

September 2, 2016

Michael Mitchell and Hon. John C. Murray
Special Advisors
Changing Workplace Review
Ministry of Labour

Dear Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Murray,

As the Principal Investigator of the research project, Precarious Work, Precarious Health funded by the Centre for Labour Management Relations, Ryerson University, I would like to comment on the policy options pertaining to personal emergency leave as identified in the Interim Report of the Changing Workplace Review (CWR). Based on our preliminary findings of our study, we strongly recommend Option 2, i.e. to remove the exemption for workplaces that employ fewer than 50 employees. Further, we reject Option 3 and Option 4 that would reduce the unpaid Personal Emergency Leave available to Ontario workers in general and women in precarious work in particular.

Brief Overview of the Study

The purpose of our qualitative research study is to examine the impact of precarious employment on the health and well-being of immigrant and racialized women in the GTA area. The project is a joint collaboration between Ryerson University and 4 community partners: the Central Toronto Community Health Centres, Across Boundaries, the Immigrant Women Health Centre and the Tibetan Women Association of Toronto.

So far from the in-depth interviews that we have conducted with 48 immigrant women from the Tibetan, Chinese and the Caribbean communities, we are seeing emerging themes and narratives that underscore the urgency and importance of comprehensive measures that will address some of the systemic barriers experienced by immigrant and racialized women who are precariously employed. Most of them work either part-time or on call through temp agencies in food processing plants, laundry, personal support services, grocery stores; and hospitality sector, many of which are workplaces that employ fewer than 50 employees.

The importance of Personal Emergency Leave for women workers who shoulder the burden of family and work responsibilities

The preliminary results have revealed that the more restrictive and confined women's life circumstances are the more vulnerable and precarious their employment and their health. Not only are they subject to the precarity of their multiple employment, they are also shouldering the housework, the caregiving work to their children and elderly parents. Many of them are in a state of perpetual uncertainty about their jobs and the well-being of the family members around

them. Many have ended up having to quit their work or got terminated due to an emergency situation of one of their loved ones.

I would like to introduce you to Ling (pseudonym) one of the study participants, an immigrant woman who used to work as an assembler in a food processing plant. She described herself as an “octopus” with all the tentacles to take care of her two young children, her parent-in-laws, her own parents, her husband and her boss. Her following quote offers us a glimpse of the domino effect of an emergency in toppling a precariously constructed system of work and family arrangement:

“I went back to work after giving birth to my baby. I had to pay my mother-in-law to take care of the baby. After half a year, my mother-in-law was in a car accident. I had no choice but to stay home to take care of her and my daughter. Even though it was only for a week, I lost my job. We barely made it through with the baby allowance. There was no other way.”

For some of these women especially single parents, the impact of precarious work with unpredictable schedules and irregular hours has also posed a heavy toll on the mental health and well-being of their children. Women workers shared their experiences of losing their employment as a result of taking time off work to accompany their child to psychiatric assessment, school interviews, and doctors’ appointments. The provision of 10 Personal Emergency Leave (PEL) days would accord workers with some job protection when they are attending to the immediate needs of their family members.

Job protected Sick Leave as an effective strategy to prevent job loss and poverty reduction

In addition, among the women we have interviewed, there is a shared desire for job protected sick leave.

“I worry about making ends meet...paying for the rent, transportation and other necessities. There isn’t anything left. I feel bad about getting sick and that I have to choose between work and health. If I lose hours or any of my jobs, I’m afraid we will end up in one of the shelters.”

The above expression of anxiety is spoken by a younger refugee woman, a university graduate who is juggling 3 part-time jobs in order to support her parent with disabilities and her siblings, as well paying her student loan.

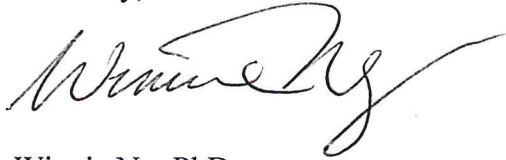
There is also a common refrain among these women workers in precarious employment questioning the fairness of “working so hard and still so poor!” “The Government should think of those who are working poor. We need to be given more opportunities. We are poor forever!”

We echo the above sentiment and urge the Changing Workplace Review to have the wisdom and courage to improve the working conditions for the working poor in Ontario. Lifting the firm-size exemption for PEL will allow all workers to have access to job protected leave when the

unforeseen circumstances of sickness, family illness, and emergencies arise. It is only fair and just for the millions of workers who have been excluded for too long.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Winnie Ng', written in a cursive style.

Winnie Ng, PhD

Unifor Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy;
Principal Investigator of Precarious Work, Precarious Health Project
On behalf of the following research team members

- Idil Abdillahi, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work
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