



DIGGING DEEP

Tackling the conditions that create the Income and Pay Gap

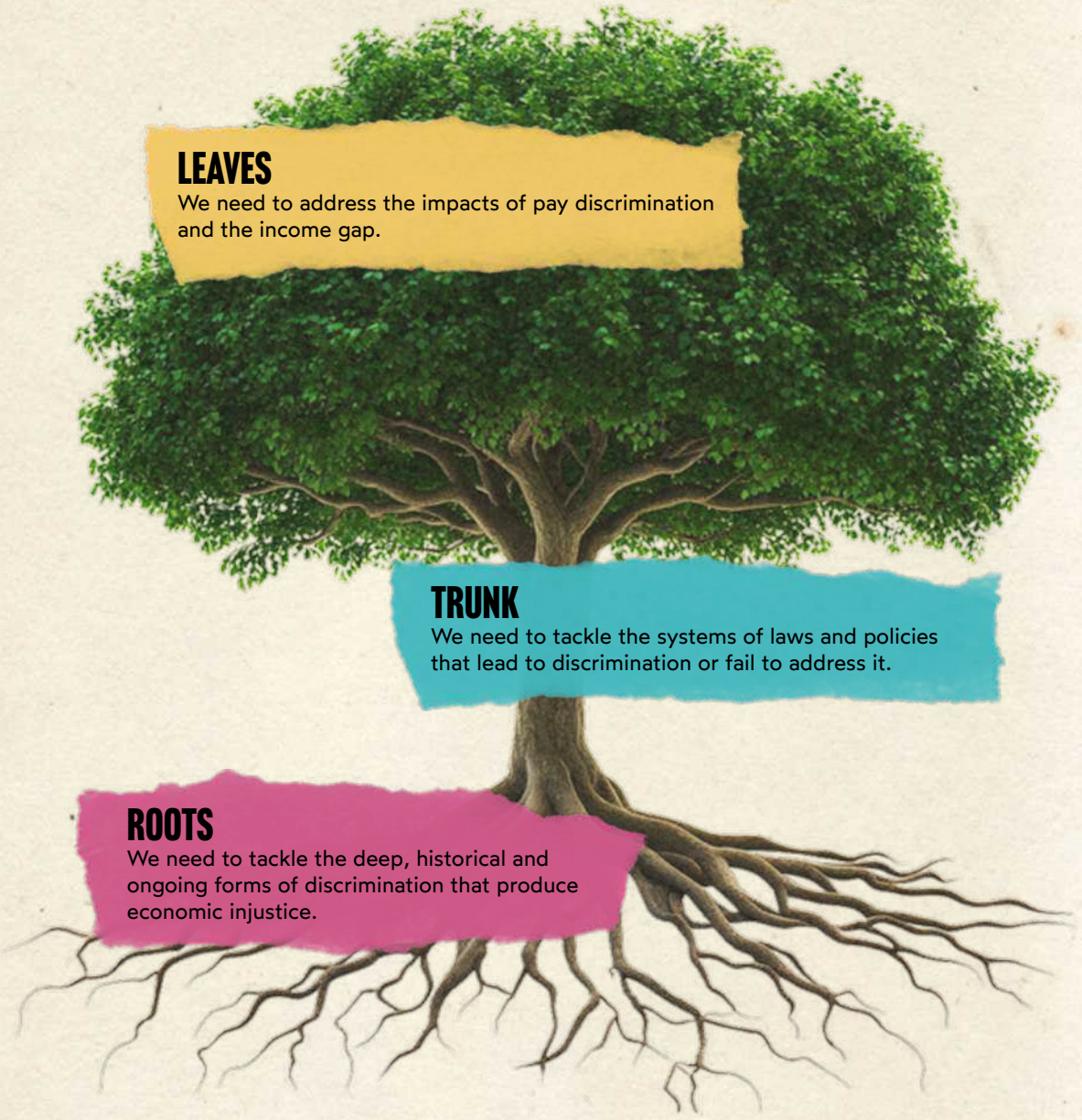


West Coast LEAF

The Income and Pay Gap is a symptom of a deeper, systemic problem.

