

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES



overnments and employers say they're all for women's equality — until they're faced with making the legislative commitment and putting up the money to ensure equality becomes a reality.

That's when the excuses start to surface. Based more on fiction than fact, they range from charging that pay equity will trigger the ruin of our economy to saying employers will get around it by hiring more men.

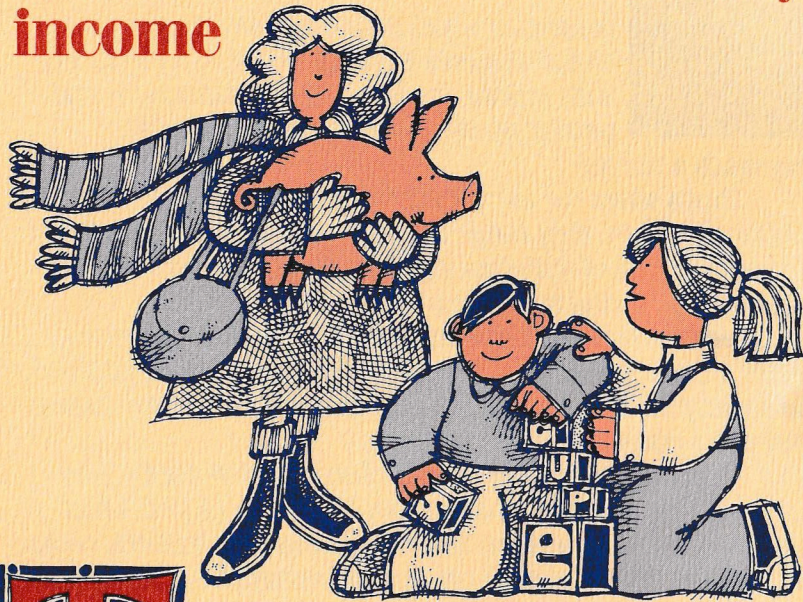
None of this myth-making should come as a surprise. After all, rationalizations for barring women from equal status in society are as common and tradition-bound as pin-striped suits at a corporate board meeting.

Why does the undervaluing of so-called women's jobs persist? One reason is that society has never placed a high value on the work women do domestically. As cleaners, cooks, caregivers and household organizers, women have traditionally provided valuable services in the home for free. Now, employers expect them to provide these skills and services for next-to-nothing on the job market. And they've devised all sorts of self-serving reasons to justify this exploitation.

**10 Pay Equity Myths** looks at the most frequently cited arguments against pay equity. It shows how they distort the truth and play on our fears about economic insecurity. And it presents facts and arguments to counter the myths.

## Myth 1

# Women work for a secondary income



Those who promote this argument say that women work for “pin money” — that their income is used for luxury items and does not go toward providing the basic necessities a family needs to survive, like food, clothing and housing.

Like all myths, this one flies in the face of fact. For example, Statistics Canada estimates that 48 per cent of two-income families would fall below the poverty line if *either* parent quit working. (And we all know that the poverty line doesn't allow a family to afford anything beyond the barest of necessities.)

In addition, the number of single parent families is on the rise. There are more than 988,000 of them in Canada now. About 80% of them are headed by women. Without an adequate income, these women can't possibly provide a decent life for their children.

So the secondary income argument is simply not based on fact. It's also not based on logic. Saying that women's income is not necessary to economic survival and thus women should be paid less implies that all income levels should be

determined by financial need. The logical extension of this argument is that the man with six children should always earn more than the man with none. But those who maintain women's income is secondary would never argue for this last point.

## Myth 2

# Women aren't committed to the workforce



Everybody knows that women drop out of the workforce and stay out once they have children. Or that if they return, they return to part-time jobs for short periods of time, just to tide the family over rough spots.

That's what the detractors of pay equity would like you to believe. But it's simply not true.

