

Government's failure on pay equity undervalues a crucial, caring workforce

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Sally Pitts-Brown & Memo Musa

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Care and support workers rallying to push their call for fair pay in Wellington last year. Numerous groups of such workers across the health and welfare sector have been facing protracted efforts to secure pay equity with male-dominated workforces.

KEVIN STENT / STUFF

Sally Pitts-Brown is chief executive of Pathways, one of the largest community-based mental health and addiction providers in New Zealand. Memo Musa is chief executive of Platform Trust, the peak body for the mental health and addiction community sector.

OPINION: Is systemic discrimination stopping New Zealand's 65,000 care and support workers from receiving the support and recognition they rightfully deserve?

Is this gender based, or is it because they are seen as unqualified and work for community organisations, not the government?

Mental health and wellbeing is paramount to the overall health of all New Zealanders. Almost half of all New Zealanders will experience mental distress or illness during their lifetime. Māori and youth disproportionately so.

Our mental health and addiction support workers care for and walk alongside the people they support. They provide daily care, like medication support and helping people to lead fulfilling lives in the community. Other times they play a crucial role in supporting those struggling with suicidal thoughts to find hope.

Without this workforce, thousands of New Zealanders experiencing mental health distress would be without support.

Once again, our care and support workforce (whose numbers mirror the population of Napier) have had their pay equity claim delayed by government officials. The same government officials who claimed to “take mental health seriously”.

Mental health and addiction support workers, peer workers, employment, housing, cultural and youth workers are all part of this undervalued and underpaid workforce.

These are the exact same workers who were deemed essential through Covid.



Then-health minister Andrew Little speaks at Pathways Trust during a visit to Christchurch in 2022. The mental health and addiction services provider is demanding action from the

government on its stalled pay equity case.

PETER MEECHAM / STUFF

Pay equity is about ensuring people in female-dominated professions are being paid the same as male-dominated professions where they are doing jobs of equal value, requiring the same level of skills, responsibilities and efforts. The same pay for the same work, regardless of gender.

Overwhelming evidence supports the fact that female dominated workforces are paid less than their male-dominated counterparts. Following an extensive process, we know that our predominantly female care and support workers are substantially underpaid compared to male comparator roles.

We want this imbalance addressed, our care and support workers paid fairly and to stop gender-based pay discrimination.

Over the last two years, across two different health ministers, Pathways (along with 14 other employers, four peak bodies and three unions) have been following a rigorous government process to achieve pay equity for care and support workers across our sector. Despite enormous effort, we have not been able to achieve any positive outcome.



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Unlike most, pay rates for care and support workers are mandated in legislation. Due to inflation pressures and a rise in the cost of living, in real terms pay rates have now regressed back to minimum wage. In essence, our workforce has become the working poor, having only received a government-recommended 3% salary increase this year. Ironically, this is not a workforce that will strike as they simply cannot afford a day without pay. Is it any surprise that prioritisation of wage increases has been for those workforces who can and do take industrial action?

Paying care and support workers what they deserve is urgent and overdue. The current legislation expires in December 2023.

This is not a secret from the outgoing and incoming government who right now are leaving 65,000 care and support workers hanging, with no security in sight in relation to their pay rates for 2024.

And yet every day we ask them to work and support some of our country's most vulnerable people. How can we expect people to support others when they can hardly take care of themselves and their own families?

Delaying this settlement is nothing less than a cynical ploy by Te Whatu Ora, who are now questioning the pay equity process, which is outlined in the Equal Pay Act, overseen by the Public Service Commission and involves key milestones – which are required to be signed off at each stage of the process. It is deeply shameful.

We want our workforce to thrive so they can help the people we support to also grow and thrive. Without this workforce, many vulnerable New Zealanders will be left with little support.

We implore government to commit to address pay equity for care and support workers as a matter of urgency. This is an absolute priority. Not doing so is to simply to turn a blind eye and to perpetuate sex-based pay discrimination.

Our workers deserve certainty, hope and to be paid fairly for the work they do, regardless of who is in government. The people we support and their whānau deserve a valued and respected workforce.