

ONTARIO PAY EQUITY RESULTS FOR CUPE SERVICE WORKERS IN ONTARIO HOSPITALS:

A STUDY OF UNEVEN BENEFITS

WRITTEN BY JANE STINSON





This paper is based on a longer study entitled: “Ontario Pay Equity Results for CUPE Service Workers in Ontario Hospitals: A Study of Uneven Benefits” by Jane Stinson, Master’s Thesis, Carleton University, Ontario, Canada, 1999.

About the Author: Jane Stinson worked at the national office of the Canadian Union of Public Employees for 30 years (1979-2009) as a researcher, member educator, facilitator, director and staff trainer, strategic planner, and more. She held senior staff positions as Research & Job Evaluation Director, Managing Director of National Services and Managing Director of Union Development.

Equality for women in all their diversity has been a key theme of Jane’s work. She did ground-breaking research on pay equity and privatization examining how Ontario pay equity legislation affected CUPE hospital workers and she documented the drastic impacts of contracting out health care services on women’s lives.

In recent years Jane has been active in the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) as co-lead of the Feminist Northern Network involving women in an action research project on resource development, investigating the impacts of Changing Public Services on diverse women as workers and users of public services, as CRIAOW liaison in rethinking feminist policies for women and in advancing knowledge about intersectionality in theory and practice.

Jane enjoys time with her family and friends, travel, horseback riding, dancing and listening to live music. She was honoured to be named one of the 75 most inspiring alumni by Carleton University Faculty of Public Affairs for their 75th anniversary in 2017.

About the Publisher: Public Services International (PSI) is a global trade union federation representing 20 million working women and men who deliver vital public services in 154 countries. PSI champions human rights, advocates for social justice and promotes universal access to quality public services. PSI works with the United Nations system and in partnership with labour, civil society and other organisations

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Foreword

Public Services International (PSI) is reviving a debate about pay equity presented in the study entitled: “Ontario Pay Equity Results for CUPE Service Workers in Ontario Hospitals: A Study of Uneven Benefits” written by Jane Stinson, a Canadian political economist, two decades ago.

PSI thanks Jane for summarizing in 2018 sections of the original study and providing key updates that demonstrate that the subject, the theoretical framework, the results and the ways forward proposed by the study remain relevant for current economic debates and gender justices struggles.

The 61st session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW61) in 2017 heralded a new wave for eliminating the gender pay gap. Since then, UN agencies have called upon governments and civil society to join their efforts and trade unions are key players in this campaign.

PSI has a long history of raising consciousness, advocating and putting in place concrete actions to close the gender pay gap in the public sector. Despite mostly incomplete results, we have continued to expose the devaluation of women’s labour, the difference between the social value of labour in general and the social value of the labour that reproduces life, and the specific function that reproductive work plays in gender subordination, invisible to the economy, but fundamental for its sustenance.

In many countries, public employment deeply reflects the horizontal and vertical segregation of women workers. Sectors and occupations in public services that are linked to production are better paid than those linked to care services. Most women stay at the bottom of the labour pyramid and are concentrated in occupations that deal with care and reproduction of life.

Stinson’s contribution for a new intersectional approach on pay equity and its transformative proposal demands wage justice and wage solidarity to build the base for a real social equality. We now invite you to participate in the debate.

Rosa Pavanelli, General Secretary

Public Services International



Introduction

This paper examines the results of the Ontario Pay Equity Act¹ (1987) for unionized female service workers in hospitals represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in the province of Ontario, Canada². Fifty-one pay equity plans negotiated in the early 1990s were gathered and analyzed to answer: How were wages and wage relations for female hospital support workers affected by the pay equity legislation? How did it affect the wages of the lowest and highest paid female job classes in the service bargaining units? Did it challenge the wage hierarchy or was it reproduced and legitimized in the process?

The Ontario Pay Equity Act was introduced after two years of intense public debate and many years of feminist organizing to get new legislation to close the gender-based wage gap by raising women's wages. At the time it was considered the strongest pay equity legislation in North America. It was a breakthrough in many respects. It introduced a pro-active approach establishing a timetable by which employers in the public and private sectors were required to complete and post pay equity plans for all employees in the workplace. Where a trade union represented the workers, employers were required to negotiate the pay equity plan with them.



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Theoretical Framework

This analysis of the result of pay equity bargaining in Ontario hospitals is viewed through a lens of feminist political economy. Feminism and political economy form a natural bond through a shared perspective on social relations. Both recognize that power relations underlie the economic structures and processes that influence social relations. As well, ideology plays a strong role in reproducing and maintaining both the social relations and the foundations that sustains them (Maroney and Luxton 1987:6). Feminist political economy considers gender divisions as fundamental and significant as class divisions. All classes are gendered and gender is fundamental to conflict within and between classes. As well, class and gender systems are inter-related and work together to reinforce each other. Analysis should seek to reveal the hidden operations of gender as well as class (Ibid:27).

Feminist analysis brings to political economy the recognition the dual aspect of social life – that it includes the realm of production and as well, social reproduction that exists on a daily basis outside of the workplace. It involves familial relations surrounding the reproduction of the next (and often former) generation as well as domestic labour needed for renewal and nurturance outside of paid work.

Feminist political economy recognizes that while a wage is determined through relations in the workplace, women's wages and the pay increase they receive through pay equity legislation are heavily influenced by women's unpaid work in the sphere of reproductive relations.

