



(ATHAR HUSSAIN/REUTERS)

Women's Day in Canada: Much to celebrate, much more work to do

Emanuela Heyninck

Contributed to The Globe and Mail

Published Saturday, Mar. 08, 2014 8:00AM EST

International Women's Day gives us an opportunity to celebrate the many achievements on the journey to gender equality. It also gives us pause to assess where we are in that journey. We are reminded daily that millions of women in developing countries struggle for personal and economic freedom, including the freedom to learn, work, and participate.

Compared to their situation, women in Canada are doing well. Our young men and women may wonder whether the theme for this year's International Women's Day, Inspiring Change, applies to us. When they look around, they see that men and women are attending colleges and universities at equal rates. In some professions, women make up more than half of the graduating classes. Men and women are participating in equal numbers in the work force. In Ontario, we have human rights, pay equity and employment standards laws, in addition to many other services and community organizations that protect the rights of women and continue to advocate for the full integration of women in all areas of public and private life. What, they may ask, needs to change in Canada?

The gender wage gap is one indicator of the fact that progress to economic equality has plateaued. While there are many ways to measure the gap, a common statistic – comparing full-time/full-year average wages – puts the gender gap at 26 per cent. This means that for every \$1 earned by a male worker, a female worker is earning only \$0.74. In the last decade this figure has barely moved. For women of colour and Aboriginal women, the gap is even wider. Royal Bank has estimated that if the gender wage gap were addressed and women and men in Canada received the same economic opportunities, women would have \$168-billion more in disposable income.

The poor representation of women in leadership roles is another indicator. Despite the overwhelming evidence that demonstrates without doubt that companies with more diverse boards are more profitable, women make up only about 16 per cent of corporate board seats.

Business structures and practices have not caught up to modern day realities because stereotypes about women and work persist.

Many employers continue to make assumptions about women and their roles as caregivers, consciously or unconsciously overlooking them for advancement and training opportunities or by not considering them for more lucrative projects.

Women have been told to take the initiative by negotiating their pay, but numerous studies show that women who attempt to negotiate for better salaries either don't receive them or are viewed negatively by their managers and co-workers.

Finally, "women's work"- and the so-called "soft skills" that women are respected for – are still being undervalued and under-compensated.

We need to be inspired. We also need to take action – to make use of the laws, strategies and tools that have been developed so that a real and substantive culture shift about women at work becomes the new standard.

Culture shift is never easy. It requires introspection and change at both the organizational and individual level. It takes strong leadership and men and women working together to come up with new ways of doing things. Where gender workplace equality is concerned, it means restructuring our business and compensation practices to mirror the realities of today's world.

By acting to change our own culture to ensure that women are fully integrated into the economic and social fabric of our country, we inspire other jurisdictions and populations and economies to aim for our successes.

Emanuela Heyninck is commissioner of the Pay Equity Commission of Ontario