



POLICY GUIDE

Women and Unpaid Work

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At Issue ...

There is no universally accepted definition of unpaid work but, for the purposes of this policy discussion, the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women defines it as any work that women do in homes, communities, and workplaces that contributes to those environments and the people within them but which does not result in financial remuneration. We know that all Islanders do a great deal of work for which they are not paid. But, we also know that women do a disproportionate amount of that unpaid work and, in the process, they experience immediate and long-term impacts on their well-being, their financial security, and their status in society.

We also lack universally accepted ways to measure and value unpaid work but, without such measuring and valuing, governments, including our provincial one, continue to use incomplete information when making fiscal and policy decisions. While Islanders know full well that the economy would collapse without their unpaid labour, our provincial government uses budgetary processes that are driven by assumptions that work means paid work only and that cash is the only means of assigning value. Thus, we end up with policies and programs that might work in that theoretical, cash-only world but which do not serve everyone well in the real world.

In the real world, women subsidize the Island economy. They make up half the paid labour force, but are still doing most of the household management and caregiving. At the same time, they make at least an equal contribution to community work and there is no telling what they are contributing to the lives of their friends and neighbours. In their paid workplaces, they find that jobs that have been traditionally dubbed “women’s work” are assigned a lower market value than “men’s work” which could require equivalent levels of training and skill. And, when government cuts services or the economy shrinks, women shoulder most of the responsibility for the tasks that get downloaded to households and the voluntary sector.

There is no need to attach a monetary value to all the work that women do, but there is a need to acknowledge their work and to value it. Right now, with strong international and national efforts working towards that goal, we must examine what needs to change in our own province so that women will cease to suffer for taking on unpaid responsibilities and that all Islanders will benefit from appropriate policy-making.

Here on Prince Edward Island ...

Overall, the issue of unpaid work on PEI has received very little study or consideration but we do know a few things. Women's participation in the province's paid economy changed rapidly over a short period of time. In 1961, women constituted one quarter of the paid labour force. Thirty years later, they made up half of that labour force. Right now, Statistics Canada reports that, at 87%, Island women have the highest labour force participation rate in Canada.

Most of the paid and unpaid workforce is concentrated in tourism, farming, and fishing. As in the household, women's work in these sectors is largely unpaid, diminished as part of their husband's or father's occupation. Although vital, women's contributions to these endeavours are often invisible and are usually provided without assurance of financial security.

Two changes in federal policy have helped women move towards economic security. In the late 1980's, they were included in the employment insurance program as harvesters of fishing resources. In 1991, the Agriculture Census allowed farmers to report more than one operator per farm. These are two important steps and there are still many more inequities to overcome. Tourism operators, fishing women, and farm women struggle with recognizing their contributions themselves, often devaluing their work by calling it "helping out" or "running errands." Some women, most notably single mothers, are actually criticized for taking on the work of mothering their children and managing their homes.

Across Canada ...

Statistics Canada reports that women do two-thirds of the 2.5 billion hours of unpaid work performed in Canada annually. And, depending on how it is measured, that work is worth between \$235 billion and \$374 billion annually. Given these numbers, it was about time when, in 1996, the *Census of Population Questionnaire* included three questions on unpaid work. There were some problems with the questions. They were narrow in scope and, in comparison to questions about paid work, they were presented in a marginal fashion as add-ons. Overall, though, the *Census* was a breakthrough and it did provide some valuable information. The results clearly showed that women perform significantly more unpaid work in all three categories. And, that is true even if the woman is a full-time income earner like her male partner. Hopefully, more work will be done to ensure that future *Census* questionnaires are more comprehensive and less biased.

At the grassroots level, Canadian women have worked hard on this issue. They have pointed out that caregivers, mostly women, suffer various forms of economic discrimination. When preparing tax returns, they find that a spousal deduction is less than a full personal deduction and that mothers who care for their own children cannot claim child care expense deductions. Unable to contribute to registered retirement savings or pensions under the Canada Pension Plan, unpaid caregivers worry about spending their retirement in poverty. New mothers who are self-employed or seasonally employed or who are unpaid caregivers find that they are likely ineligible for maternity benefits through the Employment Insurance Program. And, all mothers see that the Child Tax Benefit is based on family income, not individual income. Such measures make assumptions about women's dependency and also foster a continued dependency.