Women's paid work in hospitals bears a strong resemblance to women's unpaid domestic work. Cleaning, food preparation, laundry as well as caring for the sick accounts for much of the work of hospital support staff. This work is similar to, if not also part of the continuum of women's unpaid work in the home. The resemblance to women's unpaid domestic labour and the fact that caring for the sick does shift back and forth between paid and unpaid work, contributes to hiding the importance and difficulty of this work, which in turn has a depressing effect on the pay provided for this work.

Gender and Class in Wage Relations

Gender and class relations shape workers' wages. The wage gap between men and women continues to be one example of how the wage is gendered. In part, this is due to occupational

segregation, the different jobs and activities done by men and women in the workplace. This occupational segregation of the labour force based on sex, derives from a division of labour that separates men and women workers and reinforces traditional beliefs about masculinity and femininity. Men's jobs tend to be associated with technical skills or physical strength whereas women's jobs are seen to require patience, repetition and attention to detail or mirror the type of unpaid work women do in the home. The gendered separation of tasks performed by men and women in the workplace emphasizes differences based on gender and combines with the hierarchical ordering of the workplace in which men tend to earn higher wages. It reinforces notions of female subordination and male superiority.

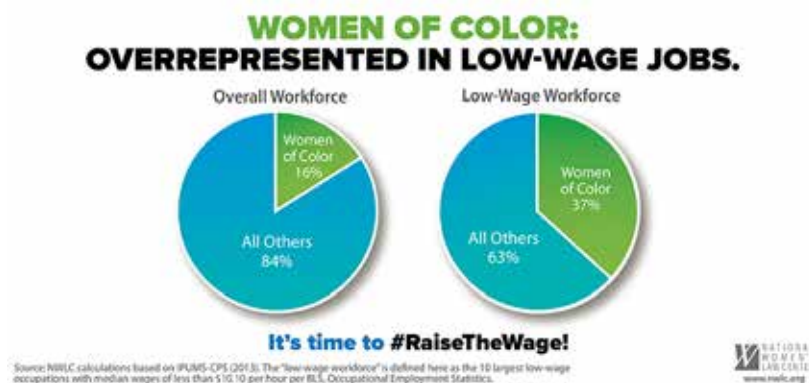
The hierarchical ordering of wages in the workplace is not based only on gender relations. It is also based on class relations (Acker 1989:20). Power relations between workers and employers determine the value of the wage. Class position is relational and dynamic, produced, reproduced and

potentially transformed through dynamic social relations involving material and ideological aspects. Class is not just a function of where workers are in the process and relations of production. It



also involves class consciousness through recognition of common situation and common interests and primarily develops through struggle to constitute an organized class and defend its class interests (Miliband 1977:22).

The inter-relationship of class and gender relations helps to explain women's location in female-dominated occupations that are typically clustered toward the bottom of the workplace hierarchy. The wage setting process associated with pay equity provides a valuable avenue for analyzing and understanding the reproduction of gendered class situations. Analyzing pay equity efforts that seek to change the practices that produce inequality can expose some of the ways inequality is embedded and reproduced in everyday social relations. Efforts to change women's position in the wage hierarchy in the workforce can reveal resistance from class relations (management resisting higher wages for women's work) and gender relations (men believing their work is work more) (Acker 1989:5).



Incorporating Race

Class and gender are directly confronted in pay equity efforts, but not race. Yet it is clear that the workforce is also racialized. Different racial and ethnic groups tend to be located in distinct occupational clusters or sometimes in distinct work groups within an occupation. The connection between the racialized character of the workforce and gender-based inequities in pay has not received sufficient attention.

Race is a social construction, not a biological one. It is relational – a social boundary drawn on the basis of otherness or difference arising from characteristics like skin colour, physical features, hair type or colour. It involves social processes of self-identification and labelling by others. The social construction and identification of racial or ethnic groups as different is often used to justify subordinate social and economic status.

The analysis of gender, class and race as inter-related is an important theoretical development, now referred to as intersectional analysis. Analysis should focus on identifying the particular ways in which gender, race and class inter-relate in particular contexts at a specific historical time.

A Stratified and Segmented Labour Market

Underlying imbalances of power shape the market. Markets exist within a capitalist economic system that is inherently unequal. Workers, by virtue of having to sell their labour for wages, are less equal than those who own capital or the means of production. On top of these class forces are layered gender, racial and ethnic forces that also shape the distribution of wages in a capitalist labour market. Overt and systemic discrimination help to explain the unequal distribution of wages and occupational opportunities available to some workers in the labour market.

Differences based on class, gender and race in society create an inherent tension that separates and divides workers. In fact, employers often use or build on these differences in structuring organizations to separate workers on the basis of differences into different occupational groups. Or within occupations into different areas of work, different shifts or slightly different tasks. These differences are often used to justify pay differences that serve to lower overall labour costs. Yet at the same time these workers are part of a total, unified system, for example as part of the total

labour process in an establishment or as part of a collective organization such as a trade union. These structurally inbuilt means of separating the workforce by sex, race, occupation, location in the organizational hierarchy and pay scales also helps to maintain the whole unified system of a capitalist mode of production (Harvey, Keat and Urry).



