

Gender Equality

Background

Canada used to rank first among nations for gender equality. Today, Canada has fallen to 23rd place in the United Nations' Gender Inequality Index and 19th in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report.¹ The slowdown in progress cannot be ascribed to the global economic crisis. Canada's economy was one of the least affected among developed countries. In fact, as Canada's gender equality rank fell, some of the countries hardest hit by the global economic crisis demonstrated progress.

Canada has made significant progress in some areas. One-third of women in Canada now hold a post-secondary certificate or diploma.² Women in Canada have among the highest healthy life expectancies in the world.³ However, these high levels are not shared equally among women in Canada.

Significant gaps in educational attainment persist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women and girls at all levels. While the number of Aboriginal people with university degrees has nearly doubled over the last 10 years, with 9% of Aboriginal women holding a bachelor's degree, the gap between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people has continued to grow, as a result of higher rates of non-Aboriginal people attending university.⁴

In spite of the significant educational gains made by some women, they are

underrepresented in leadership roles in almost every sector.⁵ Women make up 14% of members of corporate boards, for example.⁶ Overall, men outnumber women amongst senior managers at a rate of two-to-one.⁷ In the political arena, the numbers are much the same. The last federal election saw the first significant increase in the percentage of female members of Parliament in 20 years, rising from 22% to 25%.⁸

Progress in health and education has not produced an equally steady level of progress in women's economic security. The percentage of women living in poverty is rising, with over 13% of women living below the Low Income Measure in Canada.⁹ The percentage of women living in poverty has remained consistently higher than men's levels of poverty — with Aboriginal and racialized women and women with disabilities further over-represented.¹⁰

The levels of violence women in Canada experience remains persistently high. Over a million women in Canada report having experienced either sexual assault or intimate partner violence in the past five years.¹¹ Rates of intimate partner violence have fallen by a mere 1% over the past two decades, with 6.2% of the adult population reporting having experienced intimate partner violence today compared to 7.4% 10 years ago. Rates of sexual assault have increased slightly over the last 10 years, from 2.1% to 2.4%.¹² Aboriginal women experience three

FIGURE 5 Employment Rates (2011), Canada¹⁸

	Males (age 25 to 54)	Females (age 25 to 54)
Aboriginal Identity	65.3%	60.1%
Non-Aboriginal Identity	80.3%	71.4%
Immigrant	80.1%	65.7%
Non-Immigrant	79.9%	72.9%
Visible Minority	79.8%	64.4%
Non-Visible Minority	80.7%	68.1%

times the rates of violent victimization as non-Aboriginal women. The violence experienced by Aboriginal women and girls has been so persistent and so disproportionate that it has spurred visits from several multilateral bodies. There is a growing consensus on the need to conduct a national inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls.¹³

Current Issues

Economic Policies

Current federal economic policies have failed to address the different role women play in the economy. The result is both a loss of potential economic growth and a lost opportunity to provide women in Canada with greater economic security. The OECD projects that narrowing the gap between men's and women's employment could contribute an additional 8% in GDP by 2030 — amounting to \$160 billion.¹⁴

Women's employment levels in Canada increased rapidly throughout the 1980s and 1990s. However, employment levels have been largely stagnant since 2007. The vast ma-

jority of the historical increase in women's labour force participation has come from women moving into full-time work (with 44% of women working full time 30 years ago, compared to 63% today). Women's participation in part-time work has varied little over the past 30 years — with 15% of core working age women doing so (compared to 5% of their male peers).¹⁵

The majority of women working part time are not doing so by choice. Women and men are almost equally likely to cite personal preference or other voluntary reasons for working part time, with 25% of male part-time workers and 26% of female part-time workers doing so.¹⁶ Women are more likely to cite the lack of opportunities for full-time work (33%) and family responsibilities (30%) as their reason for being in part-time work.¹⁷

As women's participation in paid work has increased, their burden of unpaid work has shifted only slightly. Women have seen their levels of unpaid housework decrease as a result of a more equal sharing of that work with men and as a result of an overall decline in the total number of hours of housework being performed.¹⁹ However, in the area of unpaid family care work, the

FIGURE 6 Median Employment Incomes (2011), Canada²⁸

	Male (25 to 54 years)	Female (25 to 54 years)
Aboriginal Identity	\$37,617	\$33,871
Non-Aboriginal Identity	\$47,895	\$34,112
Visible Minority	\$38,676	\$29,157
Non-Visible Minority	\$49,789	\$34,963
First Generation Immigrant	\$40,962	\$29,758
Non-Immigrant	\$49,611	\$35,099

imbalance persists. Women make up 54% of unpaid caregivers in Canada.²⁰ In families with children, women spend double the number of hours on unpaid child care work (50.1 hours per week) as compared to men (24.4 hours).²¹

The many hours of unpaid care work performed by women clearly restricts their capacity to enter jobs where longer hours of work are required or where working hours are irregular – making co-ordination with child care and elder care difficult.²² This has an impact on both the ability of women to move into higher paying jobs (with expectations of longer hours of work) and into the political arena (where working evenings and weekends is the norm).

