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# Expanding How We Think About Women's Economic Empowerment in Canada's Non-Profit Sector

While 47% of Canada's labour force consists of women workers, they make up an estimated 80% of those working in the non-profit sector across Ontario and Canada (Zizys 2011, HR Council 2008). Women in the sector, especially racialized and immigrant women, and women with disabilities, experience unequal outcomes.[\[1\]](#)

Canada needs to build a stronger women's economic empowerment movement across sectors to lift up the most marginalized women workers, while raising the floor for all.

This entails diving into three big ideas:

1. Decent work means looking at the types of support women workers need in their workplaces.
2. Investing in women-majority sectors is as important as investing in non-traditional sectors.
3. Women's economic empowerment is only possible when women are offered decent work in the non-profit sector.

## **A gendered workforce**

In Canada, there is a significant amount of research and data from a wide variety of sources about women's employment experiences in the public and private sectors. Some of this focuses on specific groups of women and the unique barriers they experience. However, not much exists on women working in non-profits, let alone women's diverse experiences within this sector.

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Although the non-profit sector is women-majority,<sup>[2]</sup> its labour market has never been examined through a gender-based intersectional lens (GBA+), provincially or nationally.<sup>[3]</sup> There is little evidence that women in the sector have ever been asked how they are faring. Are they experiencing a gender wage gap? Have they encountered a glass ceiling? Do they experience other forms of discrimination? Have they experienced sexual harassment? Such information is crucial as it ensures we include women's voices in broader economic, gender, and labour conversations as well as in internal labour force development ones.

In 2017, the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) embarked on a three-year project to explore women's employment experiences in Ontario's non-profit sector through a GBA+ lens and develop and implement solutions based on what we found.

We're not just thinking about women as a homogenous group but are paying particular attention to how diverse women in the sector are doing – across identities, geographies, subsectors, age groups, and position levels. There is a dominant sector narrative that all non-profit work is care work, and thus many not only think of it as women's work, but also the work of racialized and immigrant women. Moreover, we know that marginalized women experience compounded barriers in the broader labour market, that there is a difference between the urban and rural work experience, and that different barriers manifest for women based on what life stage they are in, and which position level they occupy. That's why it was a priority for us to hear from, and amplify the voices of, those women who are often not heard from.

## **Experiences of sexism in a women-majority sector**

The Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) framework guided our exploration of women's employment experiences in Ontario's non-profit sector. This framework facilitates learning that changes the conditions of women's lives, both individually and collectively, while reconstructing conceptions of power so that it can be used in a responsible manner (Reid and Gillberg, 2006). It advocates for women's involvement in all stages of the research process, including identifying problems to explore, carrying out research, and interpreting and acting upon the results (Reid and Gillberg, 2006).

Our study began with a look at what research already exists through a

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literature review titled *Decent Work for Women - A literature review of women working in Ontario's nonprofit sector?*. It highlighted recent studies in the individual disciplines of gender, labour, and non-profits, and the intersection of all three.

We then convened 14 “learning circles” (focus groups) across seven cities in Ontario with 85 participants. This included women across identities, ages, regions, subsectors, and positions to share their experiences of working in the sector. We opened the learning circles to anyone who self-identified as a woman and was currently working in the sector. We held one for women with invisible or visible disabilities who had volunteered or worked in the non-profit sector. Those who participated in the learning circles were not eligible to participate in the survey. In total, 645 women responded to the survey.

While we also completed key informant interviews to access voices that we missed throughout the research activities ?— such as Indigenous women’s voices, trans women, and men ?— we could not draw conclusions from those interviews and so did not include them in our final report.

At the end of the research process, we had heard from 730 diverse women workers on what it is like to work in the non-profit sector. The following key findings emerged:

- *The sector is women-majority but not women-led:* Based on women’s employment share in the sector, they are disproportionately concentrated in non-leadership positions and are more likely to lead smaller sized organizations or those with small budgets. Unequal job opportunities and a glass ceiling seem to exist for immigrant and racialized women and women with disabilities, resulting in a gendered and racialized hierarchy in the labour force.
- *Women have lower compensation than men:* Three components affect women’s compensation in the sector. The first is a phenomenon known as the “care penalty,” where the women who participated in our study said they earn wages lower in comparison to other sectors, despite the fact they may be highly educated and experienced. Within the sector, women

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said they earn less than men, especially in senior leadership positions. Finally, women said they have limited access to a pension plan, health benefits, and maternity and parental leave top-ups.

- *Women experience sexism at all levels:* Busting the myth that sexism doesn't exist in a women-majority sector, women said they experience sexism on a daily basis, in the types of roles they are asked to fill, in distribution of work, and the value of that work. Often, women said board members treated male and female executive directors differently.
- *Women experience bullying and sexual harassment:* Women said they experienced bullying from other women in similar positions as well as those in power, while some said they experienced sexual harassment in interactions with external parties, such as clients.
- *Gender plays a significant role in shaping labour market structures in the non-profit sector:* At the macro level, respondents felt that non-profit work is considered care work and thus "women's work." As a result, some women said it is devalued and they cited examples of gendered power dynamics between organizations and their boards, donors, and funders. At the micro level, respondents felt that precarious employment is increasing, and the sector has lower wages, limited access to benefits and professional development, and difficulty recruiting and retaining staff.
- *Racism and ageism were cited as other common forms of discrimination:* Women's identities are intersectional and complex and they experience discrimination in multiple ways. Some women said they face discrimination primarily based on their gender, while others said it is due to gender combined with another part of their identity, such as like ability or age. Meanwhile, other respondents said they experience discrimination primarily because of something else, such as race (ONN, 2018).

