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Decent work for women is essential for the future of the nonprofit sector

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AH-HA Moment



Cathy Taylor, Executive Director,
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We all benefit from decent work in the nonprofit sector. As employees, we excel when we experience fair working conditions that improve our quality of life. As employers, we attract and retain high-calibre staff (and save money!) by offering good jobs. And as a nonprofit sector, we are better able to achieve our missions contributing to our communities because decent work builds a stronger, more resilient sector.

What is decent work anyway? It is a term coined by the [International Labour Organization](#) (founded as part of the treaty ending the First World War and now a UN agency) to describe what good work looks like - fair, stable, and productive - and why good work is important for everyone. At the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) in Canada, we experimented with various frameworks to describe our vision for good work in the sector and, when we introduced the concept of “Decent Work,” it really resonated with both employers and workers. It captures a vision for building a movement and inspires actions across organizational, network and policy levels to make decent work a reality.



Pamela Uppal, Policy Advisor,
Ontario Nonprofit Network

In 2017, we started building a decent work for women movement in Canada’s nonprofit sector because we had an AH-HA moment - 80 percent of our sector’s workers identify as women. That’s approximately 1.6 million women workers across Canada and, although there is lack of data on the demographics of women workers in nonprofits, anecdotally we know many of them are Black and immigrant women. We asked ourselves - how does this knowledge change how we think about our sector’s labour force strategy, workforce development, and our commitment to build a movement for decent work?

So, we set out on a journey to first understand women’s experiences working in nonprofits and then develop and implement solutions for change.

Women are not experiencing decent work in our sector

We had conversations with academics, nonprofit leaders, and labour activists (some south of our border as well, like [Building Movement Project](#) and [Fund the People](#)) and conducted an extensive [literature review](#) - all in the areas of gender, labour, and nonprofits and at the intersection of all three. We then heard directly from over 700 women working in our sector, specifically women of colour, immigrant women, Indigenous women, women with disabilities, and women from the LGBTQ2SI community.

[Our research revealed](#) that women workers in Canada's nonprofit sector are experiencing the same barriers to economic justice that women face in other sectors. Those common barriers include racialized and gendered glass ceilings; a gender wage gap; discrimination based on sex, race, ability, and age; bullying; and sexual harassment. Two notable differences exist, however: the barriers women face in nonprofits manifest in unique ways (e.g. although we have more women in leadership positions than any other sector, they are more likely to be leading organizations with small-medium budgets while men are leading big-budget organizations) and the nonprofit sector lacks specific supports to eradicate them, given the sector's unique traits and characteristics (e.g., charity mode, benevolence narrative, lack of resources).

Perhaps even more importantly, our research work documented strong connections between the fact that a high percentage of the women working in the sector, particularly Black and immigrant women, who hold jobs concentrated in frontline or entry-level positions, and how the sector is undervalued, underfunded, and underestimated. Because our sector's work is often seen as "gendered," such as care work, it is perceived through negative gender stereotypes such as dependent, emotional, unintelligent, and unskilled, and thus inferior to traditionally masculine work. This biased view has harmful consequences for the sector, its women workers, and the communities our sector serves.

The pandemic's harsher impact on nonprofits translates to more harm for its women workers

Nonprofits have been hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis. They are struggling to maintain their operations and their ability to generate revenue for programs and services amidst increasing demand and decreasing donations, while also being on the frontlines to support communities hard hit by the pandemic's economic and

social devastation. As employers, nonprofits are also grappling with the uncertainty, stress, and burnout the pandemic has caused among staff and volunteers. Staff and volunteers in frontline roles are becoming more difficult to recruit and retain as the risks of in-person work are still high.

And yet, care work is the future of work and low carbon

[Many care work industries and occupations](#) - such as elder care and child care - are situated in the nonprofit sector. The care economy is also going to grow exponentially, as our need for care increases and because it is least likely to get disrupted by technology in the future of work. Technology will not take over care jobs, but rather assist in doing the work.

As governments and other key stakeholders grapple with “building back better” plans and mitigating the impact of technological disruption in the future of work with labour force and skills development strategies, there is an opportunity for nonprofits not only to capture that growth in our sector, but also demand that growth consists of decent work jobs.

There’s much to do - let’s get started

The future of our sector depends on decent work for women. Change is required at the organizational, network, and the systemic levels.

At an organizational level, nonprofits can implement decent work by using tools like the [Decent Work Charter](#), [Decent Work Checklist](#), and [Bridging the Gap guide](#).

At the network level, nonprofits can come together to build a [decent work movement](#), pool risk and resources for sectoral solutions (such as group discounts for employee benefits or a [pension plan](#)), and explicitly share decent work practices - like #showthesalary as a requirement on job boards.

At the system level, nonprofits can advocate for changes in public policy, call for changes to funder agreements, push for transparency, and look for opportunities to recognize that the pathway to [women’s economic recovery is through the nonprofit sector](#).

As networks, grow the movement together

As more nonprofits - and the networks that support them - amplify decent work for women messages, the faster our movement will grow. Highlighting the data about our workforce, amplifying women's voices, and naming both the barriers and solutions will accelerate decent work for women in the sector and contribute to women's economic justice. And it will only serve to strengthen our sector which will, in turn, help us achieve our missions to serve our communities. After all, isn't that why we're all here?

Want to learn more? <https://theonncanada.ca/decentworkforwomen/>

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Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN), based in Toronto, Canada, is an International Ally member of the National Council of Nonprofits. Similar to a state association of nonprofits in the U.S., ONN is the independent network for the 58,000 nonprofits in Ontario, focused on [policy](#), advocacy, and [services](#) to strengthen Ontario's nonprofit sector as a key pillar of our society and economy.