**Addressing the gap means tackling the
conditions that create it, its impacts, and
the discrimination people face across
diverse identities.**

LEARN MORE | This is one of four pieces WCL has developed
as part of our **Income and Pay Gap** series. Learn more about
several key resources behind this series.



LEAVES

We need to address the impacts of pay discrimination and the income gap.

TRUNK

We need to tackle the systems of laws and policies that lead to discrimination or fail to address it.

ROOTS

We need to tackle the deep, historical and ongoing forms of discrimination that produce economic injustice.

The Indigenous Equity Framework of Relational Environments (IEFRE)

framework developed by Indigenous scholars Dr. Charlotte Loppie and Dr. Jeannine Carriere uses the metaphor of a tree to describe three environments that shape inequities. Many racialized people in our engagements found that the tree metaphor resonated with their experiences navigating economic exploitation and the pay gap.



ROOTS: SHIFTING PARADIGMS

Changing how we value people



Value work in feminized sectors

Feminized sectors like caregiving, healthcare, food retail, and education carried us through COVID-19, yet remain systematically underpaid. These sectors are vital to society and the economy, but wages don't reflect their value.

Recognize caregiving as part of all peoples' lives

Caregiving is universal, yet harmful norms push it disproportionately onto women and people of marginalized genders. Rather than penalizing people for caregiving with lower pay and instability, caregiving should be supported in all workplaces as part of people's wholistic identities and well-being.

Address racism and discrimination

Systemic racial discrimination continues to impact racialized people in the workplace. We must uproot harmful beliefs that suggest racialized people are lucky to be in Canada, should be "grateful" for whatever jobs they obtain, and accept unfair conditions of work.

"There is a mentality that people of certain ethnicities have to start below, and people who come from here have to start higher."

- COMMUNITY DIALOGUE PARTICIPANT

Uphold Indigenous people's inherent right to a livelihood

The recommendations made in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action must be implemented. Governments must address the gaps in employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples requires that Indigenous people have the right, without discrimination, to equality in employment and salary, and to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including in the areas of employment, vocational training, retraining, health and social security.



Address economic injustice for people with disabilities

People with disabilities may not work in traditional ways, but they make vital contributions that often go unrecognized—such as caring for and supporting others in their communities. They deserve economic justice and well-being, including higher income and disability assistance to ensure dignified, secure lives.



Address transphobia and discrimination against people of marginalized genders

Many trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people face systemic discrimination, which directly affects their economic security, dignity, and well-being. We must acknowledge and address transphobia, and take meaningful steps to build more inclusive workplaces.





TRUNK SYSTEMS & STRUCTURES

Transforming laws and policies that
perpetuate inequity

Fund long-term employment supports for Indigenous peoples

The Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls affirm that access to employment is a fundamental human right. Governments must provide sustained funding for Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people. This includes resourcing education, training, and employment opportunities across all Indigenous communities.



Expand programs and services to overcome barriers to employment

Education, training, and employment programs are essential for removing barriers to work. Mentorship and support can help people navigate language, cultural, and technological hurdles, while building skills and confidence to advocate for fair pay, benefits, and advancement. These programs must be delivered by organizations that are culturally competent and safe.





“Having an opportunity to start is very difficult these days.”

- COMMUNITY DIALOGUE PARTICIPANT

Develop employment pathways for racialized peoples

Employers could be incentivized to hire racialized people, especially newcomers, and to recognize prior experience, education, and credentials. On-the-job training and supportive relicensing policies are critical to reducing barriers to entry into employment.

Implement just immigration policies and practices

Immigration laws and policies that put people at risk must change. Policies that tie migrants to certain employers, lower their wages, or restrict them to underpaid sectors create precarity and exploitation. Permanent immigration programs are essential for integration and for recognizing the value and contribution of migrants.