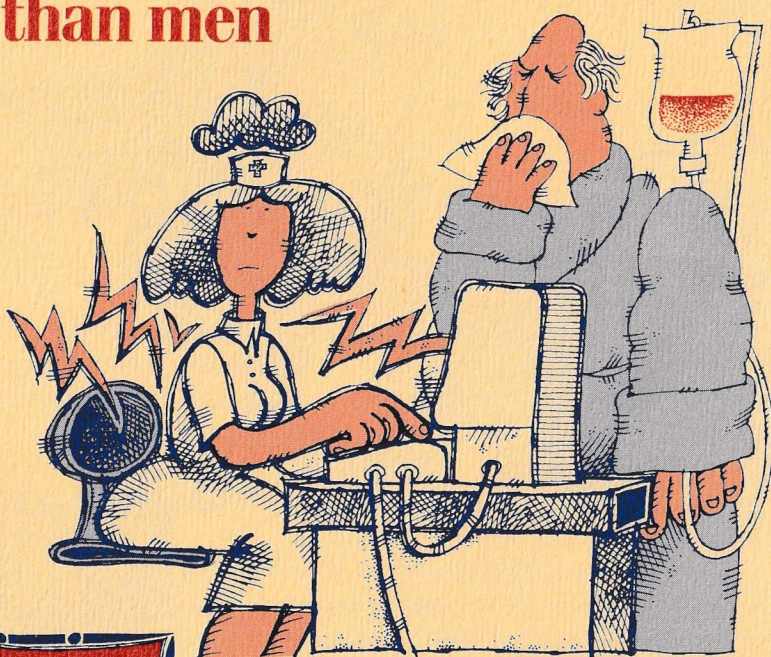
The majority of childbearing women do not drop out of the workforce to have children. Indeed, once they do have children, those who had full-time jobs tend to continue full-time employment. In 1984, 52 per cent of all mothers with young children were in the labour force; 69 per cent of these worked full time.

But often, women don't have a choice of whether to work full- or part-time because the only jobs available to them are part-time. But whether women work full-time or part-time, they deserve to be paid according to the value of the job — not according to the sex of the worker.

In addition, women are often hampered from participating in the workforce as fully as they would like by restrictions imposed on them by their traditional responsibilities in the home. Outside of work, they carry out the roles of wife and mother, full-time jobs in themselves. In carrying out domestic responsibilities, they often get little or no help from their spouses. It's simply not fair or accurate to place the blame on women for not participating in the workforce in the same numbers as men.

### Myth 3

## Women have better and safer working conditions than men



his myth says women should get paid less because their jobs are soft.

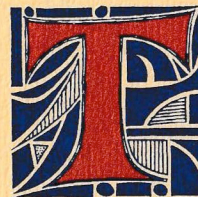
But there are many, many predominantly female jobs that expose women to the dangers of chemical, biological, physical and psychological hazards.

In offices, women are exposed to the toxic chemicals of correcting fluids and the harmful effects of prolonged use of video display terminals. In hospitals, they're exposed to infections, and their work often leads to back injuries. In social services, they suffer from the stress of understaffing, lack of control over workloads, and in some cases dealing with violent family situations.

Proponents of this myth would never carry it out to its logical conclusion. Because if harder and more dangerous work deserves higher pay, then garbage collectors and coal miners should be paid more than accountants and judges.

### Myth 4

## Women choose to work in low-paying jobs



his argument implies that jobs that are of fundamental value to society, such as day care and nursing, aren't worth pursuing and aren't worth assigning a decent wage.

Moreover, it implies that employers never discriminate when hiring, and that when given a choice between a job that pays well and one that doesn't, women will always opt for the latter.

Can anyone take such nonsense seriously?

It wasn't long ago that employers pre-selected the gender of applicants for jobs by listing employment ads in either the "Help Wanted Female" or "Help Wanted Male" columns.

And today, although these categories have been eliminated from want ads, deeply ingrained attitudes about which jobs should go to women and which ones should go to men still persist. These attitudes are reinforced by schools steering girls into secretarial and nursing careers, the lack of

training programs for women in non-traditional jobs, and the paucity of job opportunities for women in non-traditional fields.

But even if large numbers of women wanted to move into traditionally male jobs, it would take many, many years for this change to take place.

In any case, the focus of pay equality is on assigning wages which recognize the value of work to society. In this way, people will feel freer to choose the work they like while at the same time earning a decent wage, instead of being forced into sex-stereotyped jobs they might not feel suited to.