Implications of this theoretical framework

This theoretical framework calls attention to the fact that gender, class and race are all implicated in the segmented structure of the labour market and in the hierarchical structuring of workplaces. The wage that reflects that hierarchy is not only the outcome of gender and class relations, it is also racialized.

The extent to which and the way in which individuals and trade unions challenge unequal wages will vary depending on what is perceived as the primary problem (gender, class or racial inequities) or whether these are seen as inter-related. That perception will be influenced both by material conditions (the nature of occupational segregation or the nature and extent of pay inequities) and the conceptualization of the problem. Analysis of pay equity efforts need an analytical framework that encompasses the three dimensions of gender, class and race.



The Liberal Conception of Pay Equity

Pay equity is based on a liberal notion of equality. Equity became equated with female jobs being paid the same rate as male jobs of equal or comparable value (Armstrong and Armstrong 1990:37). Liberal notions of equality are also based on assumptions of:

- a hierarchical ordering of society providing differential rewards for those occupying different positions in the hierarchy;
- competition as an important motivator for individuals to aspire to higher positions, and
- a meritocratic system where those at the top, earning more, are considered the best and most deserving of preferential rewards (Brenner 1987:447-451).

Fairness is believed to exist when there is a just distribution of individuals within a hierarchy based on their individual qualities not their gender, race or class.

Pay equity reinforces this dominant ideology when it does not question the market as a fair arbiter of wages and attempts to remove discrimination from the market by using methods like job evaluation to recognize and measure previously neglected skills of women workers, because it still relies on the prevailing dollar value of comparable male work, which is determined through the labour market (Brenner 1987:457).

Pay equity in Canada has largely come to mean comparing predominantly female to male jobs to determine equal value through a job evaluation system, which may or may not be gender neutral. But equating pay equity with a job evaluation system of

comparison masks the inequality embedded in a wage structure. Calling the outcome equal and fair then reinforces and legitimizes the wage hierarchy and structured inequality that is based on gender and class discrimination embedded in the labour market (Warskett 1991:189).

Pay equity in Canada is rooted in early support for the ILO convention of “equal pay for work of equal value”. But equal value to what and value to whom were questions that were not widely debated. Instead a liberal feminist notion that women should be treated equally to men was assumed, that fails to recognize the class inequality and disadvantage that exists for men in the labour market. As well, there is an assumption that discrimination affects all women equally, failing to recognize privileges and disadvantages due to class or race (Warskett 1991).

The Role of Job Evaluation in Pay Equity

Job evaluation, which is often at the heart of comparable worth and most pay equity plans can lead to a number of problems. The primary concern is that it can legitimate inequities in pay if all parties agree that the method has been fair and produced an equitable outcome that is a reflection of differential merit. It can exacerbate hierarchies in women’s jobs, it can reinforce a continuation of large inequalities by race and it can create class or gender divisions by concluding that certain occupations are “overpaid”. While offering an attractive solution to a persistent problem, it may reinforce differences among women and between women and men that will make future collective campaigns difficult (Brenner 1987:458-461).

In part, problems stem from the fact that job evaluation plans tend to reflect both class and gender biases. They are usually built on a premise of value to the employer, thereby reflecting a class bias, for example by valuing complexity, decision-making and responsibilities more highly than jobs providing care and service (Steinberg 1990:46).

A job evaluation process for pay equity does offer positive potential to recognize and thereby value previously invisible tasks and skills performed by women workers, if not also to challenge managerial values. Making the characteristics of women’s work more visible in job descriptions can give women’s jobs higher value in a job evaluation plan. But unless the specific plan remedies class and gender bias, the process can simply create a legitimate and believable system of inequality (Acker 1988:62).

But even under the best circumstances, where women’s skills are recognized and highly valued through a gender-neutral job evaluation system of comparison, this method will not necessarily unite workers around the common outcome of higher pay for women workers or gain support for this outcome. This is because job evaluation is premised on recognizing and rewarding differences between workers to determine their location in a stratified, hierarchical compensation structure. As well, it is often conducted in a highly technical way where many workers don’t fully understand the reasons for a particular outcome. Yet another problem arises in

the final phase of job evaluation in which point values are translated into wage rates. The potential to dramatically alter wages is limited by comparison to the existing labour market value of wages in which class and gender biases are deeply entrenched. The job evaluation method is used to re-value and re-rank jobs in order to arrive at a new internal equity. However, the new wage rates are established to be consistent with external equity – what similar jobs are paid in the market (Feldberg 1987:249).



The results of Pay Equity Bargaining for CUPE Ontario Hospital Workers

Hospitals are an important site for analyzing the effects of pay equity legislation because hospital work is largely women's work, both in real and symbolic terms. Women's paid work in hospitals, of caring for others, cleaning, preparing food and doing laundry, is much like women's unpaid work in the home. In fact, the border between this work being paid or unpaid women's work is blurred. As well, hospitals provide many jobs to women. Almost one in fifteen working women in Ontario were employed in a hospital in the early 1990s³. Hospitals are predominantly female workplaces where women account for the vast majority of hospital employees.

This research focuses on service workers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the largest bargaining agent for hospital workers in the province of Ontario, next to the Ontario Nurses Association, representing registered nurses. During this investigation, CUPE represented a broad range of hospital occupations including staff in housekeeping, dietary, laundry and central supply departments, registered nursing assistants (now called licensed practical nurses), orderlies, health care aides, maintenance, ground and trades classification as well as ambulance, registered technologists and clerical workers in some hospitals⁴.