For women who are in paid work, unequal rates of pay continue to undermine their economic security and their capacity to contribute to economic growth. Women are nearly twice as likely to work in minimum wage jobs.²³ The Canadian gender pay gap is the eighth largest among OECD countries.²⁴ Women’s median employment incomes are 34% lower than men’s incomes.²⁵ The gap between what women and men earn is not just the result of women’s lower rates of

full-time employment. Women working full time and full year still earn 20% less than men working full time and full year.²⁶ Education narrows the gap but does not close it, with university-educated women still making 17% less than university-educated men, working full time, full year.²⁷

Canada’s economic growth policies need to address the untapped market of women working part time involuntarily. To do so, Canada must address the burden of unpaid work carried by women. Accessible, affordable and safe child care will make a significant difference to the capacity of women to move into full-time work or to sustain part-time work.

The decisions families are actually making run directly counter to a “male-breadwinner” model of economic security, where investments in male employment rates, job growth in male-dominated industries, and increases in male wages are prioritized. Yet these are exactly the policies that the federal government has instituted. The federal Economic Action Plan has invested in job growth in male-dominated industries without a parallel investment in industries where more women work.²⁹

The federal government has prioritized job growth in the private sector, and cut jobs in the public sector — where women’s incomes and employment levels are closer to those of men.³⁰ The public sector narrows the wage gap between full-time male and female workers by 5%.³¹ The public sector is also one of the few places where less educated women can earn enough working full time to provide for the basic needs of their families.³²

Social Policies

Canada’s economic policies are exacerbating an already uneven playing field for women. Lower incomes and lower levels of employment have resulted in fewer women being able to meet their basic needs, including food and housing. One-third of female-led lone parent families were food insecure in 2012, by far the highest among household groupings.³³ Women living in rural and Northern Canada are also particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, where the cost of food is the highest in the country.³⁴

Of the 210,000 people who use emergency shelters and temporary housing every year, 49% are female. First Nations women living on-reserve and Inuit and other women living in Northern Canada continue to face a housing crisis. Nearly half of all women in Nunavut live in dwellings that are “either crowded or in need of major repairs or a combination of both,” according to a recent government survey.³⁵ Efforts to pass legislation instituting a national housing strategy have failed, leaving Canada as the only G8 country without a national housing strategy.

Canada’s persistently high levels of violence are not only exacerbated by women’s economic insecurity but contribute to it. Violence is a major cause of women losing their housing, with 75,000–100,000 women and children leaving their homes each year for emergency shelters serving abused women.³⁶ Women who experience violence consistently report an impact on their ability to work or attend school.³⁷ A recent survey of the impact of domestic violence on the workplace found that over half of domestic violence victims had experienced abuse at or near work, 81.9% said it impacted their performance at work, and 8.5% had lost their jobs as a result.³⁸ Finally, the impact of violence against women on the economy measures in the billions of dollars. Estimates now put the combined cost of adult sexual assault and intimate partner violence at \$437 per person annually in Canada.³⁹ This compares to the cost of the use of illegal drugs in Canada, which is an estimated \$262 per person, and the cost of smoking in Canada, which is an estimated \$541 per person.⁴⁰

The current federal response to violence against women is directed primarily through non-gender specific policies and initiatives, including the Family Violence Initiative, the Federal Victims Strategy and the National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking. The federal government does not have a stand-alone policy on intimate partner violence or sexual assault. Nor does the federal government have a national action plan to address violence against women. There is growing consensus among women’s organizations, civil society organizations and Aboriginal organizations that such a national plan is

needed to co-ordinate and increase efforts to end violence against women in Canada.

The absence of political leadership, co-ordination, and investments in violence against women, housing, and poverty reduction is preventing the government from making concerted progress towards ensuring that women in Canada are not denied a basic level of economic and personal security because they are women.

AFB Actions

The AFB will:

Invest in a National Action Plan to Address Violence Against Women (cost: \$500 million annually). Components of the plan will include:

- funding for annual, detailed national surveys on violence against women;
- support for an office to provide federal coordination;
- increased funding for prevention programs;
- increased funding for victims' services, including long-term housing; and
- funding to support uniform access to specialized social, legal, and health services, including domestic violence courts, sexual assault nurse examiners, and crisis centres.

Increase funding for Status of Women Canada and restore its mandate to fund women's groups to conduct independent

policy research and advocacy (cost: \$100 million annually).

Invest in social infrastructure, including a federal child care program (see the Child Care and Early Learning chapter).

Increase women's access to jobs in growth sectors through training, education, and increased access to child care.

Provide adequate and accessible income supports and improve the earnings and working conditions of those in the low-wage workforce (see the chapter on Income Inequality and Poverty).

Proactively ensure equal pay for work of equal value by repealing the Public Service Equitable Compensation Act, establishing proactive pay equity legislation, and implementing the recommendations of the 2004 Pay Equity Task Force (cost: \$10 million annually).

Eliminate income splitting, retirement compensation arrangements, and tax-free savings accounts (see the Taxation chapter).

Notes

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