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Equal Minds, Equal Education

The Wage Gap and Women in Non-traditional Fields of Study

The Unequal Workforce

In the 1970s, women's participation in post-secondary education increased significantly. Women have been earning at least half of undergraduate degrees awarded in Canada since 1980.[1] This new, although still limited, access to education gave way to the entry of women into many fields of work where they had seldom been represented.

Table 2 - Female Participation in Selected Occupations, 1991 and 2001

Occupation	% women 1991	2001	Change
Secretary	98.6	97.9	-0.7
Dental Hygienist	95.8	97.8	2.0
Babysitter or Nanny	97.4	95.0	-2.4
Registered Nurse	95.1	94.2	-0.9
Cashier	88.6	85.9	-2.7
Elementary School Teacher	81.8	82.7	0.9
Hairstylist/Barber	78.9	82.1	3.2
Librarian	82.0	81.1	-0.9
Food and Beverage Server	80.1	79.7	-0.4
Physiotherapist	84.5	79.6	-4.9
Social Worker	74.1	79.4	5.3
College Instructor	49.6	51.3	1.7
University Professor	28.5	35.5	7.0
Lawyer	27.0	34.4	4.4
Dentist	15.7	27.4	11.7
Paramedic	20.3	26.1	5.8
Chef	18.7	20.5	2.8
Architect	18.6	20.1	1.5
Engineer	6.1	9.7	3.6
Pilot	3.4	5.2	2.8
Carpenter	1.4	1.5	0.1
Plumber	0.7	1.3	0.6

Source: 1991 Census & 2001 Census - Statistics Canada

However, beyond the initial breakthrough into elite fields such as medicine and law, many high-paying professions are still dominated largely by men (see Table 1). Conversely, most low-income, low job security occupations are still "feminised".

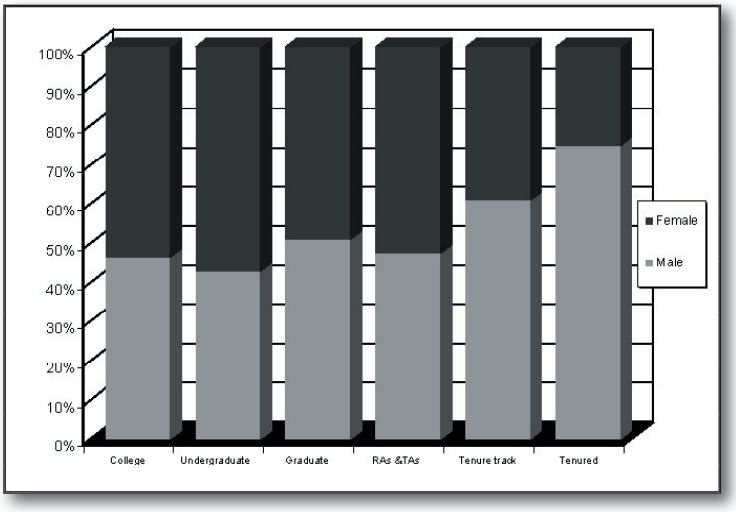
The Wage Gap

Although estimates of the difference in average earnings between men and women ("wage gap") differ by source and methodology, the most recent data from Statistics Canada shows that women earn 80 cents for every dollar earned by men.[2] When examined on a full-time, full-year basis, women's gross earnings were $33,774 in 2000, or 71.7% of men's yearly earnings.

Contributing Factors and Sexism

Several factors have been found to contribute to the wage gap. Sixty-two percent of the wage gap can be explained by characteristics of the individual worker, workplace, or occupation. For example, work experience and type of occupation accounted for 24% of pay inequity. An additional 18% of the wage gap can be explained by holding the workplace characteristics constant. The clustering of women in low-wage industries accounts for the remaining 20%, leaving 38% of the wage gap "unexplained".

It is this portion that is often interpreted as sexism in the workplace. Yet an examination of the "explained" factors contributing to the wage gap also suggest inequitable practices, not some accident of the marketplace. The feminisation of low-wage industries has occured to a large extent because work traditionally done by women is under-valued,[4] and therefore most often under-compensated. Also, sexism in the promotion process is likely to lead to fewer women in experienced and managerial positions. Work experience is cited above as an "explained" phenomenon (i.e. apolitical), but it is clearly a very gendered characteristic.



