

Meeting the
challenge of attaining
equality for canadian
women:
achievements and ...



Nowadays it is universally recognized that equality is a corner stone of any democratic society. At the same time in almost all nations women have been subjected to discrimination in family, society and at workplace for many centuries and until the present. Deep-rooted stereotypes, traditional cultural and religious habits and ideas depreciating role of women are still widespread and supportive for gender inequality (Cheal, Woolley & Luxton, 1998, p. 13).

Modern world is not uniform if considering it from women status perspective in various states and continents. The Scandinavian countries are indisputable leaders in progress made for last thirty years in this sphere. The European Union has developed and implemented varied programs on women status enhancement and ensuring them more opportunities in carrier and political life. Women's movements for equal rights have been very active in the USA, especially in the sphere of elimination of discriminatory obstacles to employment (Anderson, 1991, p. 16).

In the global context Canada is considered to be among the most successful nations in attaining gender equality (Gerkovich, MacBride-King & Townsend, 1998, p. 6). The process of implementation of equality principles in public policy and perception of their necessity by the society has been performed through several phases. First of all, women's voluntary organizations brought up public discussions on women's right protection in labour market, in issues of child care and family well-being, on involvement of women in politics and public administration at local and federal levels.

They prepared public opinion and in 1970s eventually induced federal and local governments to set up the targeted programs on improving women's status in the society (Pierson & Cohen, 1995, p. 266). In 1977 Canadian parliament passed Canadian Human Rights Act where women were among target groups whose rights should be protected. Six years later the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment was founded.

Its mission was defined as facilitation of attaining equal rights for women, aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities, and visible minority persons in labour market (Anderson, 1991, p. 47). In 1984 the Commission released its report on equality in employment which summarized domestic situation on work discrimination and emphasized importance of development and implementation of appropriate legislative instruments aimed at elimination of women's discrimination at workplace (Abella, 1984, p. 5).

This report became a landmark in the struggle for ensuring women equal opportunities with men in work, social and political life. The purpose of this study is to explore how effective were government's measures on protecting women's rights, promoting their active involvement in public administration and ensuring them equal opportunities with men in all spheres of human activities.

Toward this end we will scrutinize legal instruments in the sphere of women rights protection adopted by Canadian government within last three decades and consider their effects, analyze statistics on current representation of women in elected office and compare current employment rates of males and females, examine changes in public mind concerning place of women in

the society, and make the conclusion with regard to the ways on improvement of legislative and social framework in this sphere.

Legal Framework for Gender Equality

Twenty five years elapsed since Judge Rosalie Silberman Abella in her report “ Equality in Employment” introduced the term ‘ employment equity’ instead of ‘ affirmative action’ (1984, p. 6). She emphasized the necessity of implementation of advanced legislative instruments which could diminish disparity in employment: “ It is not that individuals in the designated groups are inherently unable to achieve equality on their own, it is that the obstacles in their way are so formidable and self-perpetuating that they cannot be overcome without intervention” (Abella, 1984, p. 7).

This document encompassed not only labour issues but also wider social topics such as balancing of labour standards, promotion of education and professional training for women, and development of child care policies aimed at easing women’s family life (Pierson & Cohen, 1995, p. 164).

Canadian government responded to it with enacting the Employment Equity Act in 1986. It stipulated for Employment Equity Program and Federal Contractors Program implementation obligating employers to undertake measures on ensuring equal access to job opportunities and equal pay for equal work to all.

Both programs implied substantial governmental interventions into human resource management policies and practices both in the private and public sectors (Redway, 1992). Moreover, in 1995 the second Employment Equity Act was adopted. It was aimed at further expounding and enforcing the <https://assignbuster.com/meeting-the-challenge-of-attaining-equality-for-canadian-women-achievements-and-failures/>

employers' liabilities. Under the Act the Canadian Human Rights Commission got the credentials to monitor and inspect equity employment efforts of all federally controlled employers (Gerkovich, MacBride-King & Townsend, 1998, p. 16).

Importance of this Act for attaining women's equity at workplace lies in its instrumentality to enhance the case law on equal opportunity and protection of women's rights as the Act made employment equity mandatory. It is obvious that true freedom of an individual anticipates not only rights equity but also equity of opportunities for their exercising. Undoubtedly women have been deprived of such opportunities over the patriarchy epoch which is still lasting.

This is true both for any given individual woman and for females as the certain social stratum of any given nation or entire world community. Thus, by giving legislative tools for ensuring wider access of women to labour market and eliminating gender barriers in their career promotion the Act stipulated for women's job opportunities advancement (Gerkovich, MacBride-King & Townsend, 1998, p. 18).

Besides, in 1995 Canada, together with other 188 nations, ratified the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) which established an elaborated plan aimed at elimination of women's poverty, providing their economic security and promoting their health. PFA set up a goal of advancing women's equality both at workplace and in family. Under this document the Canadian government committed to undertake gender-based analysis of its future public policies and legislative framework (Yalnizyan, 2004, p. 9).