“People who are temporary don’t have any room to grow. We are not allowed.”

- COMMUNITY DIALOGUE PARTICIPANT

Enforce laws against exploitative employers

Employers who misinform, mislead, or deny people their rights must be held accountable. Protections must also extend to migrants with precarious immigration status, who are especially vulnerable to wage theft, illegal fees, and other forms of exploitation.



Offer stronger parental leaves

Parental leaves must be parent and child-focused, and provide sufficient financial support to primary caregivers. Parental leaves that are flexible, protected, and appropriately paid can close pay gaps connected to a change in family and caregiving roles.

Promoting parental leaves for male parents and caregivers is also important to shifting norms, beliefs, and practices towards equal parenting.

Parental leave must be redesigned as a care policy that is not tied to employment status, which would make it more widely accessible.



Enact laws that address intersectional pay discrimination

Stronger human rights protections are needed to secure equal pay based on race, ethnicity, disability, and other identities. Discriminatory requirements like “Canadian experience” create major barriers, often pushing newcomers into unpaid or underpaid work. Laws must close these gaps and ensure fair entry to the labour market.



Establish proactive programs to certify and recognize equitable employers

Employers should be encouraged and incentivized to adopt policies that support caregiving and tackle gendered and racial inequities.

Support unionization and new laws for sectoral bargaining

Unionization can strengthen accountability, transparency, and wages. To be effective, unions must be inclusive of gendered and racialized people and accessible to those in precarious or non-traditional jobs.

Reforming BC's Labour Relations Code to allow sectoral bargaining would extend these rights across entire industries. The current model of unionization only covers traditional workplaces, leaving out many — from domestic careworkers employed by single households to franchise workers who must unionize site by site. Sectoral bargaining would give these workers collective power, improving economic justice and well-being for many more people.



Ensure robust pay equity laws and policies

Pay equity laws can make a real difference, but only if they are comprehensive, enforceable, and backed by meaningful penalties. Government initiatives should also work directly with employers to build awareness of pay gaps and support concrete steps to end discrimination.

Workplace pay equity audits must assess the true value of work across different sectors, not just wages. To be effective, pay equity laws must also be intersectional, addressing inequities based on gender, race, and other marginalized identities.



LEAVES EVERYDAY IMPACTS

Addressing the consequences of pay
discrimination and income gaps



Implement more inclusive and flexible paid time off for caregiving and sick leaves

Paid and protected time off for illness, caregiving, compassionate care, and child care is critical for caregivers. Time off that supports caregivers who work must be encouraged, and protected.

Address systemic racism in key sectors and occupations

Proactive steps must be taken to close racial and gender gaps in occupations and sectors where these gaps are the largest such as processing and manufacturing, retail and service, and health support roles.

“For people who are first generation, it is really hard. Someone told me all I can do is bathroom work rather than let me be a cashier.”

- COMMUNITY DIALOGUE PARTICIPANT



“There are layers with disabilities. Disability is mostly invisible for me and employers are not supportive. They are not making workplaces accessible. There should be more widespread training to accommodate people with disabilities.”

- COMMUNITY DIALOGUE PARTICIPANT

Ensure accommodations, active support, and robust inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace

The lack of accommodation for people with disabilities excludes many from the workforce and creates precarity in seeking support. The systemic devaluation of work done by people with disabilities can exacerbate health conditions and worsen well-being. People who are unable to work due to disabilities must also be supported with levels of assistance that enable them to live with dignity, security, and well-being.

Raise the earnings exemptions for people accessing income and disability assistance and increase assistance

People with disabilities must be able to access fair employment and pay without losing benefits. This means allowing access to multiple benefits and ending the spousal cap on disability assistance, which reduces support based on a partner's income and can trap people in financial dependence or unsafe relationships.

Living in Community, a sex workers advocacy group, has shared that many sex workers live with disabilities, and some work multiple jobs and/or receive income or disability assistance to make ends meet. Raising assistance rates is important to supporting the economic security and well-being of sex workers.





