

Parkland Post Article: 2009 Spring/Summer

Title: Gender inequality to blame for the low wages of Calgary women: Income disparity harms families and can prevent women from leaving abusive situations

Writer: Sarah Newman PhD Candidate

665 words

### **Gender inequality to blame for the low wages of Calgary women: Income disparity harms families and can prevent women from leaving abusive situations**

Last December, for the first time since 2006, Statistics Canada reported an increase in the number of Calgarians failing to earn a living wage. The study found that since 2008, 7,300 more women and 600 more men were low-wage earners. Women now make up almost two-thirds of the 65,000 low-wage earners in Calgary and 65 per cent of these female low-wage earners are over 20 years of age.

Women's low wages detrimentally affect the lives of men, too. Think of the sons of single mothers who struggle to pay the rent and put food on the table, or laid-off husbands forced to subsist on their wife's low income. There are also countless fathers or brothers who either depend upon, or help support, women with low-wage jobs. Women's low-wages should not be understood as a 'woman's issue', but rather should be understood as something that negatively affects us all.

When women receive less, they make less for themselves and their loved ones. Most families in Canada now rely on two incomes, since dual-earners now account for three-quarters of all couples with dependent children—up from just over one-third in 1976. This income is not used to simply supplement the family income; families increasingly rely on women's wages to make ends meet. Statistics Canada reports that in 2008, most dual-earner wives contributed almost 45 per cent of total family earnings.

With the current economic slowdown women have become key contributors to family income. This last year, Statistics Canada reported negative employment growth in most male-dominated industries in Alberta, such as manufacturing (-9.6 per cent) and construction (-8.0 per cent), which means many women have become the sole breadwinner for their families. Women now make up almost half of the employed workforce in Alberta, yet average hourly wage of women in Alberta was lower than for men across all age groups.

Wage discrimination against women has tangible and negative effects not only on the lives of women, but on their families. These families are unable to pay for basic necessities such as utilities and healthy food choices. The Calgary Interfaith Food Bank reported that during March 2009, 80 per cent more people used their services than in March 2008. Mortgages and rent become impossible to pay, leaving our local shelters to provide housing for these women and their families. Children's education becomes too much of a financial burden, resulting in high dropout rates among children from low-income families and a dramatically lower numbers of students from low-income families attaining post-secondary. After a lifetime of work, with no pension and no savings, these female low-wage workers will not be able to retire.

Wage discrimination is particularly dire for women trying to leave an abusive relationship or who are single and the sole supporters of their families. Several research studies have established that women who are economically dependent on their partners are less likely to leave an abusive partner; the more economically dependent women are, the more violence they tend to endure from abusive partners. The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters reports that Alberta leads the provinces in domestic assault, homicide-suicide, stalking and is third in domestic homicide. Once these women do finally leave an abusive relationship, they are often faced with poverty. In 2004, Statistics Canada found that female-headed households were more than twice as likely to be poor than male-headed households.

Gender should not be a barrier to earning a living wage. The consequences are far-reaching and long-lasting, and impact women, their families and the health of society at large. If you'd like to learn more about how individuals and employers can help establish a Living Wage in Calgary, please e-mail [info@vibrantcalgary.com](mailto:info@vibrantcalgary.com).

*Sarah Newman is the Project Coordinator at Vibrant Communities Calgary, an organization aiming to increase the social, economic and political engagement of Calgarians. For more information about Vibrant Communities Calgary, please visit [www.vibrantcalgary.com](http://www.vibrantcalgary.com).*