Our Analysis ...

Unpaid work does not devalue women. Women are devalued when their work is discounted.

(Evelyn Drescher
Mothers Are Women)

To address the issue of unpaid work on Prince Edward Island, four major changes are required. We need to: 1) Name the issue and fully understand it. 2) Include consideration of women's unpaid work in economic and policy decision-making. 3) Divide work between women and men in an equitable fashion. 4) Provide tangible social and economic recognition of women's unpaid work. As a policy maker and employer, government can take leadership in making these changes.

Women's unpaid contributions have always been invisible and not considered in economic and social policy. As a society, we first must recognize that women are doing the bulk of the work and are not being financially rewarded for doing so. In fact, they are often penalized.

Many groups who work towards social justice point out that traditional measures do not accurately reflect total economic activity. For example, here on Prince Edward Island, we measure our economy's health using traditional economic models like the Gross Domestic Product, assuming that market activity is the only productive work and that all growth is good. More realistic models, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator, measure all production modes and assess growth opportunities relative to social and environmental impacts.

This is the kind of information, along with a gender analysis, that is required in order to make accurate fiscal and policy decisions. Such decisions may still work against women's well-being but, at least, those impacts would be explicitly stated. For example, over the past number of years, government fiscal policy reduced the length of hospital stays. That major change was implemented without formally acknowledging that it was Island women who would be taking on most of that caregiving responsibility. Nor was there any assessment of the impact on women or the supports that they would require. It was as if the caregiving work would simply disappear. As such, the budgetary and policy process was incomplete and women were left to absorb the increased demands on their time, skills, and energy as best they could.

It is time to learn about this issue. The provincial government can contribute to that effort by sponsoring relevant research on women's contributions and their needs. For the most accurate results, such research needs to be women-led, fully participatory, and community-based.

It is also time to act on this issue. The Province of PEI could serve as a model employer, working to ensure that it accommodates women's unpaid responsibilities, that it values and welcomes women's experiences and skills developed outside the workplace, that it pays women fairly, and does not penalize women workers who must leave the workplace to bear children. At the same time, the Province of PEI needs to provide incentives to private employers to implement their own family friendly policies and it needs to work with the federal government to address the numerous economic disparities that result from the devaluation of women's unpaid work.

Our Recommendations ...

The PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women recommends that the Province of Prince Edward Island take these actions:

To help the public understand the issue and to encourage women to value what they do:

- Sponsor a provincial public education and awareness campaign on unpaid work.

To produce budget and policy decisions that include consideration of unpaid contributions:

- Commit to a budget development process that uses real costs and benefits, not just cash transactions, and analyzes the differing impacts of budget decisions on women and men.
- Commit to a policy development process that analyzes the real impacts of policy change on women and men.

To learn about the impact of unpaid work on Island women:

- Conduct a participatory study on the impact of reductions in budgets and services associated with the Department of Health and Social Services on women's workloads, well-being, and financial security.
- Conduct a participatory study that measures and analyzes contributions being made by Island women to the province's three main industries - tourism, farming, and fishing.

To provide leadership as an employer of women:

- Conduct a gender analysis of all workplace policies with the provincial civil service and make changes that will accommodate women's unpaid responsibilities.
- Expand current employment equity policies within the provincial civil service to include appropriate skills assessment, women-specific training, employment strategies, and top-up payments for those who take maternity and parental leave.
- Provide incentives to the Island's private employers so they will develop their own employment equity policies.

To influence change at the federal level:

- Advocate for measures such as fairer taxation; allow unpaid workers to contribute to the Canada Pension Plan; modify the Census to get a full picture of all work in Canada; adopt complete economic measures such as the Genuine Progress Indicator; include unpaid work in Labour Force Surveys; modify maternity and parental benefits to make them more available to all Canadians; and provide universally-funded child care.