

**Statement by the  
Canadian Labour Congress**

**to the  
House of Commons  
Standing Committee on  
the Status of Women  
on Improving Economic Prospects  
for Canadian Girls**

March 12, 2012



Canadian Labour Congress

Congrès du travail du Canada

# **Statement by the Canadian Labour Congress to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women on Improving Economic Prospects for Canadian Girls**

March 12, 2012

## **Introduction**

On behalf of the 3.2 million members of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), we want to thank you for affording us the opportunity to present our views. The CLC brings together Canada's national and international unions along with the provincial and territorial federations of labour and 130 district labour councils whose members work in virtually all sectors of the Canadian economy, in all occupations, in all parts of Canada.

If we want to improve the economic prospects for Canadian girls, then we need to take a close look at the economic reality for Canadian women.

Women now make up almost half of Canada's workforce. Women work in every sector of the economy, from teachers and administrators, to welders and doctors, to machine operators and child care workers. Yet women still experience inequality and discrimination in society and in workplaces.

The gap between women's and men's wages has been stuck at between 70 and 72 per cent for the last three decades. The gap is wider for older women, Aboriginal women, disabled and racialized women.

Much of women's employment remains concentrated in so-called “female” jobs, such as those in the service sector or the caring and helping professions, and are poorly represented in the skilled trades and in senior management positions.

Women are much more likely than men to work part-time, to hold down more than one job, and work in precarious jobs. This means there are more women working with fewer benefits and little or no workplace pensions. Only 33% of unemployed women qualify for Employment Insurance (EI) benefits. If you don't qualify for EI, you don't have access to maternity, parental, compassionate or sick leave.

And women still take on the lion's share of caregiving and household responsibilities. Women are under tremendous pressure to balance work and family life, whether it is caring for children, looking after aging, disabled or sick relatives, or contributing to their community. Without strong public services, many women pay the price by interrupting their careers or settling for part-time or precarious work to make ends meet while caring for their family.

Now we are facing a climate of austerity which threatens public sector jobs, a source of good jobs for women. The loss of these jobs will be devastating not only for the families that rely on them, but for the services that women across Canada depend on.

That is the economic reality for women today, and it will become the reality for Canadian girls if we do not take concerted action.

Young women in Canada face an economic deck that seems to be stacked against them. You will likely hear from other witnesses about Canada's success in educating young women. What you might not hear is that gender equality in education does not necessarily lead to better opportunities for young women

entering the workforce, nor does it seem to lead to improved economic prospects over their working lives. The reasons for this include high student debt, precarious work, lack of child care, and wage inequality.

We are recommending seven key areas where the government could act to improve economic prospects for Canadian girls.

**1) Address under-employment and precarious work.**

Canadian youth were and are among those most affected by the economic downturn and remain, overwhelmingly, better educated, badly paid and under-employed. Women in Canada are much more likely than men to work part-time, hold down more than one job and work in precarious jobs – and young women are among the most likely to work in part-time or temporary work. While some may hold these jobs because they want to, still more are working more than full-time by combining more than one precarious job, or would like to work more but cannot find affordable child care.

Girls and women need access to decent work, work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

**2) Close the wage gap.** This committee has already examined the issue of pay equity in great detail, so I don't need to repeat the points. The government must implement the recommendations of the Pay Equity Task Force.

**3) Get serious about child care.** Research has clearly shown that investments in child care increases labour market participation, improves Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and

supports vibrant local economies. Only one in five Canadian children has access to licenced, regulated child care. Yet 70 per cent of Canadian mothers are in the paid work force. Something is wrong with this picture and it can only be addressed if the federal government works with the provinces to establish a pan-Canadian early childhood education and care system that is non-profit, public, high quality, accessible, inclusive, and affordable, and provides adequate compensation to Québec for the system it is already providing. It's not just the right thing to do. It's the smart (and fiscally responsible) thing to do.

**4) Invest in public services.** Privatization and the contracting-out of public sector jobs poses a threat to good, stable jobs for women. The loss of public services in communities means young women end up taking on more and more unpaid work. It means less money in local economies. Now is not a time to be cutting back if we want to improve economic prospects for Canadian girls.

**5) Prioritize retirement security.** Current debates over changes to public pensions and old age security are particularly troubling. While retirement security may appear to be of concern only to Canada's older population, it is the current generation of young and future workers that will be most impacted by any changes. It is particularly ironic that youth are being told that it is in their interest as young people to cut back on Old Age Security (OAS) when they are earning less for longer, are more in debt than ever before, and when it is clear that private saving schemes like Registered Retirement Savings Plan (RRSPs) are not enough. It's not gold-plated to be able to retire in dignity and it is unfair to take this very basic right away from young workers in the interest of short-term economic gain.

**6) Ensure access to education and training and reduce student debt.** It is unacceptable that Canadian students need to take on a lifetime of debt to get an education, especially when

those credentials do not necessarily mean better jobs after they graduate. Tuition fees in Canada have far exceeded the rate of inflation over the past two decades. Today, average student debt now stands at \$27,000. Because there is no coherent national policy for post-secondary education, policies dealing with access and funding differ dramatically from province to province. Still, Canada-wide, almost 430,000 students were forced to borrow in order to finance their education. By 2013, Canadian student debt will hit \$13 billion.

We must also consider increasing opportunities for young women to access skills training and embark on careers in trades and technology. The government can build and promote women in these career paths by supporting youth apprenticeship and school-to-work transition programs, funding employability training programs and bridging programs which encourage women to retrain for work in trades and technology, by supporting women's needs while they are in training or apprenticeship. Once they start their careers, we need to develop a workplace culture that supports women, accommodate work-life balance and ensure we include a gender focus in workforce development programs.

**7) Address disproportionate levels of poverty, unemployment and violence among Aboriginal women and women with disabilities.** The challenges facing both of these vulnerable populations are well documented. Aboriginal girls and girls with disabilities would both benefit from better employment equity policies and practices, specific programs for access to education, training and employment, and a national action plan to end violence against women.

Finally, the text of the motion creating this study asks "what changes can be made by Status of Women Canada to its approach". The most fundamental change that needs to be made is to Status of Women Canada's approach to funding women's

organizations. With no core funding, and no funding for research, policy development or advocacy, women's organizations' ability to propose innovative solutions to improving economic realities for women and girls is seriously diminished. Funding for research and advocacy must be restored, and the lack of core funding needs to be addressed.

To improve economic prospects for Canadian girls, Canada needs to make a real commitment to women's equality. Our future depends on it.

This document is respectfully submitted on behalf of the Canadian Labour Congress:

---

Barbara Byers  
Executive Vice-President

BB:VS:gna:cope 225 • 2012-03-12  
file: 20304-02-08