

WILL EMPLOYERS VOLUNTARILY DO THE RIGHT THING?

A WOMAN'S VIEW Ginette Petitpas Taylor

When New Brunswick university students held a bake sale where sweets were offered at \$1 apiece to men and 80 cents to women, the organizers were trying to upset people.

"It was supposed to offend people because it is discrimination based on gender. So is pay inequity," said an organizer.

Were it so that we were all offended by pay inequity – by secretaries earning less than janitors in New Brunswick universities and other workplaces, even though secretaries require more education and skills.

Were it so that we were offended by child care workers paid practically minimum wage, when we say their work is crucial to children's early years and to the economy, and by nurses and other female-dominated health care professions being undervalued given their level of training and their importance to health care.

Will New Brunswick employers voluntarily adopt pay equity? That is the gamble the New Brunswick governments have taken these last few years. They decided to encourage instead of force employers to do the right thing.

Will employers voluntarily pay more to traditionally female jobs that are underpaid compared to other jobs in the same worksite? Will they conduct evaluations in their workplace to determine if traditionally female jobs are paid according to their real worth to the employer.

Halfway through the province's five-year plan to close the pay gap between women and men, there certainly has not been a rush of employers choosing to support the voluntary way.

It seems they either do not believe the government will eventually force them to end pay discrimination or they are ready to wait until everyone including their competitors are forced to do it. The provincial government has not yet released the number of New Brunswick employers who have corrected for the traditional "female job" discount.

The only way to know if we are reaching pay equity is to monitor the number of employees who are paid according to an equitable pay system. The provincial government has not yet released the figures on how many worksites in the province use an equitable pay system. This is what is needed to see what progress is made in the next couple of years to ending pay discrimination – to creating pay equity.

Just looking at the gap between male and female workers' average salary, whether for a worksite or for the whole province, does not tell much about the level of pay equity or inequity. If employers only compare the average hourly wage of their women workers with that of male workers, some employers will think they have a problem where there isn't any, and some employers will think they don't have a problem where there is one.

An employer who has mostly male managers and female support staff but whose staff is appropriately – equitably – paid, would show a significant wage gap. The average salary of the male employees would be higher than that of the women in that workplace, but the problem would not be lack of pay equity. The employees are clustered by gender - possibly only to the same extent that they are in the general population, which means the employer could not find more male support staff or female professionals if they tried..

Another employer might pay all their employees about the same – for example close to minimum wage - but the women's jobs actually have more value, require more education or effort and should be paid more. That employer would show no wage gap between the male and female employees, but there certainly could be a pay equity problem.

Evidently, you can't tell much about pay equity from the gender wage gap in the province or in a workplace.

New Brunswick's Coalition for Pay Equity has a popular new fairytale slide show being emailed around ("If you break the chain, you'll be upholding injustice!"), Olivia's Adventures In the Land of Pay Inequity, about Olivia who came to a far away land called New Brunswick to find work. When she meets Suzanne, a childcare educator, and learns that Suzanne earns \$8.20 an hour, Olivia is stunned, especially when she also learns that a store clerk for NB Liquor earns over \$16.24. When she is told the only thing for these women to do is to find better paying jobs, she wisely replies, "But who's going to take care of the children if all the educators quit?" Olivia returned to her country shortly after.

In 2006, female Community College graduates of the previous year who were working full-time earned on average 86% of what males with whom they graduated were earning in the province. In 2004, women who graduated from New Brunswick universities in 1999 earned on average 82% of the earnings of the men who graduated with them. Of course part of the problem is that too few women are in the better paying traditionally male trades, engineering and other sciences. But the other part of the problem is that traditionally female jobs are still paid at a discount.

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