Pay equity plans negotiated by CUPE and hospital employers between 1992-3 were gathered from 51 hospitals, representing slightly more than half of the 95 Ontario hospitals organized by CUPE at that time. Within this sample, there were 22 hospitals where both an Registered Nursing Assistant (RNA) and Aide classification existed, making comparisons between the top and bottom of the wage scale possible. As well, 12 interviews were conducted with local union activists and staff representatives who had been involved in pay equity negotiations.

What was the effect of pay equity on wage relations?

The analysis of pay equity plans sought to answer how wages and wage relations for female hospital support workers were affected by application of the Pay Equity Act and in particular, how the wages of the lowest and highest paid female job classes in the service bargaining units were affected. Further, did it have a transformative effect, challenging the wage hierarchy and women's location in it or the value of women's work in the hospitals?

The value of pay equity increases varied by job class since the Act called for a job-to-job comparison between predominantly female job classes and predominantly male job classes of equivalent value. Therefore, two benchmark job classes were selected for this study to analyze the value of the pay equity wage increase. A common job class at the bottom of the wage scale was selected – the Aide – as well as one at the top of the wage scale – the Registered Nursing Assistant (now called Licensed Practical Nurse). RNAs were consistently the highest paid, predominantly female classification in the CUPE service bargaining units. At the time RNAs required a Secondary School Diploma and a three semester Community College program which included clinical experience. RNAs must register with the College of Nurses of Ontario who provide regulations on the scope of duties an RNA can perform which includes much of the bedside nursing care.

There were many more predominantly female job classifications among the lowest paid in the CUPE hospital service units. Aide was selected as the most common, bottom benchmark female classification. Many hospitals had many different types of Aides (housekeeping, dietary, laundry) but they tended to be paid the same. Aide positions did not require any formal qualifications other than basic literacy. Where there were differences in pay, the Housekeeping Aide (a cleaner) was chosen as the benchmark for analysis since it was the most common classification across hospitals and tended to be the lowest paid Aide.

Value of Pay Equity Raises

Pay equity wage increases for hospital Aides ranged from zero to \$1.46 an hour – a difference of almost \$3,000 a year. The vast majority of pay equity adjustments for Aides were well under \$1.00 and in eight cases no pay equity increase was provided for Aides at all. Many more Aides than RNAs were denied a pay equity increase, usually on the ground that there was no male comparator or that no pay equity adjustment was required with the male comparator. Most Aides received pay equity increases around the average value of 57 cents an hour or almost \$1,200 annually.

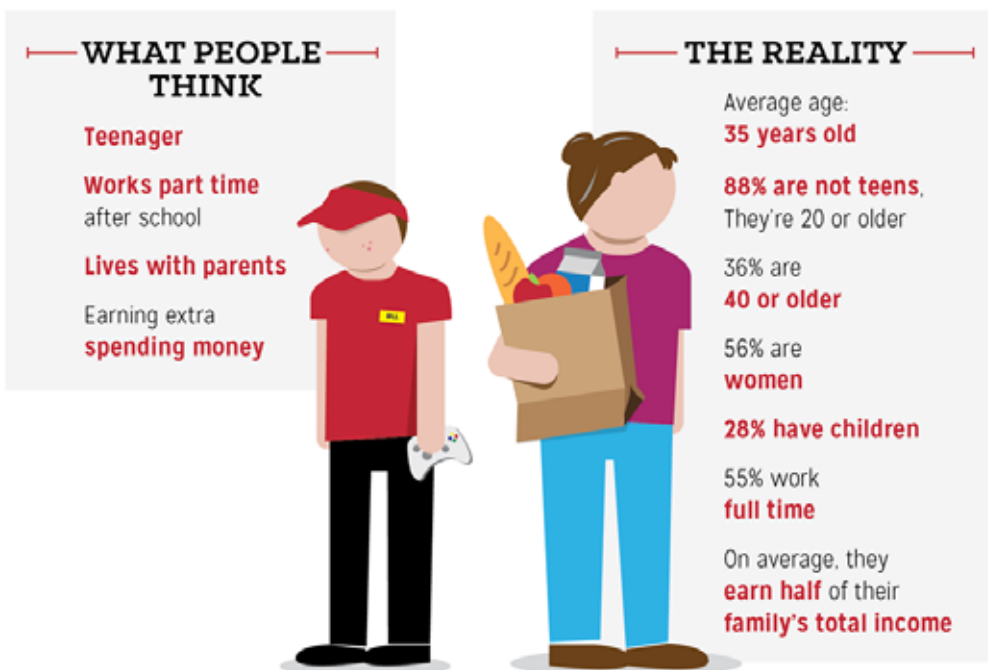
On average, RNs received a pay equity increase of \$1.72 an hour, representing an adjustment of 12.8% to their wage rate. But the average masks the tremendous variation in pay equity increases for this job classification from hospital to hospital, ranging from

zero (where there was no male comparator) to \$3.57 where an Electrician was the male comparator – a range of over \$6,800 annually. Almost half of the pay equity plans provided an increase ranging from \$1.50-\$2.50 an hour for RNAs.

