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Why the gender pay gap isn't a problem

By Andrea Mrozek, published March 8, 2011

Uncork the champagne. Women in Canada are doing well this International Women's Day. Freedom reigns, peace and good governance is the norm (the odd financial scandal aside); women outnumber men on university campus, have lower high-school dropout rates, lower suicide rates, and experienced less job loss in the recent recession.

Yet plenty of people, men and women, continue to fall prey to a sort of "victimitis" on behalf of women.

"In 1990, women with university degrees earned 86.8 per cent of what men with the same degree earned," writes Elizabeth Payne in the Citizen ("The gender gap is growing," March 3). "As of last year, according to Statistics Canada, women with similar degrees were earning 68.3 per cent of what their male counterparts were.

She goes on to say "much of the difference has to do with women's home lives."

Indeed.

And so her entire argument crumbles in one short sentence. Women's pay gap is the result of women's choices to have children and take time off work to raise them. It is the result of women working fewer hours than men per week, as per Statistics Canada's figures. It is the result of taking on jobs with lower pay but greater job security and bigger pensions (take nursing, as one example). In short, that magnificent entity called "the free economy" places different values on different jobs, and women are making choices within that economy. Is this a tragedy?

Let's take two working women of the same age and education. One has been in the workforce consistently, without break, since university. The other has taken time off, perhaps to be home with children. Or perhaps in an Eat, Pray, Love moment she decided to travel the world. Either way, upon returning to work, whose salary should be higher? Common sense would indicate the woman who never left the workforce should earn more, provided her performance is up to snuff.

To say that "gender wage gap" assessments are "complicated," as Payne concedes, is an understatement. These assessments must take in countless factors that pertain to personal work desires and freedom. In a free economy, some people will not have jobs, and others will earn more, while some earn less. We may view it as injustice that professional hockey players (mostly men) earn millions and teachers (mostly women) only earn thousands. But there is no public policy that could change this without irreparably harming our freedom - the very thing that makes Canada such a great place to live.

That's not to say that other western nations haven't tried. Take Sweden, which is often looked to as the home of true gender equity.

Home to high levels of publicly funded benefits, universal day care and higher percentages of women in the workforce, "gender equity" may appear to be the result, at first glance.

Looking deeper, however, the very policies designed to promote women may in fact harm them. Sweden has higher percentages of working women, sure, but mostly in the public sector, mostly part-time and, on any given day, one in five female employees is off on paid leave. Female managers make up only between 11 and 18 per cent in the private sector, as compared with 38 per cent in the United States. One British commentator, Patricia Morgan, comments that in Sweden the workforce rivals the Islamic Middle East for gender segregation.

Which raises the next point: Women in Canada should certainly turn our attention to the plight of women in societies where real discrimination against women is the norm. Societies where baby girls are aborted as routine; where women are otherwise killed "to protect a family's honour;" societies where women wear burkas, cannot travel alone, cannot go to school ... the list goes on.

Others can gripe about the lot of Canadian women until the cows come home. Me, I'll raise my glass to the freedom that all enterprising women of this fine country encounter and I'll think of the choices we enjoy as we contribute to home, family, community, business and country. Sure, sometimes there's a glitch or two, but in general? It's time to stop pretending that women are lagging in Canada.

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