

RESEARCH REVIEW

YOU GIVE, WE TAKE: THE HIDDEN ONGOING CRISIS IN CANADIAN NONPROFIT EMPLOYMENT

BY: JAYME WONG



Published by Imagine Canada in Fall 2022, Emily Jensen’s “Diversity is Our Strength: Improving Working Conditions in Canadian Nonprofits” provides data about Canada’s current nonprofit sector. The report explores who currently makes up the nonprofit workforce and highlights problems that are common within the sector such as low salaries, lack of- or low benefits and few long-term work opportunities. Jensen suggests three recommendations address and overcome these issues:

1. Funders need to provide funding that allows for decent work for sector workers and does not reinforce gender and racial inequality.
2. Federal, provincial and local governments need to treat the nonprofit sector as a valued partner, on par with the way they treat other industries of similar size.
3. Nonprofit sector leaders need to adopt decent work and anti-racism/anti-oppression practices to help ensure they are providing respectful, fair jobs where our diverse workforce can thrive. (4)

The report begins by asking an important question: what are current nonprofit working conditions? Jensen quickly draws attention to low wages and small benefits by comparing nonprofit employees’ wages to the economy-wide average. Data cited from Statistics Canada reveals that “the average annual salary of those working in community nonprofits is \$38,716, compared to \$57,137 in the economy overall” (3). However, Jensen suggests, this wage gap is not due to lack of experience and formal education as nonprofit sector employees are actually higher educated and older than other employees in the economy (5-6). This data leads to the next big question: why are nonprofit working conditions the way they are currently?

To answer that question, Jensen presents information about who are your typical nonprofit employees: women, immigrants and Black, Indigenous and racialized people (7-8). These are groups of people whose work has been historically devalued by society and who continue to face systemic biases that result in workplace discrimination, exploitation and unfair treatment. The report suggests that discrimination and societal prejudice against the aforementioned marginalized groups may be two key factors as to why working conditions in the nonprofit sector are so poor. Jensen writes, “Unfortunately, systemic biases against racialized people and immigrants layer onto gender discrimination and further entrench perceptions of the sector’s work as low-value care work.” (8) The undervaluing and underpaying of nonprofit employees can also be viewed as a reflection of how society undervalues and underpays immigrant, Indigenous, Black and racialized women.

“Diversity is Our Strength” only scratches the surface. The report, which focuses on wage-based data, only presents a small picture of the underlying problems that exist in the nonprofit sector. While comparing the average wages of nonprofit employees to those across the economy is the clearest way to demonstrate that there are serious funding and compensation issues. There are other problems that exist beyond money. According to [an article](#) published by the United Way in April 2022, the increase of service demand brought on by COVID-19 and the economic recession has caused job burnout and high turnover rates in the nonprofit sector.

Jensen’s three recommendations place responsibility on employers, funders and government. In part, these solutions



address the funding challenges that the nonprofit sector often faces and call for structural change from leaders. However, the responsibility also lies in the public’s hands. Many people rely on the services provided by nonprofit organizations. Simply imagine how life would be without the free services that we often take for granted. By starting to evaluate and question internal biases, perhaps we can start to value the nonprofit sector and the people behind the curtain.

The report importantly highlights a problem with the nonprofit sector that is usually quickly brushed under the carpet. Not only is there a lack of data about the sector (4), but nonprofits are, by nature, expected to give. No one ever expected that this giving was at the expense of the sector’s own employees.

Jayne has a BA in English and Philosophy from the University of Lethbridge and an MA in English and Film Studies from the University of Alberta. She currently lives in Edmonton with her partner and their cats.

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