Registered Nursing Assistants represented by CUPE in Ontario lost a standard hourly rate through the application of the Pay Equity Act. Prior to pay equity RNAs were paid the same in all CUPE hospitals across the province of Ontario. Pay equity introduced wide variability in the RNA wage rate because of the use of different job classifications for male comparators and differences in the rate for the same male comparator from hospital to hospital. The provincial wage rate for RNAs was a unique example of wage solidarity for this female job class since it did not distinguish between the specific duties of the job that could vary from hospital to hospital or by local labour market differences across the province. It emphasized sameness rather than difference. Establishing the same wage rate for RNAs across the province was a goal identified by the Union and achieved through negotiations over time. As one union activist said:

“We worked for years to develop a standard rate to overcome forms of very obvious systematic discrimination between the RNA and the Orderly rates. And having done that, we’ve now used pay equity to get these great disparities in the rates of one similar classification.”

WHO’S HELPED BY RAISING THE MINIMUM WAGE?



Note: Statistics describe civilian workers, ages 16+, that would be affected by an increase in the federal minimum wage to \$10.10 over three years, as explained in *Raising the federal minimum wage to \$10.10 would give working families, and the overall economy, a much-needed boost.* The median age of affected workers is 31 years old. Visit epl.org/issues/minimum-wage for more details.

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The Difference between the Top and Bottom of the Female Wage Scale

The value of the pay equity increase for Aides at the bottom of the wage grid was about one-third the average value for RNAs at the top of the wage grid in the bargaining unit. The simple average value of the pay equity increase for Aides was 4.7% compared to the simple average value of 12.8% for the RNAs.

There were many reasons why women at the bottom of the wage grid got less money from pay equity than their higher paid sisters in the bargaining unit. This includes the absence and low pay of male comparators at the bottom end of the wage scale, the value of women's work compared to men's (gender bias), class and market forces, as well as the desire (or lack of it) to use the Pay Equity Act to challenge and transform wage relations.

Finding a higher paid male job class of equivalent value was crucial for women to win higher pay under the Ontario pay equity legislation since this is how the Act defined the achievement of pay equity. The difference in pay for male comparators at the bottom end of the pay scale was not nearly as great as the difference in pay for male job classes at the top end of the pay scale.

The main explanation for the lower value of pay equity increases for Aides was that the wages of their male comparators were not much higher than their own. Less skilled male wages were low because hospitals are predominantly female workplaces where the historic undervaluing of women's work has spilled over to depress the wages of men employed there as well. The Pay Equity Act constrained comparisons to the wages of the male hospital workers near the bottom of the wage grid in the same establishment.

As well, market forces, reinforcing traditional, gender-biased skill values and class-based wage inequities also shaped the outcome. Male comparator job classes at the bottom of the wage scale in the

hospitals are considered unskilled or semi-skilled work whereas the male job classes at the top end such as electrician, mechanic or engineer are considered skilled work and skilled trades. Hospitals, like other employers, know they must offer wage rates comparable to those paid elsewhere in the local labour market to recruit and retain these workers. The external market comparison for skilled trades have higher wages. In contrast, the external labour market comparisons for male classifications at the bottom of the hospital hierarchy of cleaners, laundry workers and porters exert a downward pressure on their wages since they are in the largely non-union, private sector such as the hotel and hospitality industry with even lower wages.

Many different job classes were considered comparable to the female RNA reflecting the differing selection of male comparators from hospital to hospital. But RNAs generally compared to the top paid male job classification in the bargaining unit, usually a skilled trade, where they were employed by the hospital. In hospitals who did not employ skilled trades, the pay equity increase for RNAs was considerably smaller.

In summary, RNAs benefited much more from the pay equity legislation than did the Aides on average, in part because of the presence of higher paid equivalently valued male comparators in the same establishment.





Effect of Pay Equity on Women's Wage Relations

The pay equity legislation was successful in closing the gap between men's and women's wages for selected job classes within a particular hospital. But while it narrowed the pay gap between some female and male jobs, it also widened the pay gap between the women workers studies because women in job classes at the top of the wage scale tended to leap further ahead as they received a pay equity increase that was on average three times the value of what the lowest paid female job class got.

Gender, class and race relations influenced this outcome. Gender relations affected the outcome through the failure to place a higher value on paid hospital work of cleaning, food preparation, doing dishes and laundry, so similar to women's unpaid domestic and caring work in the home. Class relations influenced the low point scores contained in job evaluation plans awarded to positions at the bottom of the wage hierarchy with few recognized skills and no supervisory responsibilities. Race relations also influence how jobs are viewed and valued, especially where the majority of employees in the job are workers of colour.

One of the limitations of the Ontario pay equity legislation is its narrow definition and scope³. It only seeks to correct the portion of the pay gap that is due to gender discrimination, yet gender, class and race all work together in an interconnected way to influence wages and depress wages for women workers. Wage relations

represent a complex set of social relations including gender, class and race relations. The problem is that by just focusing on the gender relations aspect, the interconnected elements of class and race relations are missed. While there is a need to highlight the gender dimension, the challenge is how to do so without losing the connection to the other elements that influence wages.

Male wages, used as the standard or definition for achieving pay equity are not a neutral norm. They reflect a history of unequal power relations as well. While pay equity legislation may remove or correct some gender discrimination in wages by closing the pay gap between specific male and female job classes, it does little to narrow the overall pay gap between the lowest and highest paid workers. It thereby helps to perpetuate the gender-based wage gap since women tend to be concentrated in the lowest-paid classifications.