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Federal Plan on PFA implementation included such measures to be taken as facilitating women's financial independence, promoting their contribution to decision-making on public administration level, and providing inexpensive access to child care and safe housing. The key feature of this plan is application of gender analysis to development and implementation of statutory acts and in the process of public administration (Yalnizyan, 2004, p. 10). Within the period from 1995 till 2005 federal government fulfilled two five-years Plans on Gender Equality and Agenda for Gender Equality 2000-2005.

Both federal plans define the most important issues to be resolved on the way to gender equality attaining and major tasks of the state in this sphere: 1) to implement gender analysis in all ministries and state agencies of federal government; 2) to heighten level of economical independence and well-being of women; 3) to improve physical and mental health of women; 4) to reduce violence in the society in particular violence against women and children; 5) to promote attaining gender equality in all aspects of cultural life; 6) to create favourable conditions for women's inclusion in public administration; 7) to promote and support attaining of global gender equality; 8) to create favourable conditions for gender equality attainment among employees of federal ministries and agencies. Gender analysis has become one of the key components of the federal plans. In many federal bodies the dedicated boards were established or dedicated officers were assigned dealing with gender equality issues (Ratansi, 2008).

Achievements and Shortcomings on the Way to Employment Equity Attaining

Last annual reports of responsible ministries on employment equity
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demonstrate gradual advance in the representation of women in Canadian workforce – from 40, 9% to 43, 4% within the period from 1987 till 2005 (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 14).

This is considered to be a result of the government's efforts, and economists confirm that for the most part growth of work inclusion rates has been achieved due to them, but as much as 68% of unpaid work in the Canadian households is still executed by women (Cheal, Wooley & Luxton, 1998, p. 26). So, it is logical to assume public policies and legal instruments do not work in some aspects of male-female work segregation. Canada is ranked as one of the wealthiest countries among the highly developed industrialized nations of the world, and persisting of gender discrimination in labour market is undermining its high status. Besides, the economists argue that elimination of discriminative employment obstacles and full utilization of diversified skills and knowledge of labour force rise productivity of labour and output of economy as a whole (Redway, 1992, p. 23).

Hence, unsurprisingly the government pays so much attention to employment equity issues. At the same time Canada is not the only developed nation facing gender-based work discrimination. The gender gap in salary is a worldwide trend. Although indices of gender-based professional segregation are substantially lower in Canada than those in other countries, currently it takes the first place among nine highly developed nations in the North America and Europe in terms of this gap size. Wages of Canadian women have been demonstrating sustainable growth during last few decades, but substantial gender differences persist to take place in Canadian labour market (Akbari, 2004, p. 3).

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The economists ascertain that the main factors stipulating wages differentials are productivity-related characteristics such as education, work experience, age, occupation, hours of work, and industry of employment (Akbari, 2004, p. 10). Undoubtedly salary amount depends on the level of education – the persons with university degree normally have higher paying jobs. But in case of Canada wage gap cannot be attributed to this parameter as currently women are in majority among university graduates (Gerkovich, MacBride-King & Townsend, 1998, p. 21). Statistics demonstrates that women without university degree earn 23% less than man with the same education level while females with university degree earn on average 15% less than their male counterparts (Akbari, 2004, p. 36).

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women reports that its recommendation for Crown corporations and agencies to provide fair and unbiased appointment of female scientists in technologists on managerial positions and create for them conditions favourable for obtaining post-graduate degrees has been fully implemented. High shares of female in professoriate of the Canadian universities and in upper level management of state agencies are good evidence of success in this aspect of employment equity programs (Redway, 1992, p. 28). At the same time, numerous empirical studies conducted in 1990s showed that within the same occupation women earn less and carve out their career with less success in comparison with men as usually they have less work experience and often work fewer hours due to their involvement in child-raising.

It makes as no surprise as females' functions of birth-giving and child-upbringing result in their leaving the ranks of workers and consequent <https://assignbuster.com/meeting-the-challenge-of-attaining-equality-for-canadian-women-achievements-and-failures/>

interruption of work career, sometimes for a few years. At the same time wage gap indices cannot be explained by gender differences in productivity-related features. Thus, study conducted by Wood, Corcoran and Courant in 1993 revealed that wage gap between jurists-females and jurists-males graduated from the same university within their first years of work was just 7%, but in 15 years the same women earned 40% less than their male messmates (cited in Akbari, 2004, p. 13). Logically, such wide gap cannot be explained with only work experience differential, hence there are other factors influencing gender wage differences.

It has to be admitted that employment statistics for last few decades demonstrates sustainable growth of employment rates for women which clearly testify the government's efforts in labour market did yield positive results: from 1976 till last year employment rate for women has been extended by 17, 2% while men's rate has been reduced by 4, 7%; within only one decade from 1997 till 2007 monthly income of women rose by 10, 6% while the same of men increased just by 4, 5%; and, finally current state of employment in Canada is the best for last three decades demonstrating unemployment rate only 6% (Yalnizyan, 2004, p. 14). Evidently these figures testify public policy on employment equity does have effect upon labour market trends and encourages positive changes with regard to elimination of gender discrimination at workplace. At all that effectiveness of the government's efforts is not as high as it could be expected.

