

## Episode 5: Women of Colour in the Workplace

**Commissioner Ward:** Welcome to Level the Playing Field, where we explore topics related to economics, equity, women, work and money.

My name is Kadie Ward and I'm Commissioner and CAO of Ontario's Pay Equity Commission. Today I'm speaking with Seghen Woldai. Seghen serves as Director of Engagement on the Lean In Canada board. She'll be speaking with us about a white paper that Lean In Canada is set to publish on pay equity and women of color in Ontario. Seghen, welcome to our conversation.

**Seghen Woldai:** Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

**Commissioner Ward:** So before we start talking about the report you're working on, can you maybe tell us a bit about Lean In Canada and how you work to support women?

**Seghen Woldai:** Yeah so Lean In Canada. I'll start by saying Lean In, started by Sheryl Sandberg. She's the COO of Facebook and and sort of the the book was released with the idea of having women sort of lean in at the table. It was released, I can't remember now... definitely, definitely a while ago now, but the US started a Lean In, sort of group, and that's now expanded to several countries worldwide including Lean In Canada, and really the objective is, it's a community of professional women who are looking to empower each other, to build specifically some purposeful and fulfilling careers.

**Commissioner Ward:** That's fantastic. It is a really wonderful organization as you mentioned, not just at Canada-wide but but global. So, let's get to the report that you guys are working on. So you're you've launched your research program or research activity, looking at pay equity and women of color Ontario. Can you tell us how this paper came to be and why that, it's important for Lean In Canada to be doing this, this research?

**Seghen Woldai:** Yeah. So I think, you know, pay equity as it relates to women in particular has been top of mind, I'd say for a couple of decades, at least, um, I think what really came to be was, was the face of this pandemic. Sometime earlier this year we were all meeting as a board, and it just it really, it really affected us how much disproportionately this pandemic had affected women...and I think as we started to talk about just the, the disproportionate challenges women were feeling or facing through this pandemic. We felt we needed to do more, it wasn't, it wasn't enough. And so, we as a group kind of decided how can we build more awareness around this, how can we do more to educate women about their rights, especially related to pay equity, and how

women in leadership roles can make an impact in their organization. So we set two guiding principles as a board for this sort of program is what we called it, informing women of their rights to equal pay and how to advocate for themselves and advocating for pay equity legislation. So as part of this broader thinking across the Lean In Canada board, we partnered with the Pay Equity Office to co-host two events. The first was in April and the second one was in September on International Pay Equity Day actually September 18th. And the second part of this was writing this white paper, which was focused on pay equity and specifically women of color. I think it's an important paper that really focuses on education, but also advice, we really really really wanted to make a tactical, and we want to make sure that whether you were mid-level, whether you were HR, whether you were senior leadership, there was something for you in this paper. And we did that through research, through as much research as we can, and there is challenges when it comes to finding research for for women of color and pay, but we did the best we can with the research data that was available in Canada and really wrote out some true steps that we think people can take kind of coming out of that paper so we're looking forward to it's release.

**Commissioner Ward:** Yes, I've seen the draft and there is a lot of valuable information in it. And in the draft, your paper mentions intersectionality and how that affects the gender wage gap for marginalized women. Can you explain this for our viewers who may not be familiar with this concept?

**Seghen Woldai:** Yeah, for sure. So, so the term intersectionality was was, I think coined I'll say, by someone by the name of Kimberlé Crenshaw. I think it was 1989 if I remember correctly. Um, it really is the illustration or a term that's used to illustrate um, the, how gender, race, class, other individual characteristics, sort of, intersect with one another and overlap. And really what that means is, you know, while women experience their own forms of discrimination, women who then represent other forms of intersectionality so let's say women of color, women who are members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, women with disabilities, all of these folks will experience more severe forms of discrimination, sort of a compounding effect. Um, and so when it comes to the pay wage gap, it's effectively more severe for for people who are part of this intersectional group. One example is is literally just talking dollar for dollar in Canada, women earn 89 cents for every dollar that a man earns, but that widens to 67 cents for racialized women, 65 cents for Indigenous women, 54 cents for women with disabilities. That's almost, that's a half of what every dollar a man is earning so really an important concept. And one of course that we touch on through the paper. Um yeah...(inaudible)

**Commissioner Ward:** It is really important to talk about this and it's something that um, actually in Lean In Global's recent workforce, women in the workforce paper, they talked about the only's and the only-only's, so the impact of being say the only woman of color on a team, but being the only woman of color and the only LGBTQ member, so when

you start compounding the layers of differentiation from what's considered a norm, rightly or wrongly, starts to impact the effects of gender, gender wage gap so thank you for bringing that to light in your research.