The effect of the pay equity legislation was more a matter of slotting women into another place in the existing wage hierarchy than challenging and changing the wage hierarchy itself. It did little to fundamentally challenge the existence or parameters of the hierarchical distribution of wages in the workplace. Given the importance of the male comparator in this legislation, it effectively pegged women's wages within the existing male wage hierarchy at the spot deemed equivalent in value.

In many ways the pay equity process did replicate and reinforce the male wage hierarchy with women hospital workers, rather than challenge or revamp it. Rather than compressing the differences in pay, with a greater emphasis on improving the wages of the lowest paid, the differences in pay between female workers widened with those at the top of the wage scale moving further ahead. In other words, Ontario's pay equity legislation added to the stratification of the female labour force by being of greater economic value to higher paid women workers.

This case study illustrates the limits of the feminist notion of equality based on equality with a male norm. It points to the need to construct a new model of equality which asserts the need for improving wages for all workers, recognizing that gender, class and racial power relations shape wages.

An alternative approach: Wage Justice or Wage Solidarity

Pay equity, comparable worth and equal pay for work of equal value are all based on a liberal approach where women's equality is defined in terms of a pre-existing male norm. What is really needed in order to significantly increase women's wages, especially for the lowest paid, is to radically shift the premise of wage equality. One problem with the current premise of pay equity is that it is based on a market valuation of wages. Yet male labour market wage rates are inherently unequal reflecting class and racial biases as well as the effect of gender bias in predominantly female establishment. The premise should be shifted to economic justice and compensation based on need as well as the value of women's work. Value is a useful concept to use to expose the gender biases in failing to recognize the contribution and importance of work performed by women, especially that similar to women's unpaid domestic labour. But it should not be the sole consideration.

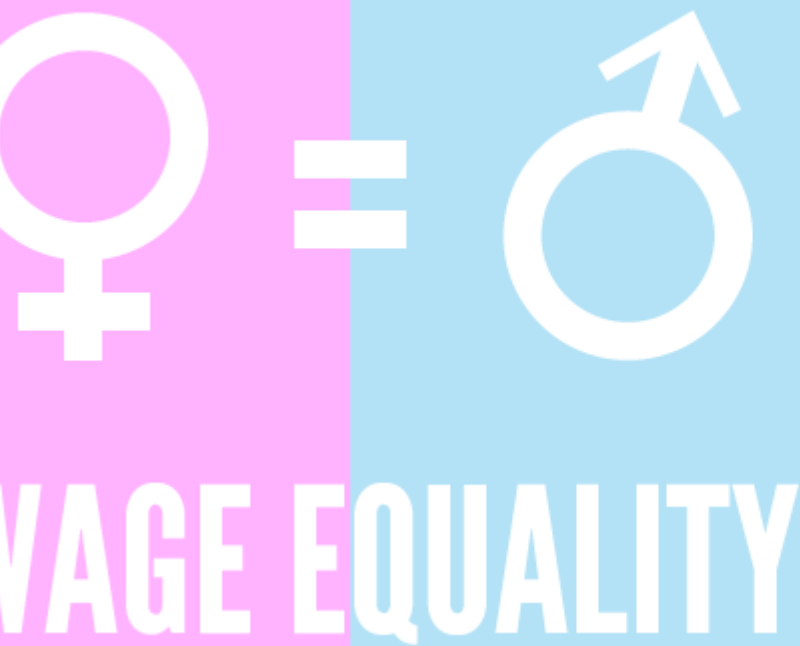
There are many advantages to shifting the premise and strategies used to raise wages for women workers. We need methods to ensure that the lowest paid women workers derive at least an equal share of the benefits. Our pay equity goals should include compressing the differences in pay in the wage hierarchy between the lowest and highest paid, primarily by raising the wages at the bottom of the wage scale. Reorienting our goals in this way would ensure that the majority of women benefit significantly from legislative efforts since the majority of women workers are employed at or close to the bottom of the wage scale. Because wages are set in relational context, focusing on raising wages for the lowest paid women would help to exert an upward pressure on other wages.

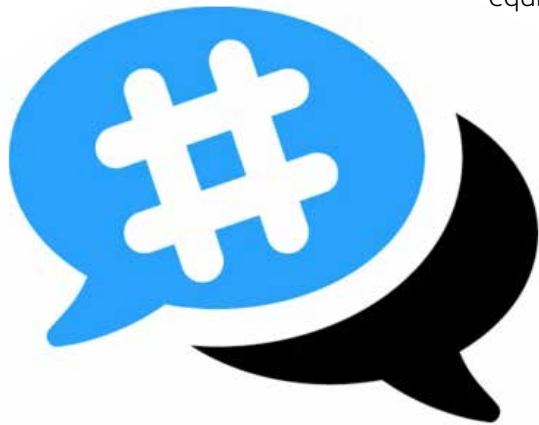
We also need to find a method that unites male and female workers in closing the wage gap between men's and women's wages. The method used to achieve wage equity needs to contribute to developing an understanding and commitment to transforming wage relations. Otherwise, those who support the old patterns and traditional values will simply try to recreate their former wage advantage. To develop broad-based support and commitment to change there should be shared benefits and a better understanding of and commitment to the wage goals. The goal should be one of achieving more egalitarian wage relations. A progressive union strategy needs to use the power of all its members, female and male, to reduce pay differences particularly by raising the wages of the lowest paid. This approach has been called "wage solidarity" (Warksett 1990: 57).

