

# HOW AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PROGRAMS FAIL WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL JOBS

*Marcia McMillan*

*Il y a un an, Marcia McMillan a complété sa formation comme opératrice d'équipement lourd. Dès ses débuts, son cheminement vers un emploi dans sa spécialité ressemble à une course à obstacles. Elle a survécu à l'inattention des bureaux de la main d'oeuvre, et autres bureaux gouvernementaux; un manque de compréhension – jusqu'à l'hostilité, même – au collège où elle reçut sa formation, et sur les champs de construction où elle a par la suite cherché un emploi. Elle a aussi survécu au refus d'un syndicat de l'accepter comme membre.*

*Elle détaille l'histoire récente de ses emplois, se concentrant sur son sous-emploi actuel avec la Commission des transports en commun de Toronto . . . et elle explique précisément les raisons pour son désenchantement avec les programmes d'action positive.*

Affirmative Action is meandering along, stopping at every corner for a breather, waiting patiently at every green light, never challenging a yellow – and never ever (heaven forbid) jumping a red: no one wants a ticket, a wrist slap, a reputation.

Affirmative Action has no grasp on the realities involved in working on a daily basis in a non-traditional occupation. It has lost touch, it is full of holes. Why?

My major complaint – and that of other women I have talked with – centres on the people who are the affirmative action officers. Who are these people and on what basis did they acquire their positions? (*I promise not to rock the boat, I promise not to make waves, I also promise to hold three other positions while I take on this all-important task.*) Male dominated, upper-management allots these jobs: *let's have someone passive, not too forceful, let's maintain control, let's just fill that government quota and smile. Definitely folks, always smile.*

It would be interesting to test my conviction. See how many upper-management females were involved in

the choice of an affirmative action officer. Where are all the upper-management women? *Case closed.*

I have always been fascinated by the heavy machinery you see on a large construction site. I had been working for several years when I decided to go back to school and learn some basics on how to operate these heavy machines.

I was very much aware of the attention of the media and the public in regard to women in non-traditional jobs. It was difficult from the start: I was much too optimistic. I had been convinced that, once I was finished school, a job would be relatively easy to get. The doors would open for me. I would have been content had one opened without a fight. None did.

I decided that the best place to acquire information in regard to non-traditional courses being offered to women was the government offices set up through Manpower. I was told during my initial interview by a female interviewer that I really didn't want this type of work: it was dirty and dusty. She told me I was too petite and the men cursed. I assured her that becoming a heavy equipment operator was what I wanted. Several days later she telephoned me and told me there were no places left in the course at the college. I drove out to the college, talked with the registrar, and found out there were *thirty* seats left. I returned to her office and asked her why I was receiving all this inaccurate information; after all, this office had been set up specifically to help women enter the non-traditional job market. The office provided little or no information and were certainly not supportive. Since then I have been told by several women entering non-traditional work that this particular office has had a complete change of staff and now offers women an abundance of information and support.

My next step in gaining entrance to the course was to contact supervisory per-

sonnel in a regional government office in order to receive accurate information on how to go about seeking admittance. After a month of ups and downs and many telephone calls I entered Heavy Equipment School.

This is it. This is the point at which you most need assistance from the government office I have been in contact with, the college, affirmative action bureaucrats, someone to give you just a general idea of what to expect. You are entering an almost totally male environment. My particular campus is 98% male. It makes little difference how old you are, or where you have been . . . how worldly or otherwise . . . when a majority of men start loudly commenting about the size of your breasts or how tight your jeans are, it is, to say the least, awkward. Preparation and education for the women – and for the men as well – is important. It sounds like a trivial matter, but if you are prepared, things can be easier to take. On both sides.