You also, the research also highlights the difference between direct and indirect discrimination and one quote reads from the draft that I saw "workplace practices that discriminate against women of color are oftentimes systemic, indirect, and not easily identifiable." Can you explain the difference between direct and indirect discrimination and why this is so important to address or at least bring to light through your research?

**Seghen Woldai:** Yeah, I mean, I think when people think of discrimination, they're often thinking (of) direct. It's the, it's the behaviour, it's the commentary, it's the very direct, you know, behaviours or or rules or policies against perhaps a particular race, nationality gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, the list continues. And it really can take different forms, I mean the patriarchy discriminates against gender, racism is against race, homophobia against sexual orientation, it's, that's the more obvious one that people think of. The indirect ones are more subtle ones. The example that often comes to mind for me is an indirect policy or organization and I would challenge listeners to to to think about this is, if you have a policy that while, equally equally affecting everybody in your mind, you may think as a leader, well this affects everybody, it can't be a discriminatory policy. But if that policy uniquely puts a protective characteristic at a disadvantage that could be a form of indirect discrimination. So an example of that maybe if your policy requires folks to work on the Sabbath, will you, that that may be equal across the board and you may feel well this is equal treatment but not necessarily, there's a particular group of people who are going to be affected that, that can't work on the Sabbath. So that's an example of one that that is, it's challenging because it's it's not, in your mind you think it's equally equally treating everybody but is it equitable? Is it fair? Is it, are you putting people at a disadvantage in that way? And those are incredibly important to address. What kind of culture do you create at work if a particular group feels sort of, you know, discriminated against, via directly or indirectly? So it's really important that organisations try to think differently about what discrimination means to them. It's not the overt. I mean the overt the overt is equally important, let's not let's not overlook that. It's just the indirect are the ones that that are brushed aside, that are not thought of, and need to be sort of at the forefront.

**Commissioner Ward:** Yeah, thank you for mentioning that and for giving some examples. We know from our research related to the gender wage gap and we've talked about it previously in this series and we've probably talked about it with your, your Lean In audience that roughly two-thirds of the gender wage gap remains unexplained. We have some ideas of what causes it and that quote-unquote unexplained part is absolutely related to unconscious bias and different forms of indirect discrimination so it's something that we know the federal government is looking at. How can Stats

Canada start collecting data around these unconscious and indirect forms of discrimination and bias so we can better understand not just the gender wage gap, but other gaps in society and to make society a more, you know, fair and just, as you said, equitable place for for multiple differences across the board.

**Seghen Woldai:** Right, we have a diverse country I think it's it's time we started to think differently about how we, especially in the face of this pandemic if this is taught us anything, we really need to think differently about how we run organizations and what we want to do with our future.

**Commissioner Ward:** Absolutely. Absolutely. So, I know you're still in the process of researching the paper at the time of our recording. Maybe if it's done by the time we release this, we'll be including a link for sure. In any case we'll be promoting the, the paper, but what are some potential steps that you're already thinking about or recommendations that you think will be in your final report on, you know, what can our viewers do to take, to take, to take, to be a part of the solution?

