

Women's Economic Empowerment: Making it Real

**Unifor's submission on A Call to
Action for Ontario**

August 2017

Unifor supports Ontario's development of a Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy and we welcome the opportunity to provide input. We are Canada's largest union in the private sector with over 310,000 members. We represent approximately 100,000 women in every sector of the economy, with approximately 60% of those women living and working in Ontario.

Realizing women and girl's full security, equality and justice for women and girls in Ontario requires renewed action and leadership. Action on systemic issues creates the greatest opportunities for women to excel.

Unfortunately, many initiatives on women's economic empowerment are weighted too heavily towards individualistic solutions, as if women's economic insecurity is due to their personal shortcomings rather than systemic gender discrimination. We caution the government not to observe this issue through that narrow lens.

The consultation process itself is deeply flawed. The consultation paper will never get in to the hands of the most vulnerable women in the most precarious work and home lives. To be a real consultation that addresses the range of women in Ontario, it was incumbent on the government to go to where vulnerable women are and give them the opportunity to raise their voice and their issues. The consultation, taking place very quickly over the summer period and relying on organizations to provide input, seems destined to failure.

An effective strategy must be anchored in systemic action and an intersectional lens. We know that when women have multiple identities such as race, class, sexual orientation, disability, they experience particular oppression that reflects the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination.

Entrepreneurship, for example, is touted as a strategy for women. However, this focus on private and technological solutions as the way to address social problems ignores the policy changes necessary to correct gendered inequality. Without supports like publicly funded child care, women have one hand tied behind their back. And without public policy to address and correct the underlying gender bias that runs throughout our society, women cannot individually succeed.

Access to capital without addressing systemic barriers for women is not sustainable particularly for poor women. Indeed, a 2014 paper by a development economist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology examined micro-loans to women in Hyderabad, India and found that they had no effect on their economic status two years later. And yet micro-loans and the entrepreneurship that is implicit in receiving a micro-loan continue to be pushed as a solution for women.

The government's mandate letter directs the Minister to develop a plan for women's economic empowerment at all economic levels. Unfortunately the consultation paper is heavily weighted

towards women moving into under-represented areas (STEM) and moving up a corporate ladder. While we support those areas, the plan for economic empowerment must also address sectors where women are currently overrepresented. We only need to look at child care workers and personal support workers to understand that women who work in those sectors are struggling economically and a plan is needed. We recognize the wage subsidies provided in these sectors but women are still left at the low end of the wage scale.

We are disappointed to see the weak language in the Vision portion of the engagement paper. The proposed framework sets goals to *examine* gender bias in institutions and *encourage* the use of gender-based analysis. It proposes an outcome of *increased awareness* and longer-term generational shifts in attitudes about gender. We are well past the need to examine, encourage and increase awareness. We need an action plan to *correct* gender bias.

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women was set up a full 50 years ago in 1967. The Commission wrote reports to the government about issues regarding pay equity, a national child care policy, reproductive rights, access to managerial positions, part-time work, and education. The report also addressed specific inequality that faced Indigenous women under the *Indian Act*. All of the recommendations were based on the core principle that equality between men and women in Canada could be brought about through changes in social policy and needed to be addressed collectively rather than individually.

Since that report, we have had countless other studies and reports that capture the implicit and explicit gender bias that exists in society. These barriers to women's equality will not be brought down through more examination, awareness raising or encouragement. Strong systemic measures must be put in place if we are to make progress.

Ontario's own consultation paper on closing the gender wage gap illustrates that occupations in arts and culture have consistently been female-dominated with over 50% women in that sector. It was therefore surprising to see the Arts added to STEM. While the resulting acronym, STEAM, might be catchy, it risks undermining the efforts to improve the true underrepresentation of women in STEM.

In order to support women's economic empowerment, there needs to be structural solutions. Some clear solutions include making it easier for women to unionize, addressing precarious work, bringing in provincial employment equity legislation, and making pay equity more effective for female dominated sectors including fully-finding adjustments owed to women working to provide public services to Ontarians.

Several high profile cases were in the news highlighting the dismal working conditions for women in the restaurant and service industry. Specific examples of dress codes that were highly sexualized revealed the power imbalance based in sexism. The government of British Columbia recognized that women's dress codes reinforced sexist attitudes and banned the requirement that women wear high heels in the workplace. Ontario can take similar steps to ensure that women can go to work with dignity and use all of their skills instead of being hired and valued on their appearance.

Studies have shown that the gender wage gap is smallest in unionized environments. In a unionized environment, women are more likely to have pensions, benefits and provisions that address issues of discrimination and harassment. A grievance procedure is an effective tool to make legal rights enforceable in the workplace. The government should be making it easier for women to organize by bringing back card-based certification and extending broader based collective bargaining structures as outlined in our submission to the Changing Workplace Review.

Women are overrepresented in precarious work. Being stuck in a cycle of temporary, contract and involuntary part-time work leads to women's economic insecurity. A lifetime of underpaid work with no pension or benefits compounds to lead to poverty in our senior women. Precarious work is not inevitable, the structure of the workplace can be changed. One pertinent example with which Unifor has gained experience is contract flipping. In many industries and workplaces, but particularly with airport workers and school bus drivers, employers have used contract flipping as a strategy for keeping labour costs down. In the process, this strategy has served to trap workers in insecure, low paid work as contracts are awarded to one service provider after another, requiring employees to re-apply for their jobs and start again at the bottom of the pay scale. One solution to this troubling trend is to grant successorship rights when contracts are flipped in order to protect compensation levels.

By using a wide lens, the government can develop a strategy that takes into account the many areas that impact women's choices but are often addressed as women's "personal lives". Unifor believes in social unionism, recognizing that our fight must go outside the four walls of the workplace and deal with systemic issues that impact the whole person that comes to work. This includes women's reproductive rights and gender-based violence.

By being able to control whether and when to become a mother and how many children to have, women have increased economic choices. Although access to abortion has been legal in Canada for decades, we are seeing increased attacks on women's access to safe reproductive health services. We commend the government's announced intention to bring in a bubble zone law as well as move to cover Mifegymiso under OHIP. We encourage the government to continue work in this area including ensuring Mifegymiso is available in rural and remote areas.

The government's moves in the past few years to address gender-based violence and harassment are welcome. Harassment and violence holds women back regardless of their education, income level, or capabilities. Addressing harassment of women in the workplace (including in politics) and on the street is crucial to equality. The acknowledgment that domestic violence has an impact on women's economic security is important. The introduction of paid domestic violence leave is a key component of supporting women's autonomy and choices. It is disappointing that the proposed paid domestic violence leave in Bill 148 is merely 2 days and is rolled into all emergency leaves for workers including bereavement leave. Women workers are more likely to take emergency leaves compared to men. Women are still predominantly the family facilitators – taking care of sick children or elderly parents and attending to emergencies within the family. When paid domestic violence leave is rolled into the general leaves available to workers, it renders it useless. The government had a real opportunity with Bill 148 to provide a small income support and job security and it did not make this real. This consultation paper identifies domestic violence as a barrier to women and yet the government has not taken real action here. We are calling on the government to have a stand-alone paid domestic leave of 10 days.

For young women, the government should be looking beyond education and career paths. Supporting community leadership and leadership in schools helps develop skills that anchor strong economic outcomes throughout their lives.

The women of Ontario have a breadth of talents, creativity and energy to contribute to our society. Too often barriers of overt sexism, unconscious bias, lack of access to good jobs, disproportionate domestic obligations get in the way of making these contributions. Action on systemic barriers is required if we are to create opportunities for women to excel. We call on the government to develop a strategy that makes a real difference to women's economic empowerment.