Our research clearly suggests the existence of a glass ceiling, a gender wage gap, and harassment. All three manifest differently for different women workers and because of the sector's unique characteristics.

While some regional and subsector differences exist, participants mostly said the same things across Ontario, where a significant portion of Canada's non-profit sector is based. Similar findings have also been found in the United States.[\[4\]](#)

A limitation of our research is the missing voices of queer,

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non-binary, trans and Indigenous women. We recognize that these communities work in our sector and experience unique barriers as many have been shared with us anecdotally. We strive to work more intentionally to ensure these voices and experiences in our work as it progresses.

## **Expanding how we think about women's economic empowerment**

These types of experiences that women shared with us often get lost in the broader women's economic empowerment movement. The narrative is usually about improving women's economic position by getting them into higher paying sectors and occupations, which are often male-dominated or associated with traditional constructions of masculinity.

While this is important, moving the needle on women's economic justice requires using an intersectional lens to also improve working conditions in women-majority sectors. Current women-majority sectors and occupations have been, and remain, women-majority year after year. Moreover, research shows that a key driver of the gender wage gap is lower wages in women-majority sectors by virtue of them being women-majority.[\[5\]](#)

Expanding the ways we think about women's economic empowerment illuminates that decent work for women in non-profits means:

- Equal pay, equal pay for work of equal value, and pay transparency;
- Stable employment;
- Maternity and parental leave top-ups;
- Safe reporting mechanisms for discrimination and harassment;
- Pathways to professional development and advancement;
- Gender parity and diversity in sector leadership;
- Not reproducing gendered roles in organizations; and
- Recognizing

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the impact of being a feminized sector on the type of employment opportunities available.

**Every time we talk about women's economic empowerment, let's make it clear we also mean women working in non-profits**

How can we make a real difference in the lives of women working in the sector? How do we impact the most women workers and the most marginalized? We've started by creating a framework of [10 solutions](#) at the organizational, network, and systemic levels. This is an iterative and ever-changing framework as we move through the implementation stage of our work.

But we can't do this alone. We need women workers and male allies in the sector, and beyond, to work together to:

1. Spread shared #decentwork messages across networks: Investing in women-majority sectors is equally as important as investing in non-traditional sectors. Women should have decent work in whichever industry and occupation they choose to work in (STEM, trades, care work, etc.).

2. Advocate together on public policy impacting women workers: Advocating to the Government of Canada to modernize EI maternity and parental benefits. Enhanced measures for maternity and parental leave beneficiaries should include the reduction of the EI benefit waiting period to zero weeks, cutting in half the number of hours required to qualify for benefits (from 600 to 300 hours), increasing the benefit rate from 55 percent to 67 percent, expanding EI Family Supplement eligibility to all those under Canada's official poverty line, and creating an incentive program for employers to provide income top-ups to workers on maternity & parental leave. Detailed recommendations and associated cost analysis can be found in ONN's [policy brief](#).

Advocating to the Government of Ontario means calling for transparent pay scales, eliminating requests for salary history, getting rid of reprisals

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for sharing salary info, and reminding legislators that gender wage gap reporting levels the playing field for women workers to earn a fair living. We know that when employees are earning fair wages, organizations are better equipped to meet their missions. Stakeholders can learn more about pay transparency from a non-profit lens in ONN's Ministry of Labour [consultation submission](#).

3. Activate decent work for women: ONN has developed several resources to activate decent work for women. Organizations can begin by starting the conversation with their boards with the [Decent Work Charter](#), or by using the [Checklist](#) to figure out what is working well and what needs improvement in their workplace. The [Decent Work](#) and [Gender Equity](#) allies toolkits provide tangible ways to amplify the decent work for women movement.

ONN will be launching two how-to guides to help organizations understand fair wages and benefits through a GBA+ lens as well as help workers advocate for themselves. *Maternity and parental leave top-ups: How we can do better in Ontario's nonprofit sector* is one guide that shares what a "top-up" is, its value, and various policy examples from the sector. The *A gender-based intersectional approach to compensation practices in nonprofits* highlights compensation practices that affect women.

Building a stronger women's economic empowerment movement that includes the voices of women working in non-profits is possible. Rather, it is already happening and now is the opportunity to grow it.

## References

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[1] ONN uses an inclusive definition of women that recognizes and welcomes trans women, queer women and nonbinary people. While people who identify with the LGBTQ community, such as Trans Women, experience unequal outcomes in the broader labour market, we were unable to draw conclusions on their experiences in the nonprofit sector because not many participated in the research activities.

[2] The term “women-majority” will be used rather than “women-dominated” because, although the sector consists predominantly of women workers, women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions.

[3] See: [The Department of Women and Gender Equality \(2018\)](#); [Kimberley Crenshaw \(1989\)](#)

[4] See: [Race to Lead: Confronting the Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap](#); [2018 GuideStar Nonprofit Compensation Report](#)

[5] See: [Austin et al](#); [Baines et al 2017](#); [International Labour Organization 2018](#); [Kühn](#)

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et al 2017; [Moyser \(2017\)](#)