Thus, while in 2000 55% of women in able-bodied age were represented in the workforce the males' index was amounted to 67%; besides, 22% of female employees in the age from 25 till 44 years old were part-time workers <https://assignbuster.com/meeting-the-challenge-of-attaining-equality-for-canadian-women-achievements-and-failures/>

as compared with only 5% share of part-time workers for males of the same age (Zukewich, 2000, p. 102). Moreover, recent government's reforms on unemployment insurance became an ordeal for females having underpaid and part-time jobs. It is not surprising as out of all positions held by women more than 17% are on part-time basis, and females constitute 69% of part-time employees in Canada, while about 34% of females working on full-time basis are in underpaid jobs (Yalnizyan, 2004, p. 73). It is indicative that birth-giving and child-raising are the major factors cited by women as a reason for working on part-time basis (Zukewich, 2000, p. 103).

Of course, some part of gender wage gap is attributed with the fact women are more involved in work on part-time basis as the latter anticipates less working hours and often less working days weekly in comparison with full-time jobs. But even when average salary is estimated on hourly basis the Canadian women get only 80 cents for each dollar got by male employees (Akbari, 2004, p. 9). So, weak public child care system is evidently a bottleneck of government's programs on employment equity is apparent.

Evidently public policies have to include more effective instruments for easing child-bearing and care-giving roles of women and for providing sufficient state support for mothers who have infant and school age children (Cheal, Wooley & Luxton, 1998, p. 24).

It is important to do that taking into account that within last decade the character of the state aid changed. Financial assistance to reimburse the expenditures for child care was substantially reduced, and public aid was more likely to be granted by means of income-related instruments such as maternity leaves or tax deductions, rather than by means of providing more <https://assignbuster.com/meeting-the-challenge-of-attaining-equality-for-canadian-women-achievements-and-failures/>

spaces in affordable even for families with low income and well-organized child care settings especially those for early child development (Yalnizyan, 2004, p. 15). For example in 2001 only 12, 1% of Canadian children in age less than 12 years old had access to the state-regulated child care spaces.

In several provinces as little as 4, 2% of children had access to them (Yalnizyan, 2004, p. 66). Scholars confirm that such shortcoming in public policies has far-reaching negative outcomes for economy of the nation – they argue that narrow scope of jobs accessible to women combined with scarce public funds available for affordable and high-quality child care services lead to decreasing of well-being of women-mothers and in the future may lead in increasing of number of families living in poverty (Cheal, Wooley & Luxton, 1998, p. 31). So, the state has to assist women to execute their family functions and combine the latter with work career promotion.

Some scholars also attract attention to the fact that nature of work executed by females and males differ, and due to this statistics on their wages increasing may reflect actual state of things in an incorrect way. For example, positive aggregate figures of employment rate growth within last decade can be undermined taking into account that such growth was possible owing to a large extent to increase in employment in the domains of occasional work, underpaid contract work, or low-paid self-employment (De Wolff, 2000, p. 56). As women constitute major part of part-time labour force it is obvious that they still experience unstable and underpaid employment. De Wolff's study exhibited that 70% of women interviewed get income no more than \$18, 000 per year while 40% of them are the only money earners in their families (De Wolff, 2000, p. 57).

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These data can serve as an alarm signal for state agencies responsible for economic and social well-being of the nation. If such trend will endure the number of households living in poverty will increase. It is one more negative tendency in the sphere of employment demonstrating that there is still much to do for policy makers in employment equity. Although women's share in labour force has increased for last decades more than three quarters of females are still employed in only one quarter of occupations available in the market (Akbari, 2004, p. 17). That means that gender segregation in terms of occupation is still existing, and government's measures on eliminating gender discrimination in workplace did not paid due attention to this disparity.

It has to be pointed out, that global changes in the international labour market and fast industrialization of the world during the twentieth century contributed to promotion of women status at the workplace. Thus, while during the first of last century Canadian labour market demonstrated trend to vertical segregation when females shifted from unpaid work in family and work in manufacturing industry to clerical work, from 1950s till the present horizontal segregation has become a prevalent tendency; and recent data show that share of females in managerial occupations has increased for this period by 22% while their share in clerical professions has reduced by 16% (Akbari, 2004, p. 11).

This is a good example of effectiveness of the government's measures on encouraging women to shift out of the conventionally female professions into other ones and efforts on implementing recruitment programs ensuring equal access of both sexes to all professions (Gerkovich, MacBride-King & <https://assignbuster.com/meeting-the-challenge-of-attaining-equality-for-canadian-women-achievements-and-failures/>

Townsend, 1998, p. 37). Nevertheless, such positive changes did not permit to eliminate gender wage gap. Even women holding top management positions in various industries report their salaries are substantially less than those of their male colleagues having the same level posts (Zukewich, 2000, p. 116). This proves that gender disparity in labour market has to be addressed with all possible thoroughness and sophisticated analysis, because if we witness both gender segregation and wage discrimination at all management levels no figures on employment growth can prove the state makes its best to better situation with employment inequality.