

Equal Partners for Change: Women and Unions

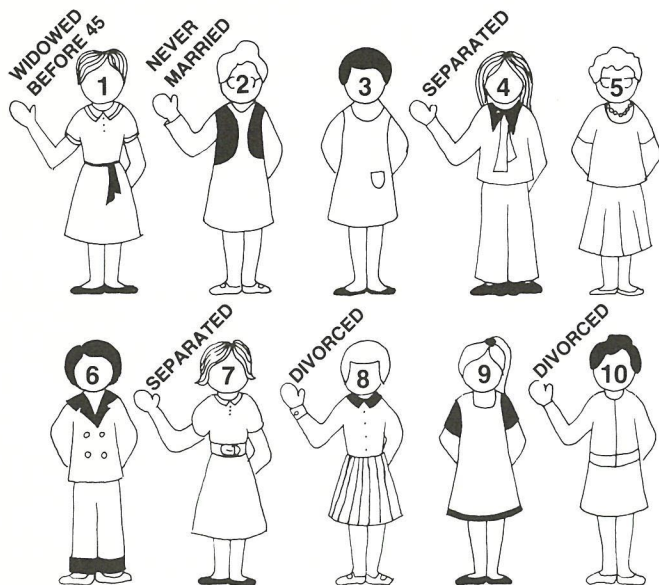


Here to Stay Women in the Work Force

All women work. Whether they are doing the unpaid labour of child care and housework, or paid labour in business or industry, women and their work are an essential part of Canada's economic life.

In the 1800's, one out of every eight paid workers was female. Today, four million Canadian women are doing paid work. Women make up 37% of the labour force, and their numbers are increasing. From 1967 to 1977, the number of women in the job market increased 70%. Until now almost 1 out of 2 women between the ages of 15-65* is in paid employment. Although predictions for the 1980's anticipate a slowdown in the number of women joining the labour force, it's clear that the paid working woman is here to stay. The need to be self-supporting puts many women in the work force.

For different reasons, six out of ten women, at some time in their lives, will be self-supporting.



Marriage no longer takes women off the job. In the last 20 years, the number of married women in the labour force has more than doubled. Now three out of five women in paid employment are married.

Thirty percent of women in the labour force are single, nine percent are widowed or divorced and over

a third have husbands with incomes of less than \$10,000.

A growing number of married women are taking paid jobs to keep up with the rising cost of living. Far from being secondary wage earners or working for luxuries, these women are working to keep their families out of poverty. The lower the husband's income, the greater the chance that his wife will be working. In one-third of Canadian families with young children where both husband and wife are working, the husband's income was less than \$12,000.

For single-parent families headed by women, finances are critical.



While most women work for financial reasons, many women are seeking paid employment for personal fulfillment. Some are choosing to make their work a life-long career. Still others are re-entering the job market after their child-rearing duties are ended.

Whether by choice or by necessity, women workers have a serious commitment to their work. Although they face blatant discrimination in job opportunities and in rates of pay, women have proven to be reliable employees. Contrary to common belief, women workers do not miss more sick days than male workers do. Neither are they any more likely to leave their jobs than men, even though most women also carry out child care and household duties.



However the differences between male and female workers show up very clearly in their paycheques. In spite of labour legislation and union efforts, the wage gap between men and women is widening. The average income from wages and salaries for male workers is \$13,352 while a female worker earns only \$6,435, less than half the man's wage. Although some legislation has been passed to introduce equal pay, loopholes allow employers to avoid paying equal wages by changing small details of the job.

The gap between male and female wages exists at all age levels and in all occupations. Even higher education does not substantially improve the chances for equal pay. With only primary school education, an average woman's salary is \$3,758 and a man's is \$9,659. But with a university degree, a woman still only earns \$9,966 to the male graduate's average of \$21,854.

Women are still employed largely in "job ghettos," parts of the labour market characterized by low wages, monotonous tasks and lack of opportunity. Almost three-quarters of women working are in clerical, sales, services or health-related occupations. Women make up almost all the bank tellers, secretaries, cashiers, nurses, telephone operators and receptionists. Little progress is being made in getting women into non-traditional jobs, skilled trades or apprenticeship programs.

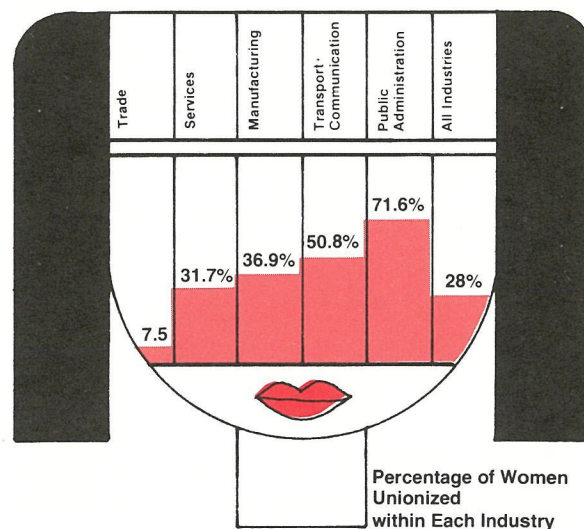
Occupational segregation by sex does not protect women from getting lower wages. Even in the "female" fields such as clerical work, men averaged up to \$45 more a week than women workers. In fact, as more women enter certain industries, the salary levels drop in that industry.

Nor do job ghettos protect women from unemployment. When the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was published in 1970, unemployment among women had been consistently lower than for men for 20 years. In the last decade, however, women have been badly hurt by unemployment. The recent rates for women have been running close to 10% across Canada, and up to 15% in some areas, such as Newfoundland and New Brunswick.

Women, always last hired and first fired, are too often considered by employers and governments as disposable secondary wage earners. Therefore in government cutbacks, special programs or retraining courses for women are the first to be cut.

Women are beginning to look more often to unions for assistance. Since 1967, female membership in unions has risen from 15% to 28%.

Within unions, women face many of the same problems of discrimination that plague them in the working world. However, they have begun to demand and receive action from their unions to eliminate



inequalities. Some unions, particularly those with large female memberships, have negotiated equal pay clauses, better maternity leave, equal job opportunities and fairer benefit packages. More union women are appearing as officers and staff, and some unions have affirmative action programs underway.

Women are not a temporary part of our economy. They will continue to look to paid work for financial support and personal fulfillment. Women in the labour force are demanding from their unions and from society an end to unequal treatment.

* Statistics from Women's Bureau, Labour Canada, 1977 edition, *Women in the Labour Force*.

For Discussion:

1. Women are often told they are discriminated against because they are not primary bread-winners. How many of your female co-workers consider their wages necessary to the family? How many are self-supporting or helping to support their families? Are they satisfied with their wages and their work opportunities?

2. In your workplace, are there jobs done exclusively by men or by women? If so, compare the jobs considering responsibility, physical effort, working conditions, difficulty of work and experience required. Could the job be done by either sex? Do the jobs have different salaries?

3. "Unions are likely to be a major factor in improving the position of women in the work force." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why? Does your union listen to and act on the needs of women workers? How could you get your union to act on these needs?