### *Myth 5*

## Pay equity threatens the free market system



This is one of the most common arguments against pay equity. It's based on the mistaken assumption that the market is "free" and unmanipulated, and that as long as it's allowed to operate unhampered everything will turn out alright.

But the free market is one of the biggest myths going in our society. Far from being free, the market is constantly being

manipulated by government policies and laws that sometimes limit it, and sometimes sustain it.

For example, governments manipulate the market every time they introduce wage controls. Yet employers never argue against this kind of intervention.

Other market manipulations include minimum wage and health and safety laws, and government subsidies and tax breaks to business. Again, interventions that benefit the business community, such as subsidies and tax breaks, never come under criticism from business.

A related myth is that women's wages are lower than men's because of the laws of supply and demand. In fact, a U.S. study looking at the correlation between the number of jobs and wages, found that the only relevant factor in determining wage levels was gender, not the number of applicants for the job.

That's because the market isn't neutral. It elevates cut-throat competitiveness above all else, no matter who pays the price. That's not the kind of society we in Canada want. As long as business is allowed to treat the free market as a god before which we should all bow, women will never attain equal economic status.

### *Myth 6*

## Pay equity means the end of a free and democratic society



This myth is not unlike the argument that says pay equity will endanger the free market, because it too puts the interests of the few above the interests of the many.

In this case, it is argued that pay equity will undermine democracy and a free society because it will force employers to pay women decent wages, thus limiting their freedom to pay

women a substandard wage. This “freedom” is blatantly discriminatory.

But democracy is defined as favouring social equality. It is government by all the people. How then can a system which perpetuates the social and economic inequality of women (roughly half of our society) be said to be democratic?

Many democratic countries and jurisdictions have enacted pay equity legislation. Among them are Germany, Australia, Belgium, France, Sweden, the United Kingdom and 16 American states. In Canada, Manitoba and Quebec have pay equity laws. And the federal government has enacted such legislation for employees under its jurisdiction.

As a democratic society, we have put in place human rights legislation because we believe discrimination is unjust. No one would argue that allowing employers the “freedom” to discriminate against racial minorities is what democracy is all about. Yet somehow, when it comes to women, discrimination becomes okay, as if it were the natural order of things.

Far from restricting freedom and democracy, pay equity laws would show that we truly believe in these principles. Such legislation would do away with the economic discrimination against women and the notion of women as second-class workers.

### *Myth 7*

## **Pay equity will mean economic disaster**



Remember Chicken Little, who ran around crying “the sky is falling, the sky is falling” when nothing of the sort was happening?

Well, those who insist pay equity will mean the downfall of the economy sound as unbelievable as poor Chicken Little.

Paying women fair wages will put money back into the economy. After all, women make up roughly half of the

consumers in Canada. If they're paid more, they'll be able to buy more consumer goods. And that's good for business.

But the Chicken Littles remain undaunted. They say that pay equity will force hard-pressed employers to mechanize in order to cut costs, thus reducing job opportunities. They conveniently ignore the fact that many jobs women do — providing services in stores, hotels, restaurants, nursing homes, schools, day-care centres and hospitals — don't lend themselves to automation. They also ignore the potential savings in lower turnover rates and higher productivity that paying women decent wages would bring about.

The many progressive countries and jurisdictions where pay equity laws exist show up the economic doomsday myth for what it is — a gross and distorted exaggeration. Societies with pay equity laws still manage to have a well functioning economy. Their economic sky hasn't fallen.

But the bottom line is this: any economy that, to exist, depends on the exploitation of a major group should be overhauled. Perhaps the push for pay equity will finally force governments and employers to acknowledge that the interests of ordinary people are just as or more important than the profit margins of business.

### *Myth 8*

## **Pay equity means creating another huge bureaucracy**



Every time a beneficial social measure involving government comes along, its opponents conjure up armies of bureaucrats as a reason for scuttling its implementation.

True, there will be an important need for governments to provide skilled advisors on pay equity to help employers and unions design comprehensive and fair programs.

But there are other ways of handling pay equity that will cut down on the so-called “bureaucratic army”.