The Swedish trade union movement pursued a solidaristic wage policy from the 1950s into the 1980s which established the narrowest male/female wage gap in any industrialized country with women earning on average 91% of the average male wage in the late 1980s⁶. Canadian examples of a wage solidarity approach pre-date the introduction of pay equity legislation. This includes raising the bottom wages by establishing a minimum wage for union members (the public sector Quebec Common Front in the 1970s, CUPE's Ontario Council of Hospital Unions in the mid-80s) and by negotiating an equal base wage rate between predominantly female and male entry-level classifications, as CUPE in British Columbia tried to do when they sought to boost the lowest paid women's wages in municipalities and school boards (Errington 1981).

Unequal wages need to be addressed on a system-wide basis, for example at least at a sectoral basis rather than at the level of a particular hospital or within a specific bargaining unit within a hospital. Ultimately equality does not occur in one workplace since that level of change is insufficient to change the market valuation of wages. Communication and education about the previously unrecognized elements and value of women's work is crucial to promote an understanding of the historic undervaluing of women's work and contribute to a better understanding of why women's wages should increase.

Lower pay for women workers was built on the ideology that men are the main breadwinners and as such the primary male wage earner needed a "family wage" to be able to support a family on just his earnings (Steinberg 1990:458). But this argument is certainly not true today as two salaries are needed to support a family and as growing number of women bear the sole responsibility for the family income as single-parents. Therefore, more than ever before, there are strong reasons to argue for higher wages for women on the basis of need, not only value.





Pay Up

We need to add and integrate into strategies for achieving pay equity a greater focus on meeting the financial needs of the poorest paid women. Reframing gender pay differences around wage solidarity offers the potential to foster greater class solidarity between female and male workers by placing a strong emphasis on raising wages for job classes with large numbers of lower paid women workers. Women continue to be over-represented among the lowest paid workers especially if they are Indigenous, disabled, racialized, transgendered or not unionized.

Wage solidarity policies seek to counteract the market tendency toward wage differentiation, curb excessive wage differences and produce the most egalitarian wage structure possible. It has worked best in countries with strong collective bargaining institutions that allow for national, cross-sectoral coordination of wage policy (Schulten:2001).

Work that is less skilled should be more highly valued by recognizing the contribution of those jobs to the overall production process or provision of a service. In the case of hospitals for example, good surgical techniques or nursing care will be undermined if cleaners are not doing their job. Dirty and unhygienic hospitals mean a greater risk of infection that will impede a patient's healthy recovery regardless of the quality of surgical techniques or nursing care.

To close a gender-based pay gap we also need to strive for greater economic justice for women workers that requires a broad program of action, including increasing the minimum wage, increasing full-time employment, providing affordable and accessible child care so women can freely participate in the labour market, enabling access to and strengthen collective bargaining, developing broad-based plans to close the gender pay gap, introducing representative workforce policies and more⁷.

Shifting the premise of pay equity to incorporate the notions of wage solidarity, financial need and economic justice offers the potential to challenge the assumptions inherent in a capitalist division of labour premised on dividing work into skilled and less skilled jobs to justify differential wages and lower total wage costs. This conception of pay equity offers a greater potential to move beyond simply repositioning women in the existing wage hierarchy and instead start to redefine the wage hierarchy itself in such a way as to boost the wages of the lower paid, less skilled women who are in the greatest economic need. □

Notes

1. The Ontario Pay Equity Act has been amended since but it has not changed the results analyzed here. Some of the biggest changes to the Act were to introduce proxy comparisons and proportional value comparisons for workplaces where there were no or very few male comparators, for example in the long-term health care sector (not part of this study), childcare centers and other almost exclusively female workplaces.
2. I presented my thesis findings to the Executive of CUPE's Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU) representing the subjects of this study, shortly after it was done. OCHU President Michael Hurley informed me in 2018 that:

Your research was the basis of an effort that lifted the RNA/RPN wage rate over multiple rounds of bargaining, eventually eliminating the distortions of the pay equity process, particularly on units without male comparators. The gap closed by over 30 per cent. In addition, your research was also critical to an effort to have the OHA reconsider the hospitals' approach to pay equity. Regretfully they rejected doing one provincial pay equity plan so that we could deal with the obvious problems.

In this shortened paper I concentrated on the impacts on the lowest paid in the bargaining unit. But at the top end pay equity destroyed a provincial wage rate that had taken years to establish for RNAs because of the requirement for male comparators within the establishment.

