

SEVEN TYPICAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST
EQUAL PAY FOR WORK OF EQUAL VALUE
AND
OUR RESPONSES

A front page Globe & Mail article, "Gloom Pervades Board Rooms over Ontario Liberal Policies" (December 30, 1985), suggests: "Perhaps the most contentious issue of all for business is the government's promise to bring in legislation providing equal pay for women performing jobs equal in value to those performed by men."

Since the Liberal Government's announcement early this summer, newspapers and magazines have published opinion pieces by critics of equal pay for work of equal value. The number and range of arguments prove that those of us who want legislation must prepare for a tough battle.

Here is a list of common arguments used to oppose equal pay for work of equal value legislation, and some responses to these arguments.

The quotations are taken from the following articles:

The Globe & Mail Editorial,
"The Scales of Value",
July 10, 1985

Barbara Amiel, Maclean's
August 5, 1985

E.L. Stringer, Q.C.,
The Toronto Star,
August 12, 1985

Laura Sabia, The Toronto Sun
December 3, 1985

Walter Block and Michael Walker,
The Fraser Institute, in
The Globe & Mail, October 22, 1985

John McCallum, The Toronto Star
November 22, 1985

The Globe & Mail Editorial
"The Politics of Wages",
November 22, 1985

E.L. Stringer, The Globe & Mail
January 2, 1986

Joan Breckinridge,
Report on Business Magazine,
December 1985

Barbara Amiel, The Toronto Sun
December 3, 1985

John Crispo in Influence,
December 1985/January

The Toronto Star Editorial
"Right Problem, Wrong Solution",
October 11, 1985

ARGUMENT

1. Women Choose Low-Paying Jobs

Globe & Mail, November 22, 1985: "The pernicious self-selection of women for lower-paying jobs is not confronted."

Crispo: "... the home, where much of the problem still begins."

Breckinridge: "Yet many more are still reluctant to invest the requisite amount of time, energy and money in themselves and their future ... Workers affect their pay prospects by choosing or not choosing to enter particular professions."

Block and Walker: "(Marriage Key to Gap in Wages) ... Again, however, the never-married sample provides evidence that the explanatory variable is not discrimination, but rather marital status ... This 'problem' doesn't require legislation, it requires that females be better acquainted with the income deficiency costs associated with their career choices."

Star: "... mandatory affirmative action ..."

RESPONSE

People who suggest that women have deliberately chosen low-paying jobs have very short memories. It was just a few years ago that employment ads were divided into "Help Wanted Male" and "Help Wanted Female" columns.

The majority of women still don't have real choices when they need a job. Only a privileged few have "the requisite amount of time, energy and money" to prepare for a professional career.

It's arrogant to imply that only high-paying men's jobs are worth pursuing. Jobs such as nursing and day-care are fundamental to our society. Women's jobs are low-paid, not because the jobs themselves aren't valuable, but because traditionally they have been done by women, and historically our society has undervalued women's work. That's changing.

Most opponents of equal pay are quick to assure us that they believe in women's equality, and insist that affirmative action is the only legitimate route. They say we should aim for a more equal distribution of men and women in the workforce. This means that millions of men and women would have to change their jobs. It's not a realistic solution in the short term, and wouldn't solve the problem of unfair differences in pay.

The argument that women receive low wages because of marriage and not because of discrimination is silly. The "sample" that's referred to was biased. Do married men make less than single men? Would everyone's wages go up if we all stopped getting married? People who make this argument want to make women feel guilty.

ARGUMENT

3. Equal Pay Endangers The Free Market

Globe & Mail, July 10, 1985: "... respond with care to preserve the genius of the market ... friends of the market should feel no qualms in defending a historic gift."

Amiel, August 5, 1985: "Market forces of supply and demand are neutral ... Ultimately you are replacing the amorality of the free market with the immorality of the regulated society."

Globe & Mail, November 22, 1985: "Supply and demand is not mentioned ... an unacceptable dismissal of market forces."

