

Women's Economic Security: A Working Women's Agenda

**Unifor Submission to the Standing
Committee of the Status of Women**

March 2017

Thank you for the invitation to participate in the Status of Women Committee's study on the Economic Security of Women in Canada.

Unifor is Canada's largest union in the private sector representing 310,000 workers in all sectors of the economy, including over 100,000 women. Our female members work in a variety of occupations such as air traffic controllers, personal support workers, rail mechanics, food service workers, customer service representatives, electricians, bus drivers, and retail workers to name a few.

The Committee has heard from many sources about women's economic insecurity. We want to focus on a particular set of challenges – the challenges that face working-class women. The two ends of the continuum of women's economic security often get the lion's share of attention – either the extremely vulnerable or the reach for the c-suite. Both deserve attention. But we must ensure that average working women aren't left out of focus.

Unifor believes in social unionism – this means that we advocate for the rights of workers as whole human beings – human beings that are affected by what happens to them outside of the workplace as well as in. When we look at the indicators of women's inequality, these, by and large, are happening to working women. We don't conflate all working women together; Unifor takes an intersectional approach and acknowledges historical, social and political contexts that lead to experiences based on the intersection of all relevant grounds of discrimination.

We support the government's desire to close the gender pay gap, reduce occupational segregation, reduce women's poverty and eliminate sexual harassment and violence. We believe that taking measures to improve women's working lives will significantly address these issues.

Our submission will focus on two main areas: Access to good jobs and equity at work; and supports when exiting the world of work.

Access to a Good Job and Equity at Work

Unifor believes that everyone deserves access to a good job. We also believe that with the right regulations and business practices every job can be a good job. Addressing these will require concrete steps and mechanisms of enforcement and accountability.

Some positive actions the federal government can implement include:

- Strengthening employment equity legislation to ensure more women have access to roles where we have been traditionally under-represented;
- Improving the quality of work for women in roles traditionally dominated by women, such as the care economy;
- Investing in a universal, affordable, high quality, public and non-profit system of early childhood education and care;
- Setting a \$15 an hour minimum wage;
- Addressing sexual harassment and violence in the workplace, including addressing power disparities that make these much more likely such as in precarious and part-time work, and

programs like the temporary foreign worker program;

- Enacting pro-active pay equity legislation and requiring pay transparency;
- Addressing the barriers in accessing leaves such as maternity and parental leave;
- Increasing access to unionization and collective bargaining, which is an equalizer for women and is incredibly necessary to make the “paper-rights” real.

The Committee has heard from people on most of these points. We will focus on some unique tools Unifor has developed to address the area of sexual harassment and violence and thereby strengthen women’s retention in the workplace.

The first is a joint investigation program. Where complaints of sexual harassment are made, the employer and the union have trained investigators that conduct the investigation together and make findings. We have this process in place in many of our large employers including in federally regulated workplaces. It has been a tremendous step in effectively addressing and reducing sexual harassment in the workplace.

The second is our Women’s Advocate program. We have over 350 trained Women’s Advocates in workplaces across the country. The Women’s Advocate’s main role is to assist and support workers who are facing domestic violence. A woman is murdered every 6 days in Canada by her current or previous intimate partner. Women’s Advocates can assist in risk assessment and safety planning. Along with the Advocate we have bargained paid domestic violence leave.

Joint investigation, the Women’s Advocate and paid domestic violence leave are all areas the federal government could implement in legislation and extend to the non-union sector.

Retiring from Work

On average, the cumulative impact of gendered experiences throughout the life-cycle results in a less secure retirement for women across the income spectrum when compared to men. Time off for child and elder care can lead to fewer years of credit towards a Canada or workplace pension plan. Gender streaming and lower pay for jobs traditionally held by women means that pension plan benefits are lower for women than men – often women in this work don’t have access to a workplace pension at all. The precarious nature of work traditionally done by women means they may not have an income that allows them to save for their retirement, even if they want to.

The federal government’s action to strengthen the Canada Pension Plan was an important step to improving income security in retirement for women. However, a failure to maintain the “drop-out” allowance for time spent raising children or on disability means that women will be penalized in their retirement for the years they spent performing unpaid and important work. Including the drop-out in the CPP expansion is one more step the government can take to improve economic security of women across their life-cycle.

Improving women’s economic security and ensuring the equal participation of women in the Canadian economy will take conscious effort. The points outlined above are some concrete first steps. We welcome being part of the solution.