children live in "child care deserts," or those areas in which at least 3 children are vying for each licensed child care space. In addition, 70% of child care centres have waiting lists.⁷

In addition to child care, women continue to be the main source of support for those needing care. The 2017 report *A Snapshot of Women, Work and Family in Canada* by the Vanier Institute of the Family found that "women account for 54% of all caregivers" who provided care or elder care to a family member or friend with a long-term health condition or a disability.

Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and human rights legislation are intended to protect us against discrimination based on sex. Furthermore, Canada has signed international covenants vowing to promote equality and to respect human rights. Laws

and policies, such as pay equity, allow governments to not only fulfil these commitments, but to act as a leader in improving women’s economic equality and strengthening human rights.

More needs to be done to eliminate the gender wage discrimination that continues in Canada. The federal government must enact new stand-alone, proactive, and comprehensive legislation to ensure that Canada fulfils its international obligations and domestic commitments to protect equality.

What Can Unions Do?

As unions and trade unionists, we must continue to expose workplace inequities, including wage discrimination, at every step of the employment process. Unions also need to identify and create opportunities, such as pay equity reviews, to ensure women’s work—paid and unpaid—is appropriately valued.

Pay equity laws alone are insufficient to close the gender wage gap. There must also be a wide range of supports in place that will empower women to succeed.

Complementary programs needed to address the wage gap include

- a national and universal public early learning and child care system;
- adequately funded parental leave to encourage parents to re-enter the workforce and to support shared caregiving responsibility between parents;
- adequately funded supports to meet the needs of Indigenous communities, developed by both levels of government and Indigenous communities;
- reducing tuition and permitting debt forgiveness to allow women to pursue higher education without amassing debt and to succeed further in the workforce.

The National Union remains committed to the goal that all women’s work is properly recognized and valued, and that gender-based discrimination is eliminated.

¹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14694-eng.htm>

² <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2018/10/backgrounder-pay-equity.html>

³ <http://behindthenumbers.ca/2017/11/29/racialized-canadians-barriers-to-work/>

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<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2019/12/Canada%27s%20Colour%20Coded%20Income%20Inequality.pdf>

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https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Ontario%20Office/2016/04/Every_Step_You_Take_ON2016.pdf

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<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Ontario%20Office/2012/10/Living%20Wage%20as%20a%20Human%20Right.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/child-care-deserts-canada>



NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES

- B. C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU)
- Health Sciences Association of British Columbia (HSABC)
- Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA)
- Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU)
- Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU)
- Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
- Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers (CUBGW)
- New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees (NBU)
- Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU)
- PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (PEI UPSE)
- Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE)

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of Public Services International.

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