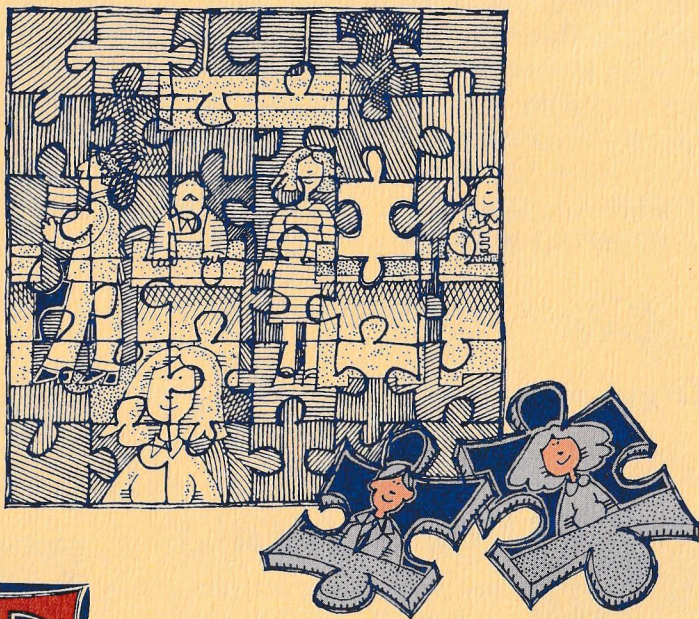
In unionized workplaces, pay equity can become part of collective bargaining. Ways to bargain pay equity include equalizing the wages for entry-level jobs, reducing increment steps, or comparing bench mark jobs.

Employers, ever-ready to spend money on labour lawyers and management consultants, could earmark a part of their budgets to help in deciding how to pay fairer wages to women.

All of these methods will offset any possibility of creating an unwieldy bureaucracy to implement pay equity.

*Myth 9*

## Pay equity will hurt women



This myth is based on the argument that employers will seek revenge for being forced to pay fair wages. They'll do this by reducing employment opportunities for women by hiring more men to evade the law. They'll also resist any "special treatment" law by making sure women don't get promoted into well-paying jobs.

This argument has no basis in fact. And it says a lot about the mean-spiritedness of pay equity opponents.

Employers won't be able to evade pay equity laws by hiring more men, because wages will be based on jobs, not on gender.

The pay equity legislation in Australia resulted in the growth of female employment. Female unemployment as a proportion of male unemployment fell. And women's relative earnings increased by thirty percent.

It's clear that this myth tries to blackmail women into abandoning the struggle for pay equity — or else suffer the consequences. Those who make this argument try to appear as if they're sounding this warning with women's best interests at heart. But they're the same people who supported wage controls — legislation that hurt women's economic status badly. They also support free trade, which will ensure that job opportunities for women dry up and consign them to low-paying jobs with poor working conditions.

The very same people who have profited from the exploitation of women now want us to believe that they're *protecting* women by opposing pay equity laws. Surely they can't expect us to think their motives are anything but self-serving.

*Myth 10*

## Pay equity will hurt men



This divide-and-conquer tactic plays on the fear that pay equity will be won at the expense of men. Specifically, it says that wage increases won by women through pay equity laws will be paid for by making men forego their own increases or giving them smaller increases.

This argument tries to enlist men as pay equity opponents and attempts to make women hesitate to enter the pay equity battle because they might hurt men.

However, it ignores the fact that where pay equity laws exist, all adjustments are made outside of regularly negotiated wage increases. It also ignores the fact that unions and women's groups have repeatedly stated pay equity adjustments — whether bargained at the negotiating table or won through job evaluation — will only be agreed to if men don't suffer financially.

What the detractors of pay equity fail to recognize is that men, too, have a stake in supporting pay equity. The lower wages paid to women workers drag down the wages paid to men.

In addition, men have sisters, mothers and spouses, all of whom need a decent income to survive. When it comes to pay equity for their wives, men know that it will benefit them by upgrading the family's standard of living.

Far from hurting men, pay equity could very well help them financially. And it will open up new, non-traditional job opportunities for men since jobs will be paid according to their value, rather than gender.



This booklet can be obtained from  
The Equal Opportunities Office,  
Canadian Union of Public Employees  
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