**Seghen Woldai:** Yeah, for sure. So we've got a few of them I would say, um, you know, when it comes to your biases. I mean, the first thing is, let's, let's call a spade a spade. Everybody has them, and we need to make sure we acknowledge them, confront them, and and do our best, as individuals, as Canadians, as proud Canadians, to make sure that we are confronting it head on. And so part of that includes, you know, a lot of organizations now started offering Diversity, Equity and Inclusion trainings. That is some of the bare minimum that can be offered and the bare minimum that you as an individual at that organization should be should be, should be doing. At minimum, go to those trainings, open your eyes, open your ears, and try to take in as much as you can. I went to one recently and and, you know, even being in the space, I thought I was aware, and yet I still learned a ton and found myself really having some tough internal dialogue around how I want to proceed forward in my, in my style of communication and what I say when I don't, things like that, so really attend that. If you're an organization leader, make sure these initiatives are not performative. These need to be ongoing. These are not a, you know, once a year when something happens in the media that we decide we want to install these into an organization. Make sure you're hiring DE&I staff or appointing DEI committees and not just hiring or appointing those that look diverse. You know, spread the wealth and make sure those that are passionate about the space, feel welcomed and are open and willing to take on these, these roles. The other thing I would say is, is around hiring policies. So make sure you're hiring policies are are fair, transparent and equitable and I think some of the ways you do that are, there are lots of apps, programs, processes that can be put in place to make sure that your HR processes on, you know, remove the candidates name, try to remove unconscious bias when reviewing applications. Ensure the individuals reviewing those applications are aware of what unconscious bias looks like in the hiring process and are conscious of

that as they're going through the applications. Make sure you reveal salary ranges in your job postings. That transparency can be huge because if you ask candidates what their expectations are for salary, you are forcing candidates to low-ball their salaries if they're desperate for a job and and really that can be really, particularly harmful to marginalized people, especially women and especially women of color who have just lost a tremendous amount of jobs through this pandemic and are now you know trying to return back to the workforce. And who already face more obstacles in the job hunting process. I would say, you know, broader than that, funding intersectional research if you are in a position to do so as an organization. Supporting businesses and enterprises that are owned by women of color. Increasing funding for uh, public sector occupations. So I know we didn't get a chance to talk about it today but certainly in our paper we've highlighted the challenges with lower paid jobs being the kind of jobs that women are, our society kind of pushes them into, these nurturing jobs, these caring jobs tend to be healthcare, education-based. Whereas you know men are often pushed into construction, utilities, things like that. One of the challenges I often, you know, we, we as an organization should think about is, is the private sector. Do we call on them to take the lead to publicly disclose salaries? This is, it's not required legally but maybe that is something that private sector could set the, set the bar by by taking that first-mover in the space and disclosing their private, private sector salaries. And I think the last thing is, is for women, we said this before, for women to move forward and in organizations, they need support at home. So encouraging the men to to lean in themselves, to lean in, both in the, you know, at the workplace and being an advocate for women's equality and advocate for for for these, you know steps that I've just shared, but also at home. Leaning into the domestic work, sharing it equitably and and doing their best to support their partners or their families where possible to make sure that the women have a space to focus on their careers and can do what they can in the office. So those are some of the ones we've at least, preliminary started to think about, but certainly if you read the paper when it comes out in the next month or so. We're excited to, to share more, and we look forward to, to hearing people's thoughts.

**Commissioner Ward:** That is an exceptional list of very, like, tangible, actionable, real recommendations that people, that individuals can take and I and I like that you covered not just stuff that businesses managers can do but also people, people in relationships or people in supportive relationships or friends, colleagues, so it sounds like there is a breadth and depth of recommendations coming out with this report so we'll let our viewers know they can go to [leanincanada.com](http://leanincanada.com) just to learn more about the organization and to follow this report.

**Seghen Woldai:** Absolutely for sure and if you subscribe to our mailing list you'll be one of the first to get the the paper once it's released, and hopefully folks feel exactly that. That there's tactical recommendations, really wanted to avoid the high level, sort of, you

know, consider this, and really make it quite as tactical as we could. We want people to finish that article, read it, and have a game plan for the next day. We think there's opportunity to improve things immediately and and yes there's a lot of work ahead of us long term, real systemic changes that need to be made, but, but there's also small. Small can sometimes be large, especially when compounded across people and across time. So, I hope people will feel that it's as valuable when they read it and I look forward to hearing their thoughts.

**Commissioner Ward:** It absolutely is. Thank you so much for joining me today and for sharing the preliminary insights and the preliminary recommendations you have. We're looking forward to sharing this with our audience.

**Seghen Woldai:** Thank you so much Kadie, it was a pleasure.