Upon completion of the course, the non-traditional novice, forever optimistic, starts looking for a job. Again, no one at either the college or government level has contacted me. Both have affirmative action offices: I have heard from no one during my whole time at school. Two women . . . two hundred men. There has been no follow up. If I had dropped out no one would have known or cared obviously: I was one more quota-filling token. To begin my job search I went first to the Ontario Women's Directorate to get a list of all private or government agencies participating in Affirmative Action or Equal Opportunity Programs. They had no such list. They gave me a very attractive folder with *Affirmative Action* printed boldly across the front and stuffed with a hundred and one different pamphlets regarding my rights as a worker in Ontario, labour law in action, women and the law, etc., etc. – but no list. I spent days on the telephone.



Credit: Sak

Next I decided I would try the construction sites. With all my qualifications in tow I applied to six on my first day. I was told the same thing at all six: we cannot hire you unless you belong to the union (Local 793 of the Union of Operating Engineers). I went to the union hall the next day to make application to join the union. I was told by the union that they did not want me unless I had a job. Catch 22 situation. No one had told me about the unions. A whole new ball game. They would not take the three hundred dollar fee from an unemployed person. I made application and pestered them for three or four months and never heard from them again. Big question: *how do minorities gain access to unions?* Thank you, Union Local 793.

When I asked how many women belonged to this particular union I was told – oh hundreds – a sympathetic secretary informs me there are six in five thousand members.

During the time you spend at school, in government offices, visiting and talking to various people involved in non-traditional work, no one ever prepares you for union hassles or all the everyday situations encountered in being one woman working amongst twenty men. No one informs you because they do not know at first hand what it really is like. They have not been there personally.

Affirmative Action sends you in cold. There is no preparation or education

programs in place either for the men you will work with or for you.

My first job was with a Ministry of the Ontario Government. They had an affirmative action office. I was hired to work in a place where they had never had a woman before; no one contacted me – near the end of my six-month contract, I contacted them. They fill their government affirmative action quota and off you go . . . forgotten. After working a few months I found out that, on the Friday afternoon before I started, a foreman walked into the lunchroom and informed his twenty-five-or-so male colleagues that . . . okay boys, the party is over, we got a woman starting on Monday, no more cursing, no card playing at lunch, and take those girlie pictures off those lockers. That was the extent of the preparation they had. The average age was forty years old. A group of blue collar men, truck drivers and ex-miners who had never worked alongside a woman – who never considered such a thing possible in their lifetime. What in hell was happening in the world! No wonder you are initially treated with coldness and hostility. Later I was told that this particular affirmative action office was chiefly concerned with getting women into middle-management positions; the four or five of us making strides out there in labour did not matter much.

I have been out of school for one year now. I have held two six-month contract

jobs. I am now completing a job with the heavily Ontario Government-funded, Toronto Transit Commission. I am a labourer. I am considered a temporary casual employee, lowest-of-the-low. The unions (I have now belonged to two of them) take my money monthly but would just like to see the back of me. As a temporary employee I weaken their bargaining power, I work for less than a permanent staff member, and I get laid off when my services are no longer needed. Each job I have had has been in the non-traditional area, but neither has involved operating a piece of heavy equipment – even though that is what I went back to school to learn to do. *I regularly wonder, if I were a man with my qualifications, would it be different?*

The Toronto Transit Commission, it is often stated, has one of the best affirmative action programs in the country. It is up for an Employment Equity award this November. The T.T.C. has ten thousand employees: eighteen hundred of them are women, three hundred of them are women in non-traditional jobs. One hundred and seventy of that three hundred are drivers: if you want to drive a bus, subway train or streetcar, this is fine. But what about us who would like to be mechanics, equipment operators, carpenters, stationary engineers, etc. etc.? What about all those areas closed to women at T.T.C.? I agree that it's nice that the public gets to see those one hundred and seventy or so female drivers operating those buses, streetcars and subway trains – nice high profile stuff, Employment Equity Award stuff – but there is still that minority out there, that temporary casual woman carpenter or other woman labourer who wants that thirteen dollars an hour. What about her T.T.C.? The ones who do not want to become drivers . . . where do they fit in? How many of us are there? Eighteen hundred women – fifteen hundred who are clerical – hitting those typewriters for a lot less than thirteen dollars an hour. T.T.C.'s affirmative action officer holds two other jobs – in order that she can devote just so much time to her affirmative action duties. Employment Equity Award indeed! All those taxpayers' dollars – all that provincial assistance!