Stringer, August 12, 1985: "The major problem with the legislation is that it totally ignores the economic system we operate under."

RESPONSE

The free market is a myth. Our economic system, like market economies everywhere, is sometimes constrained by government policies, and sometimes bolstered by government policies.

Laws about hours of work and minimum wages, laws against child labour, and health and safety legislation are examples of how we've chosen to regulate employers. Tax credits for research and development, government grants and loans to businesses, favourable interest rates, and corporate tax breaks are examples of how our government has chosen to boost business.

A view that elevates the market above all other considerations reduces life to the law of the jungle. The market isn't amoral; it places a supreme value on competitiveness. Another view sees co-operation as the basis of life.

Half the consumers and 44 percent of the workers in Ontario are women. Women aren't separate from our economic system, they are central to it, so it's only fair that they get paid on the basis of the work they do, rather than on the basis of their gender.

Wages aren't set by supply and demand alone, but are influenced by social attitudes and conventions. Paying women low wages is a left-over from the past, when women weren't even recognized as persons and didn't have the vote. Now that our society treats women equally at the ballot-box, there's no excuse for perpetuating a system where they are less than equal on payday.

4. Equal Pay Jeopardizes Our Freedom

Amiel, August 5, 1985: "Of all the concepts that the totalitarian instinct of our times has bequeathed to society ... the seemingly harmless slogan 'Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value' is potentially the most destructive to a free society ... To stop this steamroller policy will require fighting shortsighted and narrowminded feminists as well as cowardly and opportunistic politicians."

Sabia: "Pay equity will assure them of total dependency on the state. It's the socialist way. Heaven help Ontario!"

Amiel, December 3, 1985: "... policies ... pit men against women, mailroom clerks against filing clerks, group against group and the state against the individual."

Equal pay is destructive? We can think of plenty of things which are harmful in a free society, and equal pay isn't one of them: unemployment, racism, poverty, the threat of nuclear war.

The argument that equal pay laws will undermine our freedom is the twin of the argument that it interferes with the market.

Many democratic countries and jurisdictions have equal pay for work of equal value laws: Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and 16 American states. In Canada, the Federal Government, and our neighbouring provinces, Manitoba and Quebec, already have equal pay for work of equal value legislation.

Corporations are eager to accept government regulations when they lead to increased profits. It's hypocritical for them to use these kinds of arguments to oppose legislation that would give women a more equitable share of the profits.

We have human rights legislation because as a society we've decided that discrimination is unjust. Equal value legislation would show that we no longer think that women should be treated as second class workers. There are no second-class citizens, or employees, in a truly free society.

ARGUMENT

5. Equal Pay Will Hurt The Economy

Breckinridge: "But equal value legislation could have a disastrous effect. Higher wages without any rise in productivity would for example push up prices across the board ... economic growth would be impeded ... Canada will alienate both foreign and domestic investors ... unable to absorb inflated wages, independent business would have a choice of either reducing staff to cut costs or moving to an area where wages and non-wage labour costs are generally lower."

McCallum: "... employers will first attempt to pass them on to consumers of their products in the form of higher prices. In our present high unemployment/foreign competition-prone economy, employers are not likely to get far in this regard ... it would be astonishing, therefore, to find employers not moving aggressively to reduce their dependence on those women ... They will substitute capital in the form of mechanization, automation and robotics for the labour that is increasing in cost ... "

RESPONSE

These arguments make it seem like the economy rests entirely upon the exploitation of working women. If that's true, then it's time to reconsider the kind of world we're making for our sons and daughters.

Our economy certainly isn't working for everyone. There are over a million people looking for work and even more live below the poverty line in Canada.

People who cry disaster are playing on our uneasiness about the economy. They imply that equal pay for work of equal value is an extraordinary measure, but in many progressive countries such legislation is the rule rather than an exception.

Many jobs that women do - in stores, nursing homes, schools, day-care centres and hospitals - can't be exported or mechanized. They're not going to disappear. Paying women equal wages can lead to increased productivity, because women will feel they're being treated fairly. That can lead to lower rates of turnover, and thus lower recruitment and training costs for employers. Because pensions are based on earnings, if women's wages increase they'll receive better pensions, and more women will be financially secure when they retire.

