

EMPLOYMENT EQUITY: THE QUIET REVOLUTION?



Credit: Courtesy of Centennial College

En moins de vingt ans, la proportion des femmes au travail a atteint 41%. On attribue la cause de ce changement dramatique à une variété de facteurs – y compris plus d'éducation, de divorces, une espérance de vie plus grande, moins d'années passées à porter et à élever des enfants, et une hausse du niveau de la vie. Le tout fait que plus de femmes sont reléguées à des emplois mal rémunérés, sans prestige, et sans issue.

Mona Kornberg résume les résultats de la dernière décennie d'action positive au Canada, décrit les raisons pour son échec, et suggère des stratégies possibles pour faire face à la résistance qu'on lui fait.

The change in the sex composition of the workforce – in less than two decades the proportion of women in the workforce rose to 41% – has been referred to as "The Quiet Revolution."¹ The dramatic increase in women's workforce participation has been attributed to a variety of factors, including increased education, an increase in divorces, longer life expectancy, fewer years spent in child-bearing and rearing, and a rising standard of living necessitating two incomes per family.

But all this has meant up to now is that an increasing number of women are being segregated into low-paying, low-status, dead-end jobs. Attention is just beginning to focus on the prevalence and persistence of discriminatory practices in the workplace. Oblivious to this, Statistics Canada describes the phenomenon as "the revolution that has been sweeping the Canadian workplace."²

- For the first time in the nation's history, more than one-half of women aged 15 and over were in the labour force in 1981, either in a job or actively seeking one.
- The participation of women in the labour force increased at a rate two and one-half times that for men, or 60 percent over 10 years to about 4.5 million.
- Although participation rates were highest for women in their early twenties (over 77% in 1981) – the largest increase of women workers came from married women.

Despite the increase in numbers, 77% of women are concentrated in only 5 major job categories: those five are the low-pay, low-status, dead-end jobs characteristic of clerical, sales and service occupations. To take one instance, the percentage of women in "pink-collar" jobs has in-

creased from 71 to 74% over the last ten years with only some slight increases in managerial and non-traditional jobs. In addition, women constitute about 72% of all part-time workers (although one in four would prefer to be full-time) and their jobs are more vulnerable to obsolescence because of technological change. Equally dismal figures confirm that women continue to earn less than men – as of 1980 – at every educational level. "In 1980 a woman with a university degree earned slightly more than half what a man with a similar education earned, and about the same as a man with less than a grade 10 education. Similarly, a woman with less than grade 10 education earned half as much as a man with the same amount of education" (Statistics Canada).

As the numbers of women in the workforce swell, as better educated women find themselves earning less than their equally educated male counterparts, the quiet revolution is beginning to find its voice. Receiving impetus from the American Civil Rights movement of the 60s, efforts to remedy workplace discrimination have relied on two interrelated strategies for change: one has been directed toward passing anti-discrimination legislation, and the other toward promoting affirmative action programs.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF A DECADE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN CANADA

Although affirmative action measures, now known as *employment equity* measures, aim to redress the workplace inequities of four target groups – the disabled, native people, visible minorities, and women – this paper will address itself to the situation of the last, and largest group: women.

Starting with the Equal Employment Opportunity Program for women in the Federal Public Service in the 1970's, we have had over ten years to assess the accomplishments of voluntary affirmative action programs in Canada. With few exceptions, what does stand out, in the words of one authority, "is that measurable and observable results after 10 years must be classed as disappointing."³ Part of the problem has been the difficulty of agreeing upon a definition of what constitutes an affirmative action program, and then applying that definition to measure progress. Accordingly, there has been tremendous variation in how affirmative action is applied and measured.

The experience of federal and provincial

bodies points to some of the confusion and difficulties. In its 1982 employer survey the Ontario Women's Directorate found that out of 198 respondents, 65 employers reported having formal affirmative action programs, 35 had informal programs, and 98 had no affirmative action programs. (The formal/informal definitions of the Directorate itself covered a broad range). Similarly, the response rate to federal initiatives has not been encouraging. Since 1979 The Canada Employment and Immigration Commission has had responsibility for providing consultative and technical services to assist the private sector and crown corporations in affirmative action planning. Between 1979 and 1983 CEIC contacted 900 companies and wound up with 34 official agreements. Of these 34 agreements, no trends or similarities were identified. Although there have been individual cases of public and private sector employers initiating and implementing affirmative action programs that resulted in measurable changes, *the overall situation for women in the workplace has not changed appreciably.*

