

Ontario gender pay gap consultations: a welcome development

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The Ontario government is taking the next step towards making good on Premier Kathleen Wynne's promise to develop a plan to close Ontario's gender pay gap.

A government committee will hold consultations in 12 communities across Ontario as part of a process that is supposed to end with a strategy to close the gender pay gap: men in Ontario currently make 31.5 per cent more than women.

It's a welcome development. For years, the Ontario Equal Pay Coalition, the CCPA, academics, and other organizations have been documenting the gender pay gap problem and making the case for public policy to close the gap.

Finally, the gender pay gap issue and women's income inequality is making a breakthrough into public policy making in Ontario.

In September 2014 Premier Wynne issued a mandate to Minister of Labour Kevin Flynn to work with the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues to "develop a wage strategy to close the gap between men and women in the context of the 21st century economy."

On April 20, 2015 — Ontario's Equal Pay Day — the Ministry of Labour set up a Gender Wage Gap Steering Committee to consult and develop recommendations for the Minister.^[1]

While the Equal Pay Coalition had asked for an independent consultation process, which is what's happening in the case of the Ministry's Changing Workplace Review, the Ministry insisted on having government officials in the lead.

Linda Davis, an Equal Pay Coalition member, and Professor Parbudyal Singh are advisory members to the committee.

The original timing of the committee was designed so that a report would be ready in time for planning and action to be taken by April 2016. That is the month when Ontario's next annual Equal Pay Day will take place.

However, the process stalled and the consultation documents and arrangements were not revealed until now.

The consultation process kicked off with three documents: *Closing the Gender Pay Gap: A Consultation Paper for Businesses and Organizations*, as well as a document for individuals and a background paper.^[2]

The consultation paper makes no bones about the gender inequities facing women in Ontario:

Gender wage gaps show that workforce inequalities continue to exist. Nearly half Ontario's workforce is women, yet women earn less than men throughout their working lives. Despite increased participation in the workforce and higher levels of education and increased skills, women still face significant barriers and disadvantages compared to men. More women than men are in low paying jobs, are disproportionately in minimum wage and part time work and are under-represented in occupations that have higher paying wages. This negatively affects women, their families and Ontario's economy. In many of today's families, both parents work and try to balance work and family responsibilities. Workplaces have been slow to adjust to this workplace trend.^[3]

Importantly, there is public recognition in the consultation paper that women who suffer many disadvantages — such as Aboriginal women, women with disabilities or immigrant women — face higher pay gaps.

As well, the consultation paper draws the connection between the gender pay gap and women's unequal reproductive and care responsibilities. With a focus on the "working life cycle", the consultation paper highlights that the gender pay gap "becomes wider over a woman's working life in almost all industries and sectors."^[4]

As the consultation paper states: "Regardless of how it is measured, the gender wage gap signals a greater, underlying problem of labour market and workforce inequality."

The Appendix of the consultation paper provides a good primer on women's and men's work and pay in Ontario:

- Gender segregation in occupations and industries has not changed substantially since 1987;
- The gender pay gap, based on annual average earnings, only narrowed by 11.3 points in a 24-year period: it was 44.1 per cent in 1986 and decreased to 31.5 per cent by 2011.

Between now and February 16, consultations will take place through in-person meetings, online submissions, and town hall meetings in 12 locations — dates and actual locations have yet to be announced.

Ontario women have been waiting a long time for government leadership on pay equity.

While the Ontario government had been in the lead on pay equity issues since the Pay Equity Act came into effect in 1988, officials were slow to recognize that having that Act alone was not going to close the gender pay gap. It also takes action.

For many years, the EU and its member countries have been closing the gender pay gap as a key part of a country or region's strategic planning.^[5] Now, the Ontario government is recognizing that actions by government and business to close the gender pay gap must be embedded in the province's Build Ontario Up economic planning.^[6]

Following the lead of the Equal Pay Coalition, the consultation process will take a broad approach to the gender pay gap to see how it affects women at work, in their family and in their community. By examining how the gender pay gap affects women across the economic spectrum, the committee will examine how government, business, labour and individual leaders can together work to address the conditions and systemic barriers that contribute to the pay gap.

Importantly, the consultation process will also consider how issues such as race and disability operate to produce even greater pay gaps.

It is currently unclear how the government intends to carry out the Premier's mandate to the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues to work with other Ministers to "ensure that a gender lens is brought to government strategies, policies and programs."^[7]

No action has yet been taken on this front to embed a "gender lens" in government decision-making. Ontario's 2015 budget failed to include a gender lens in its analysis.

The Equal Pay Coalition conducted a training session on March 27, 2015 for more than 80 Ontario government staff on how to conduct gender-based public policy making. ^[8] However, the coalition is not aware of any efforts within Ontario ministries to prepare for the next budget planning process. Steps need to be taken now to include a gender analysis in ministry policy making and budget preparations.

All of this has been a long time coming: the background paper notes that Canada's international obligations include the commitment of the federal government emerging from the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to conduct gender-based analysis on all future legislation, policies and programs.

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- [1] House Statement by the Honourable Kevin Flynn Minister of Labour on Equal Pay Day, April 20, 2015, http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/news/2015/ms_gwg20150420.php.
- [2] See <http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/about/gwg/index.php>.
- [3] Closing the Gender Pay Gap: A Consultation Paper for Businesses and Organizations, Ministry of Labour, October, 2015, *Ibid* at p. 5.
- [4] *Ibid* at pp.7-9.
- [5] For example, the EU Strategy for equality between women and men, 2010-2015 and Annual Reports on Equality between Women and Men, http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/document/index_en.htm#h2-7.
- [6] House Statement by the Honourable Kevin Flynn Minister of Labour on Equal Pay Day, April 20, 2015.
- [7] See <http://www.ontario.ca/page/mandate-letters-2014-2015>.
- [8] See "Applying a Gender Lens to Close Ontario's Gender Pay Gap" by Mary Cornish and Jennifer Quito, March 27, 2015, www.equalpaycoalition.org.