I worked with women this summer who had been working for the T.T.C. for four and five summers: not once did affirmative action ever contact them. I



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asked why they didn't complain. Their standard answer is "not enough time." Why not make time?, I asked. No one in a blue collar job wants to stand out as a disturber of the peace, especially if they need the job. They will not complain unless things get extremely bad. Do you need a Ph.D. in Psychology to know this? Why, perhaps once in the four years they had been employed, did a government official not just contact them and ask how are things going, let them know they are there if any problems arise? At least make the effort. A humanitarian gesture. It's appreciated. We were student labour: who cares? My thought is that they are future professionals. Why not get one foot up in regard to attitude? They did not even know T.T.C. had such a thing as an affirmative action office. We really need more apathy and excuses. Lets drag on another fifty years or so.

Every three months or so I get in contact with approximately fifteen women whom I have met through various networking channels. Out of the fifteen, only *two* are actually doing what the taxpayers' dollars sent them back to school to learn to do. One is a truck driver and drives a truck for her brother's company; the other is a stationary engineer and the token woman employee. Two more of us are in the casual temporary mould – looking for work every six months – and the rest are back doing what we did before . . . job

ghettos, traditional work, minimum wage. Why? We got tired, no one cared, we floundered and had nowhere to turn for support. No one made the effort to reach us. Our savings ran out, our kids needed winter coats, too many people said no.

No one went to the personnel office and got names and telephone numbers for those women who applied for non-trad work today. Where are those statistics . . . the nameless women without the loud vocal cords, the public forum, the polished veneer – the women who really did give it a shot? What affirmative action office knows how many women tried and failed because no one reached them? Where are the government reports on them, what awards are *they* in line for?

I have been told repeatedly, and most often by men, that I am too vocal, and have asked what exactly am I trying to prove. *I believe if you talk long and hard someone who matters is bound to listen* I have also been told that I will tire, give up – that we all do eventually. Women, of course, are made of finer fluff: we succumb if our hands get dirty.

My future wish is to buy a few pieces of heavy machinery and perhaps be in a position to give some other optimistic woman a chance. I will maintain my belief that, if I can do the job, at least give me the chance to try.

*Marcia McMillan, a heavy machine operator, is currently employed with the Toronto Transit Commission as a temporary casual employee in a position in which she can not use her training and specialized skills. She is a fighter on behalf of all women struggling for recognition in non-traditional work.*

## HEIFER

I see you prance by the gate  
waiting to stalk me again  
tail extended and up  
you give yourself away, foolish  
heifer.

the bulls in the pen are interested  
but put off by skittish cavorting  
your wild and rolling eye,  
comic and unpleasant. I expect you  
my haunch flexed  
the hoof is raised.  
rowdy girl, you rout and grab  
lunge hard up my udder.  
the blow is dead-on  
to your lowered shoulder  
you stumble.

I regret

if your pink-dotted, wet nose  
was bruised again  
ramming into my flank.  
but you don't say excuse me much  
never remember your loss of milk  
teeth.

my staring is more timeless:  
simple with years of letting  
the dust of it all drift and settle.  
in other words, you don't notice  
how ethereal I've become lately  
you always bullying for a suck  
violating our fresh sense of space.

the sunset radiates  
since you bug me  
I pivot and amble toward it.  
my tail slaps you  
as my shoulder shivers away flies.  
the sensation moves little sputters  
down to my udder  
where a tugging  
makes me suddenly odd and off  
struggling to recall  
a tender-mouth calf.

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