

ECOSOC
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Innovation at work: National strategies to achieve gender equality in employment
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Opening remarks (5 minutes) by Barbara Byers, Executive Vice-President of the Canadian Labour Congress and Worker Member (Canada) of the ILO Governing Body.

You have asked us to address innovative approaches to achieving gender equality in employment and at the workplace and the challenges in realizing this goal.

In preparing for this event I was constantly reminded of the words of Frederick Douglas, an American abolitionist, who in 1857 said: *Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.*

The road to equality in Canada is full of demands and our journey toward equality has been very, very, very slow.

Everything we have achieved thus far has been through many hours and years of advocating for equality with politicians, the public, at bargaining tables and any place we could be heard.

It would be wonderful to state that these are clear wins which will last and benefit young women as they enter the workforce. However, it is more accurate to say that we often come close but rarely achieve the full benefits that we have been working for. Most recently in the area of childcare we have lost benefits which had been established in the past 12 months.

Here are some modest advances we have made, along with the challenges we continue to face:

1. Most women have access to some form of pay equity or equal pay for work of equal value mechanisms through human rights or labour standards legislation. Unfortunately, it is complaint based and not pro-active. Canadian women still earn on average 80 cents for every dollar a man makes. Unions have been the promoters of pay equity complaints and have found that their efforts have been challenged at every level by employers, including governments as employers. Women in the federal public sector, at Canada Post and at Bell Canada have won large pay equity settlements because their unions were prepared to allocate the necessary financial and staff resources to achieve those wins. Still, the settlements sometimes fall short of the full amount owing women from the time they first entered their complaints.

Unions in the provincial public sector have bargained pay equity programs for their memberships however they have encountered great resistance and have also devoted many financial and human resources to these struggles.

Overall, the benefits for women workers have been significant. For many it will mean the difference of owning a modest home or living their lives in inadequate rental

accommodation. For others it will determine if their children will have access to post secondary education and the hope for a better future. Indeed it may also determine if those women have access to further education for themselves. Pay equity wins have brought life long benefits as the adjustments in pay have meant increased pensions as older women.

The previous federal government established a special parliamentary committee to consider the issue of pay equity. After 3 years of comprehensive consultations with employers, unions, women's organizations, civil society etc. the committee presented a comprehensive report which was endorsed by all political parties and which would have made a huge difference in the economic and social lives of Canadian women.

Unfortunately, the government of the day did not act on it and just before they were defeated they had called for further study of the matter.

2. Women advocated for and won increased unemployment insurance benefit duration for maternity and parental leaves after the birth of a child. They also advocated for and won security against discrimination in labour legislation should they take these leaves. Currently they have access to up to 50 weeks; some of this time is for the mother alone and the bulk of the remaining time can be taken by either parent or by both parents. While this was considered a win it also has some major barriers - a new method of calculating access to benefits has excluded the vast majority of women who should be eligible. In addition, the benefit levels have been lowered by successive legislations since 1989, which in effect means that most women who do qualify cannot afford to take the full time they would be eligible for.
3. Unions in one province worked for many years to achieve labour legislation which would have allowed those working part-time in larger enterprises to maximize their hours up to full-time. This would have benefitted women workers and young workers more than any other group. The provincial government actually passed the legislation in 1994 and then refused to proclaim it into effect due to the opposition of large employers, primarily chain stores and those in the fast food chain industry. It attempted to implement the legislation a few years ago however withdrew it in total after similar opposition.
4. Women finally thought we had won a major step forward in child care last autumn when the federal government of the day made financial arrangements with provincial governments which would have created tens of thousands of child care spaces across the country, and assisted with raising the wages of child care workers (the vast majority of whom are women). The newly elected government has refused to live up to these arrangements and instead has implemented a family allowance payment (taxable) to parents of children under the age of 6 years. This new payment will not create any new spaces for families who require child care.
5. Unions and labour centrals in Canada have been very aware of our need to increase the influence of women throughout our elected and staff structures. Since 1984 the Canadian Labour Congress has had affirmative action positions for women on our Executive Council. This advance also led the way for other positions on the Council for trade unionists in other equality seeking groups (Aboriginal, workers of colour, disability rights, youth,

gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered) and for retirees. In this way our Council is more representative of our membership. These equality measures by the CLC have created similar measures in union structures and in the structures of our provincial/territorial federations of labour and municipal labour councils.

6. Finally, unions and labour centrals have been active in promoting the involvement of women in trades and technology. We have been involved in promotion of trades with young workers and have ensured that this promotion includes the involvement of young women in trades. We know we must also work to ensure that workplaces are welcoming young women into the trades and that there are opportunities for their advancement in the trades.