

The theme question starts by stating that “Barriers still exist for equity seeking groups to employment in BC.”. We need to first define who the equity seeking groups in question are and what barriers exist for their employment in BC. Equity seeking groups in Canada are the groups that have been traditionally discriminated against. These groups include women, Asian Canadians, Indigenous Peoples, Black Canadians, Francophone Canadians, single parents, seniors, mentally and physically disabled peoples, and members of the LGBT community. The barriers differ by group but some general problems include unequal pay, elimination of culture, unequal access to health services, sexual harassment, rates of homelessness, and cost of living.

The question goes on to ask “How can unions take the lead on equity employment?”. We need to define what is meant by equity employment. There are two main types of equity that are pertinent here: employment equity and pay equity. Employment equity strives to increase the number of equity seeking groups in higher-paying occupations and reduce the barriers they face to employment. Pay equity focuses solely on making sure women (or predominantly female professions) are paid the same as men (or predominantly male professions). Two acts have come about in support of these goals: the Canadian Employment Equity Act of 1995 and the Pay Equity Act of 2018.

The Canadian Employment Equity Act of 1995 was created to: *“achieve equality in the workplace so that no person shall be denied employment opportunities or benefits for reasons unrelated to ability and, in the fulfilment of that goal, to correct the conditions of disadvantage in employment experienced by women, aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities by giving effect to the principle that employment equity means more than treating persons in the same way but also requires special measures and the accommodation of differences.”* This act was well received when it was enacted with positive policies that included more wheelchair accessible ramps, recruitment in Aboriginal communities, job advertisements in Chinese newspapers, apprentice programs for people with disabilities, and more. The Act removed barriers to employment for equity seeking groups, and led to positive gains in the workplace.

The Act was not without its detractors however. Criticism came from people such as economists Cristina Echavarria and Mobinul Huq for the fact that the Act mentioned employers removing barriers for women to enter male-dominated fields, but had nothing regarding men entering female-dominated jobs such as Child Care Providers, Social Security Workers, and Veterinarians. Controversy emerged again in 2010 when Sandra Landriault, a white woman, was barred from employing for a federal agency because she was not a member of a racial minority, causing the president of the Treasury Board of Canada to announce a review of employment equity. Others wish the act had been more strict, citing the less than harsh penalties for non-compliance. Still others believe the act should have had a different focus all together, relying on moral persuasion rather than legal action to make a meaningful change that would hopefully end discrimination in the larger society, not just in the workplace.

The Pay Act of 2018 was created to *“require employers to identify and correct gender discrimination that may be present in their compensation practices and to adjust the wages of employees in female job classes so that they are at least equal to the wages of employees in male job classes when they are found to be comparable in value based on skill, effort, responsibility and working conditions.”* One of the main factors behind the act was a 2009 finding by Statistics Canada that found that Canadian women who work full-time receive only 71% of what a man makes. Many factors contribute to this wage gap, including many women-dominated professions being generally lower paying, but even when that factor is accounted for, there still exists a level of gender discrimination in pay rates. It is important to recognize the difference between equal pay for equal work and pay equity. Pay equality compares the salaries of all women and compares them to the salaries of all men, without taking into account different occupations, and this is where the figure 71% comes from. Equal pay for equal work specifically focuses on men and women’s wages when at equal positions in the same company, while this figure is often much smaller than the 71% for pay equity, it is not quite 100% and that is what this act hopes to change. It is essential for fairness and equality that women in the workplace to earn the same salary as men doing the same work.

I am lucky enough to play wheelchair basketball at a very high level, having represented BC in the 2019 BC Winter Games in Red Deer, Alberta. Wheelchair basketball is a fascinating

sport because it allows able-bodied players such as myself to play at the same level as athletes with varying forms of physical disabilities. Growing up in a small community, I did not interact with a lot of disabled people before I joined wheelchair basketball. It has been a very positive experience for me to spend time with my disabled teammates, on and especially off-court. Seeing how they live their everyday lives was a big eye-opener for me. I had not previously considered how they would handle activities that I would not think twice about, such as flying on an airplane, catching a public bus, or going to the store. People often have impressions of disabled people that are not entirely correct, and I was certainly one of them. However, after knowing some of them for years now, the barriers to understanding and friendship have broken down and I consider many of them to be good friends.

Wheelchair basketball is an amazing experience as it allows people of different abilities to play a sport together. The wheelchair acts as an equalizer and makes an able-bodied person no different than someone who cannot move their lower body. Wheelchair basketball is also a co-ed sport, which is unique, and therefore allows many different people from different walks of life to play together. Canada is one of the few countries in the world that allows able-bodied people to play alongside disabled people, while most other countries do not. Because of this, able-bodied Canadians cannot play at the international level and so for me, playing at the national level is the highest level at which I can expect to play. Despite this, I love the game, both for the gameplay and competition which I now prefer to the stand-up version.

Breaking down the barriers facing disabled people in the workplace is incredibly difficult as opposed to barriers faced by other equity seeking groups, and in many cases it may be unfortunately impossible. Other equity seeking groups are really no different from the stereotypically white, straight, male employee, and because of this the only barriers facing them are societal discrimination. Given this, the process for breaking down barriers will come as society becomes more equal and less discriminatory, which is happening over time. For disabled people however, the barriers are largely physical, and while some modifications are able to be made to help them fit into a job, some jobs are unable to be done while in a wheelchair or while using a walker or while using crutches.

Obviously a lot has changed from the past, where discrimination was more commonplace, but unfortunately there are still examples of workplace discrimination that exist today that can be felt by certain groups including women, Asian Canadians, Indigenous Peoples, Black Canadians, Francophone Canadians, single parents, seniors, mentally and physically disabled peoples, and members of the LGBT community. I think that it is appropriate for the labour movement to focus on improving the lives of all Canadians, especially those who have faced past and current discrimination, by being proactive in putting forth progressive policies that promote the full participation of all Canadian workers.

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