In 1998/1999, only 13.5% of graduate students in engineering and applied sciences and 33.9% in mathematics and physical sciences were women.

Education: Social Equaliser?

Public education is considered to be a great social equaliser. Education levels have been strongly correlated with most quality of life indicators, from future earnings to health.

In recent years, enrolment of women at the college, university undergraduate, and university graduate levels has reached a point where women comprise the majority of students on campus (see Figure 1).

Despite these gains, women make up less than 40% of tenure track faculty members, and 25% of the tenured faculty members at universities in Canada (see Figure 1). While women take up the majority of lower-paid teaching and research assistant positions, over 75% of higher-paid tenured faculty are men..[5]

On average, female faculty members earn less than their male counterparts across *all faculties* (see Table 2). With an average of just over 26% female faculty in 1999, Canada lags behind the average of 34% among the industralised countries that make up the OECD.

Women in Non-traditional Fields

The Statistics Canada Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics data from 1998 shows that only 20% of professionals employed in the natural sciences, engineering and mathematics are women.

Disparities among students, especially within engineering and the applied sciences are marked. In 1998/1999, only 13.5% of graduate students in engineering and applied sciences and 33.9% in mathematics and physical sciences were women.

A study of renewal rates among male and female students revealed that women who began studies in engineering and applied sciences were more likely than men to leave the programme after the first year, partly because of a "poor fit" between their values and expectations and the values and practices of the educational environment[7]

Although women are well-represented in post-graduate degree programmes, there are still close to half as many women as men with doctoral degrees.[8]

Education can indeed be a great social equaliser. Women with a university degree are able to significantly reduce the gender/income gap, and more women than ever are enrolled in higher education.Yet twelve percent of women have university degrees compared with 14% of men, and only 5% of Aboriginal women, the group in Canada most likely to live in poverty, have a university degree.[9]

Table 1 - Average Full-time Canadian University Teachers' Salaries by Subject and Gender (all ranks) 2001-2002

	Education/ Éducation	Fine & Applied Arts/Beaux-arts et arts appliqués	Humanities & Related/ Sciences humanies et disciplines connexes	Social Sciences & Related/ Sciences sociale et connexes	Agricultural & Biological Sciences/ Agronomie et sciences biologiques	Engineering and Applied Sciences/ Génie et sciences appliquées	Health Professions & Occupations/ Professions de la santé	Mathmatics & the Physical Sciences/ Mathématique et sciences physiques	Specialisation Not Reported/ Spécialisation s non déclarées	*All Subjects Combined/ Tous les sujets combinés*
Male/hommes	$82,148	$79,266	$82,034	$89,089	$85,388	$89,283	$84,805	$87,080	$75,177	$86,260
Female/femmes	$74,754	$70,312	$70,813	$75,813	$74,941	$75,941	$73,213	$74,115	$64,859	$73,781
Both Sexes Combined/ Tous les sexes combinés	$78,807	$75,994	$77,827	$85,061	$82,745	$88,016	$76,165	$85,439	$72,494	$82,536

Source: Statistics Canada/ Statistique Canada & the Canadian Association of University Teachers/ l'Association Canadienne des professeures et professeurs universitaires

"*Higher education is correlated with higher incomes for both men and women, but men benefit far more from their education. 59% of Canadian men with university degrees had incomes over $32,367 compared with only 36% of women*."

- Karen Hadley, *And We Still Ain't Satisfied: Gender Inequality in Canada*,s a study commissioned by the National Action Committee on Status of Women (2001)

Conclusions

As is the case with the wage gap, gender segregation by field of study appears to persist because of entrenched sexism.

Improving overall access to higher education for all, by eliminating financial and social barriers, must be prioritised as a means of reducing the wage gap.

Additional funding for support services, mentorship programmes, promotions and faculty hirings, all with a focus on improving women's participation in non-traditional fields may also contribute to reducing the gender gap in academia.

Societal attitudes and stereotypes, starting from early childhood development, while more difficult to change than public policy, must also be addressed.