Paying women fairer wages isn't money down the drain, it's putting money back into the economy. If women are paid more, they'll have more buying power.

It's a distortion to say that wages will be inflated, as if suddenly women will be paid more than their work is really worth!

6. Equal Pay Will Hurt Women

Breckinridge: "... employers will reduce the number of women employees through attrition and make more use of part-time labour ... Who will promote women into responsible, well-paying jobs when they are coddled by a law that has the phrase 'Handicapped, needs special treatment' stamped all over it?"

McCallum: "Women who gain equal pay for work of equal value increases, could, therefore, find their jobs in time no longer exist ... Women who gain because of equal pay for work of equal value will find that they do so mainly at the expense of other women in the form of lost job opportunities and adverse changes in working relationships."

Stringer, August 12, 1985: "But women, as usual, will find themselves holding the short end of the stick as employment opportunities dry up, taxes rise and the price of products made in Ontario increase."

Sabia: "The very women who need our help will be without jobs."

Stringer, January 2, 1986: "... no benefit to the people it was supposed to serve. They will now be unemployed ..."

Star: "... could actually cost women jobs as employers evade the law by hiring exclusively men ..."

The argument that paying women fairer wages will disrupt the economy and women will suffer most isn't based on the facts. When Australia decided to bring in equal pay for work of equal value laws in the 1970's, female employment continued to grow faster than male employment. What's more, female unemployment as a proportion of male unemployment fell. Women's relative earnings increased by thirty percent. The only group for whom unemployment increased was teenage girls. They probably stayed in school.

It's curious that opponents of equal value legislation are often the very same people who supported wage controls, and who are now lobbying for free trade. Women suffered most under wage controls, and women workers are going to be hurt most by free trade. Opponents who warn that equal pay will hurt women most design their arguments to appeal to our sense of compassion and sisterhood. They want us to give up the fight. But we know they have their own, rather than workers', interests at heart.

The threat that employers won't hire women is a hollow one, because equal pay for work of equal value will mean that wages are based on jobs, rather than gender. In the meantime, employers will have a hard time getting men to work in women's jobs unless they pay better wages.

7. Equal Pay Isn't "What Women Really Want"

Sabia: "... a nightmare of reverse discrimination. It's unworthy of women."

Block and Walker: "On the other hand, it may simply reflect the fact that females, better than males, recognize that in measuring the benefits from working - money isn't everything."

Breckinridge: "The women's rights groups that say provincial equal value laws are desperately required are inadvertently portraying women as helpless victims who must be protected from their own irrational, irresponsible job choices ..."

Stringer, August 12, 1985: "The legislation they are being offered in return for their votes, however, may turn out to be a sort of Snow White's Apple-bright, shiny and full of promise on the outside but containing a bitter potion which will set their crusade for true equality back decades as its effects are felt."

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The first two viewpoints are reminders of that old-fashioned image of women standing on a pedestal, so special and so much purer than men that they don't really need equal pay! We know differently: when it comes to paying the rent and buying the groceries, women are no different than men.

Helpless! Well, businesses are protected by tariffs and get tax breaks, not because they're victims but because they have the power to influence politicians. Women have been victimized by an economic environment they've had little influence over. The fact that equal pay for work of equal value was a major issue in last year's provincial election proves that women are not helpless, and that they are prepared to fight for equality.

The Snow-White picture comes from another out-dated and patronizing idea of women as naive and easily mis-led. It insinuates that business men know better than we do what's best for us.

Opponents of equal pay are using these images because they're scared, they know women are gaining a sense of the power they have to change things. The opposition has good reason to worry. A poll done for the government this September shows that 54 percent of the men and women in Ontario think that the government is moving too slowly on equal pay for work of equal value.

By the way, what's wrong with voting for politicians who support us? Isn't that what democracy's all about?

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