Living wages for all

A living wage is the hourly amount someone needs to earn to cover basic expenses which is calculated based on the region a person lives in.

Everyone must be guaranteed a living wage, including migrants. Contracts signed outside of Canada must be reviewed for fairness in every aspect, including rates of pay.



Better access to child care

Alleviating pay inequities requires better access to child care, including more facilities and flexibility for non-standard work hours.

Ensure inclusive access to reliable public transit

Access to free transit must be expanded. Safe and accessible transit must be made available across the province.



Work towards poverty reduction among the elderly including guaranteed incomes and improved pensions

The devaluation of work done by women and people marginalized based on gender results in lower savings and pension benefits over time. Poverty reduction among the elderly, especially those who are racialized and gendered, must be prioritized to ensure people can live and retire with dignity.



WHY AREN'T EXISTING LAWS SOLVING THE PROBLEM?

BC's New Pay Transparency Act

In 2023, BC introduced a Pay Transparency Act to address the pay gap. The law requires larger employers to publish pay transparency reports and all employers to post wage ranges on job postings, avoid asking about pay history, and not retaliate against workers who discuss pay.

But the law has serious flaws. It includes no penalties for non-compliance and no enforcement mechanisms to ensure employers act to close pay gaps. Reports don't even need to be submitted to government, leaving no way to verify accuracy. And the data provided is often vague, making it hard for workers to know if they are being paid unfairly.

Finally, the Act is not intersectional. While it recognizes non-binary people, it fails to capture the realities of race, disability, and other forms of discrimination. Many marginalized workers remain excluded, and the largest pay gaps persist.



"I want to have legislation but no matter how beautiful that legislation is, if the onus of enforcing that legislation falls on the worker, it won't be of benefit."

- COMMUNITY DIALOGUE PARTICIPANT

What about the Human Rights Code?

Section 12 of the Code says employees cannot be discriminated against on the basis of sex when doing “similar or substantially similar work.” But this protection is very narrow — it only applies in those specific circumstances.

The Code does not address the broader devaluation of entire sectors and occupations where discrimination persists. And even when protections exist, people must navigate an adversarial complaint process. For many vulnerable or precarious people facing power imbalances at work, making a complaint is both difficult and risky.



What about the Employment Standards Act?

The Employment Standards Act does not tackle systemic pay discrimination. If workers’ face issues with being paid in accordance with employment laws, they can bring complaints. However, this also requires vulnerable workers to go up against their employers and risk their employment. The process also suffers from delays and backlogs.

HOW COMMUNITIES LEAD THE WAY

Many organizations and grassroots campaigns are working to change the conditions that create the pay and income gap in BC.

Living Wage BC

A campaign that has been working to get employers across BC to pay living wages. As of 2024, there are now 450 Living Wage Employers in BC.

\$10aDay Child Care Campaign

An initiative of the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC demanding access to high quality, inclusive, and flexible child care, with professional wages, benefits, and healthy working conditions for educators, across BC.

BC Poverty Reduction Coalition

Over 80 organizations and community mobilizations that advocate for policy solutions to end poverty, homelessness, and inequality in BC. Their "Blueprint for Justice" provides an important map for policy changes to reduce and eradicate poverty.

RAISE
THE
RATES

Status
for All

\$10aDay
CHILDCARE

EQUAL
PAY

MIGRANT
RIGHTS
NOW

STOP
RACISM

LESSONS LEARNED: WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

Hold employers and governments accountable

Closing the income and pay gap requires proactive accountability. Employers and governments must be required to enforce rights and protections, rather than leaving the burden on individual people.

Move beyond complaint-driven processes

Relying on adversarial legal complaints is not effective. Many workers face power imbalances and risks that make it nearly impossible to challenge discrimination through existing systems.

Pursue systemic reforms

Real solutions must address the root causes of pay inequality. Coordinated socio-cultural, legal, and policy reforms are needed to uproot discrimination and advance economic justice and well-being.



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