I became the director of CUPE's Job Evaluation department when it was combined with the Research Department in the early 2000s. CUPE's JE plan, called a gender-neutral comparison system, was used to address pay equity. Staff were encouraged to use it to produce a flatter wage line than the typical management JE plan that produced a wage line that looked like a banana – relatively flat at the bottom but dramatically sloping up with large wage differences for those near and at the top of the wage structure.
3. As of 2016 approximately 1 in 20 working women in Ontario were employed in a hospital and women continue to account for vast majority of hospital workers. This information is thanks to Jonah Gindin who derived it from the 2016 census, using Labour Force Survey data. The relative decline in female hospital work likely reflects hospital closures and the growth of precarious employment in the private services sector among other factors.
4. I have been able to locate only a few related Canadian studies since my thesis. One is by David B. Fairey, *An Inter-Provincial Comparison of Pay Equity Strategies and Results Involving Hospital Service & Support Workers*, revised ed. (Vancouver: Trade Union Research Bureau, Jan. 2003.). I could only find a reference, not the full study, on line. Plus Marjorie Griffen Cohen's *Destroying Pay Equity: The effects of privatizing health care in British Columbia* published by the Hospital Employees Union, 2003.
5. I am referring to the limitation of the legislation here. The Union sought to negotiate pay equity provincially for hospitals but the employer – the Ontario Hospital Association – refused to do so, despite engaging in provincial bargaining on other issues. Nothing in the legislation compelled provincial bargaining. Had it, the outcome would have been quite different. An important limitation of the legislation is in requiring comparisons with comparable male job classes within the same establishment where they exist.
6. Since the 1980s wage solidarity approaches have been challenged as neo-liberalism has taken hold. According to Swedish trade unionist Maria Östberg Svanellind wage inequality between men and women persists in Sweden in 2018. She explains that Swedish feminists have had a campaign on the 8th of March on equal pay in recent years to illustrate the gender wage gap by stating at what time working women stop getting payed compared to men. This year women's pay stops at 16.02 hours (compared to a 17.00 workday end). (This represents a 12% wage gap for an 8-hour day). When this campaign started 6-7 years ago women's end of pay time was 15.52. The gap is narrowing but it is very slow, and sectors dominated with women are of course the worst.
7. This list is partly informed by a report by Cornish 2014.

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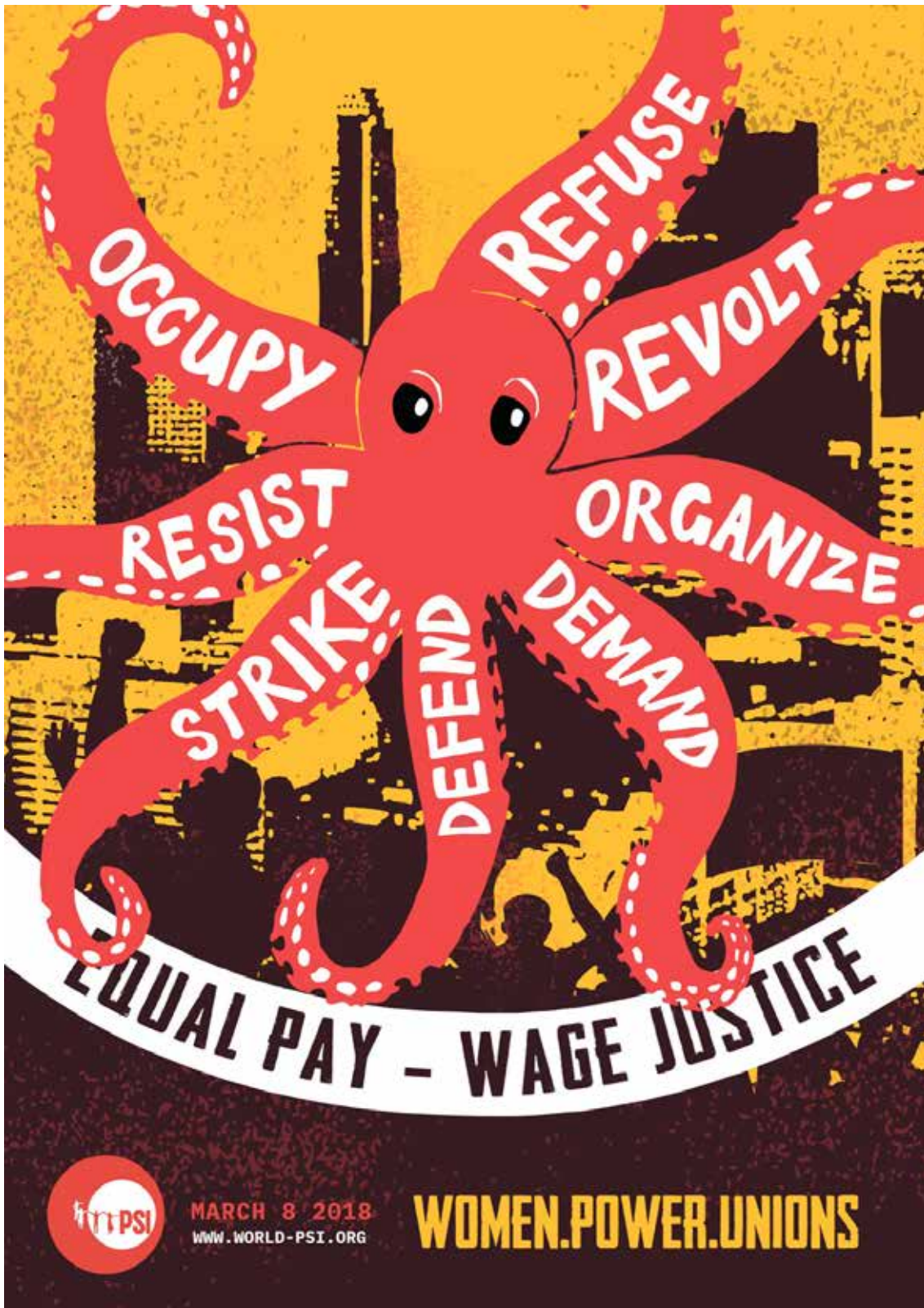
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