Statement by CRIA-W-ICREF Regarding Gender Analysis in 2017 Budget

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The government took baby steps toward implementing a gender analysis on its budget announced Wednesday. This is important. It's the first time this federal budget includes a chapter that addresses the differing effects of public policy on men and women, including women who belong to multiple communities, such as Indigenous and immigrant women. CRIA-W-ICREF recognizes the federal government's important step towards addressing gender and diversity in its policy-making processes. We hope this budget signals a course of moving forward on commitments to gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) across federal government departments. A key advantage of GBA+ in comparison to targeted programs aimed at addressing gender inequality is its underlying premise that all policies and programs are gendered. Applying GBA+ allows policy developers to detect and address unequal gender effects, including in policy areas that are not typically seen as gendered, such as taxation, foreign policy, and transportation.

While yesterday’s announcement is an important first step in making better public policy, it must be matched with funding commitments that advance women’s equality. It is also critically important that diverse women – including women with disabilities, racialized women, and younger and older women – are uniquely considered.

The funding announced in this budget for childcare, health care, and a caregiver benefit, along with plans to address violence against women and lengthen parental leaves, are important measures. What is equally important, and what has not been addressed, are the structural conditions that continue to leave women out of some sectors, and mostly responsible for unpaid care work.

Take the extension of parental leave from 12 to 18 months. It's a partial improvement because it extends job protections for women. But, the eligibility requirements have not changed. This means around 38% of parents will not qualify for it – primarily women living on low-incomes. The actual benefit (55% of income, stretched over a longer period of time) is not enough to sustain a family. It also ignores evidence showing that men will not take the parental leave unless there is an incentive or a requirement for them to do so. Research also shows that extending parental leave only for women for 14 months or more can harm women’s long term economic security. According to CRIA-W member Kathleen Lahey, a woman taking leave past 14 months in length “will never regain the same level of income, or chances of promotion or job security, or pension security that she would have otherwise realized.” The new caregiver benefit does not fully recognize the gendered division of care, or other factors, such as the additional challenges facing women with disabilities who also provide care for others.
Nor does it seem to realize that increasing tax incentives to women who provide unpaid care to so many different members of society does nothing to help them find enough time or earn enough to support themselves through decent paid work.

The new housing, innovation and infrastructure strategies are not gender-impact evaluated. They focus on supply rather than demand side issues, and offer limited specifics for helping marginalized communities, such as newcomers, and lone parents. For example, the National Housing Strategy focuses on building houses, which privileges male-dominated industries like construction, rather than efforts to address the underlying and population-specific causes of housing insecurity, such as the unique challenges facing LGBTQ+ young people.

There are challenges with the federal approach to investment in infrastructure more broadly. First, there is no requirement for those receiving infrastructure funds to provide training and hire diverse women into predominantly male-sector jobs building infrastructure. Second, the implications of the Infrastructure Bank are highly gendered. The new federal Infrastructure Bank will privatize infrastructure through Public Private Partnerships despite the evidence that this will make user fees, and higher infrastructure costs, more likely. Making infrastructure more expensive will eventually mean less money for social programs that benefit women and those needing it most. And reducing public services means reducing public sector jobs, which eliminates good jobs for women and shifts more unpaid caring work onto their shoulders. CRIAW-ICREF’s research project, Changing Public Services, shows how much women rely on public services to help address the economic and domestic inequalities they face. The elimination of the transit tax credit, for example, will disproportionately impact women’s lives.

Full implementation of a GBA+ approach in policy and program development will reveal the kinds of challenges CRIAW-ICREF knows diverse women around the country are facing. It will help address the structural barriers that can prevent women from achieving equality in the workforce. It will help shed light on the fact that federal transfers to provinces and territories for caring work like healthcare, long-term care, and childcare, fall far short of what is needed. Yesterday’s budget is an important first step; we call for many more steps, and soon.

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW-ICREF) is a national, women’s organization that has been doing research on, with, and by women for 40 years.