Recent developments point to a step – albeit a modest one – in the direction of equity. In March 1985 Flora MacDonald, Minister of Employment and Immigration, announced the Federal Government's response to Judge Rosalie Abella's Royal Commission Report on Equality in Employment, and cited the new federal measures as a "major step toward achieving genuine Employment Equity in Canada."⁴ These measures include the requirement for crown corporations, federally-regulated businesses (with 100 or more employees), and firms contracting with the government (for goods and services of \$200,000 or more) to implement employment equity and to report annually to Parliament on their plans and progress. *What these measures did not do was set up a separate standard-setting or enforcement agency; nor do they assign the responsibility uniformly to any existing agency.* Instead, the government chose to "draw on the energies and inventiveness of employers in removing barriers" and to rely on the public pressure that supposedly would follow the public reporting of company records. As it now stands, it is not clear what the outcome of the federal initiatives will be. There seems to exist an expectation that some of the problems will be resolved informally and that the private sector will voluntarily want to emulate any progress made by the federal sector.

REASONS FOR FAILURE

There are a number of important lessons to be drawn from both the Canadian and American experiences in affirmative action. *Voluntary affirmative action is ineffective.* Where demonstrable changes can be shown in the U.S., they are attributable to an emphasis on mandated affirmative action and enforceable contract compliance. The key instruments for implementing affirmative action measures within organizations are monitoring and accountability. Unless goals and timetables are incorporated into such programs, there is no way to evaluate progress and measure results. *Unless commitment for employment equity is made at the top and passed on to senior level staff through accountability, little change will occur.* Too often the task of overseeing and implementing affirmative action has been handed over to departments lacking enforcement powers. The clarity and force – not to mention the effectiveness – of commitment can become obscured when managers are not held accountable.

The problem of accountability is reflected in the 1982 employer survey of the Ontario Women's Directorate. Of 65 respondents who claimed to have formal goal-oriented programs, only 24 held managers accountable for promoting women. What is even more striking, is that 27 had not even informed employees that such a plan existed! *As a means of combatting systemic discrimination, the case-by-case approach adopted by human rights commissions is costly and cumbersome, and ultimately affects very small numbers.* Far more effective are class-action suits, like the AT & T case in the U.S. (1974) which changed the entire hiring, pay, and promotion structure of the country's then-largest employer of women.

A number of other overt and covert factors inhibit the momentum toward employment equity. Not least of these is that Canada is in the midst of an economic recession. At a time when companies are concerned about streamlining their operations, it is difficult to convince them of the benefits of establishing good data-collection bases, flexible work conditions, and opportunities for training and development. Equally important, and often more covert, is the threat of increased competition to the entrenched male workforce for the already scarce jobs. This threat is often expressed by charges of "reverse discrimination" and general feelings of increased hostility toward female

workers. These feelings in turn add fuel to the persistent under-valuation of what women do. Not only is this message brought home by a wage system which devalues jobs performed by women in the paid (and unpaid) labour force, but by the accumulating research findings that both men and women tend to attribute women's successes to good luck and men's successes to ability.⁵

One of the greatest barriers to employment equity has been the almost universal under-estimation of resistance and the absence of measures to combat it. Resistance can take many forms – from half-hearted attempts to implement the minimal number of employment equity measures necessary to refusing to even consider that inequities may exist in a company. Resistance may be active or passive, overt or covert. In many cases resistance is a reaction to the possibility of change. Change is frightening at any time, especially frightening if one is not feeling too sure about one's own position (as in recessionary times). A great deal of the backlash appearing can be attributed to fear of anticipated change.

Most of the arguments raised by opponents have not been supported by any evidence. The charge that competence is being sacrificed in the name of equality is not backed by any data. Nowhere do advocates of employment equity suggest that unqualified employees should be hired or promoted; nobody would benefit from this situation – least of all the employee hired. The argument that business will suffer from mandated employment programs is also unsupported: even employers in the U.S. who initially resisted these programs have reported the positive impact affirmative action has had on their business practices.⁶

DEALING WITH RESISTANCE

These reactions, and the more subtle negative ones, have to be met on two different levels. On the content level: the arguments and concerns must be acknowledged and refuted. Resistance to proposed change (especially change directed at some of our most basic social premises) should be expected, acknowledged, and coping strategies developed ahead of time. Although it is crucial for the initial commitment to employment equity to come from the top, where the authority lies, it is also important to have a cross-section of employees involved in the early planning and implementation. If people

are encouraged "to own" the ideas and the program, they will have an investment in making it work. It is usually uncertainty that fosters anxiety: knowing what to expect, whenever possible, reduces it.

Viewed systemically, a change in one part of the organization will affect other parts. Building support networks for all sides is essential. Good fortune can suddenly ostracize people. A consultant friend of mine recently described a situation in her company whereby a secretary, through hard work and initiative, was promoted to an administrative position. Not only did the other secretaries stop talking to her, but they banded together to condemn her "uppity" behavior. It is a common scenario and one that should not be ignored; it is important to acknowledge what is happening and provide opportunities to deal with the mixed reactions when one "breaks rank."

Instituting employment equity procedures within a familiar framework, with familiar terminology, also makes for a more gradual, comfortable change. Employment equity can thereby be handled as any other problem-solving activity in the organization. As such, it should aim for short and long-term goals that are realistic and measurable. Achieving short-term goals provides reinforcement for the longer, more difficult organizational changes.

THE RATIONALE FOR EMPLOYMENT EQUITY

Employment equity is like motherhood: we are all committed to it *in principle*. The crucial question is, what are we going to do to promote and support it? Why should we do anything? There are two main arguments for implementing employment equity measures. The first is based on an economic rationale. "Affirmative action is good business."⁷ The proportionate participation of women in the work force continues to increase. As the Honourable Robert Welch has stated, "In Ontario, women now make up 43% of the total workforce and our projections see the participation rate of women in the workforce rise to 50% by the year 2000 . . ."⁸ By 1990 women will account for two-thirds of labour force growth and will represent a sizeable underutilized resource. In recessionary times particularly, businesses recognize the need for efficient and effective utilization of *all* human resources. This message is increasingly

brought home by business leaders, as George Vila, chairman and chief executive officer of Uniroyal Inc., attests: "In the decades ahead, any organization which ignores or underestimates the potential of women - or overlooks any source of talent, for that matter - will be making a fatal mistake."⁹

Women themselves are demonstrating their abilities in increasing numbers. Partly in response to their frustration in being denied admittance to the inner executive circles of the big companies, women are going into business for themselves. Not only are Canadian women starting businesses at a rate three times that of men (paralleling the rate of American women which is five times that of men) but they "are a major force in small business, are more successful than men and are responsible for a significant portion of job creation in Canada."¹⁰ However, despite women's contributions to the economy as both employees and entrepreneurs, they have not yet benefitted accordingly. The argument from the economic rationale is a powerful lever of change: "In the future, there will be no room for the economic inefficiency of (these) wasted resources. Equity in the work place is not only just in a democratic society but is a key to economic growth."¹¹

The second argument for promoting employment equity is based on another reality: we are not discussing a minority population. We are discussing a poten-

tially powerful force. Revolutions - quiet or otherwise - cannot be ignored and cannot be turned back. It may well be "that women in the (under)paid labour force will not continue to suffer in silence."¹² As awareness of inequities increases, so do demands for effective organizational change.

What we need is a two-pronged approach to employment equity, one that includes legislated changes (enforced and implemented) and that at the same time effectively deals with the anticipated resistance. These changes must occur at all levels. "No matter how much the law changes, it is up to the individuals who make up society to struggle against the beliefs and assumptions that relegate all women to second-class status - to the detriment of our whole society."¹³ The attainment of equity objectives is good business and everybody's business.

⁹J. Farley, *Affirmative Action and The Woman Worker* (New York: Amacom, 1979), p. 6.

¹⁰*Statistics Canada, Canadian Women in the Work Place* (Canada Update from the 1981 Census).

¹¹Leah Cohen, "Affirmative Action in Canada: Ten Years After," (Ottawa: Department of the Secretary of State Human Rights Directorate, March 1983), p. 4.

¹²Statement to the House of Commons by the Honourable Flora MacDonald, Minister of Employment and Immigration, on the Federal Government's

Response to the Royal Commission Report on Equality in Employment (March 8, 1985).

¹³Nina Colwill, "Lucky Lucy and Able Adam: To What Do You Attribute Your Success?," in *Business Quarterly*, 49 (1) (Spring 1984), 93-94.

¹⁴Paul Scott, "The American Experience with Affirmative Action: Debunking the Myth," in *CEIC* (November 1982).

¹⁵Peter Robertson, "Affirmative Action: What's It All About?," in *CEIC* (March, 1980).

¹⁶The Honourable Robert Welch, "Productivity and Affirmative Action," in *Productivity* (October 1984), p. 24.

¹⁷Quoted in Paul Scott, p. 25.

¹⁸Jerry White, "Businesswomen Meet Success," in *Ontario Business* (May 1985), p. 5.

¹⁹*Employment Equity and Economic Growth, A Background Paper* (8 March 1985).

²⁰Dorothy Gillmeister, *The Equal Opportunity Fantasy: A Hard Look At Voluntary Affirmative Action*, p. 18.

²¹Anne E. Thorkelson, "Women Under the Law: Has Equity Been Achieved?," in A. Sargent (ed.), *Beyond Sex Roles* (St. Paul, Minnesota: West Publishing, 1977), 493-4.

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