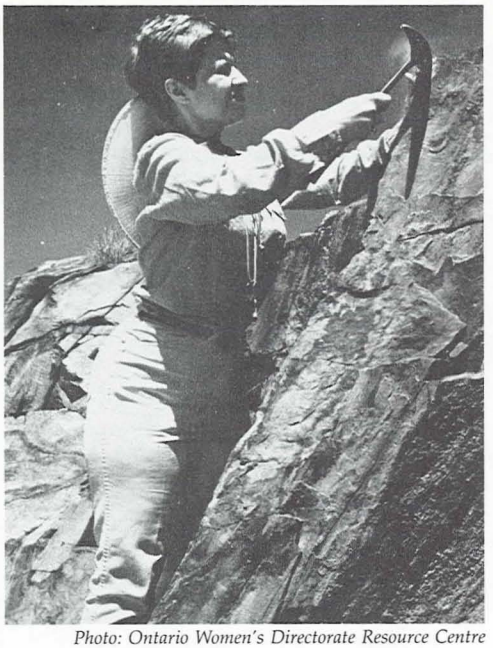

Photo: Ontario Women's Directorate Resource Centre

Climbing up Ladders: Some Questions of Balance

Naomi Black

L'auteure examine le chapitre IX de Some Questions of Balance, *le 3ème volume du Rapport de la Commission Symon sur les Etudes canadiennes, et tout particulièrement les réponses négatives qu'il a provoquées. Il y est déclaré que "la discrimination contre les femmes dans les universités . . . est une honte nationale". Le chapître fut rejeté comme "faible" et "injustifié" et reçut maints autres commentaires tout aussi négatifs. L'auteure conteste la justesse de ces opinions négatives envers un "rapport humain et perspicace" et affirme que nous n'avons pas besoin de plus d'information. Elle suggère que les administrateurs académiques préfèrent le statu quo à tout examen de solutions possibles. Elle déclare que l'action positive constitue un effort délibéré pour transformer les facteurs institutionnels et personnels qui protègent une situation injuste. C'est alors qu'on pourra constater les talents des femmes à gravir les échelons!*

Early in 1984 Thomas H. B. Symons and James E. Page presented the Canadian academic community with the third volume of the report of Dr. Symons' Commission on Canadian Studies. Much of *Some Questions of Balance* consisted of a continuation and update of the earlier volumes of the report. By and large public response to the report was positive, although the section on foreign citizenship provoked, perhaps anachronistically, much the same sort of protests as had accompanied the first stirrings of nationalism in Canadian universities in the sixties.

But one section of the report was different, a section which had no precedent in the earlier stages of the commission's work. Chapter IX included accusations and recommendations of a severity quite unmatched in the commission's previous publications. This was the section on women, the one which said (p. 201) that "the discrimination against women in universities, whether practiced consciously or unconsciously, is a national disgrace." Chapter IX urged the institutions of postsecondary education to take a lead in ending the "current inequitable treatment of women" (p. 209) and headed its list of 20 recommendations with the following: "That Canadian universities and colleges stop discrimination in the hiring (and) treatment of female faculty and staff" (p. 211).

Chapter IX was also different in the level and intensity of the negative reaction it provoked. For instance, here in *University Affairs* the executive director of the Council of Ontario Universities, Edward J. Monahan, labelled the first recommendation "gratuitously offensive", and dismissed the chapter as "weak" and "unsubstantiated." Media analyses and comments took much the same line, as did published letters to editors. I have taken the title of this piece from one such letter, published in the *Globe and Mail* on January 28, 1984, signed Sheldon Goldfarb. Let us look more closely at the arguments made by Monahan; his rhetorical response to a humane and perceptive report should not go unchallenged.

Monahan concedes that Symons and Page do indeed show "lamentable facts" about the situation of women in the universities and colleges of Canada: although women now make up a substantial portion of the persons attending and obtaining degrees, they are still the lower-paid minority among the faculty, clustered in the lower ranks. But, says Monahan, these facts do not mean much in themselves. More data are needed, which would show that women have been qualified for university jobs only recently, in "a period in which fewer appointments have been made, most at the lower ranks and at the low end of the salary scales." Although this situation is regrettable, "it does not demonstrate discrimination." Goldfarb presents the same argument: only recently have women had the necessary training, and, after all, "it takes a while to climb ladders, especially in recessionary times when . . . universities are doing little hiring." Neither the executive director of the Council of Ontario Universities nor the letter-writer comment on Symons and Page's central thesis, which is that disadvantages in education are responsible for many of women's continuing disadvantages in the larger society, such as disparities in wages and in job opportunity.

What these and similar responses amount to is a disavowal of university responsibility for the situation of women on their staffs. Such critics also deny, by implication, that educational institutions have any obligation to address the situation of women in

Canada. Symons and Page may have expected some such response: they plead with colleges and universities to recognize the situation of women, and to prepare to remedy it insofar as it lies within the university's means to do so. Above all, they urge the institutions to see the situation of women as a problem that affects more than just women themselves: "unless women are permitted to participate fully in the academic community, that community will be less than it could otherwise become." In the context of the commission's mandate, they add: "Nor will it be possible for Canadians to have a reasonably balanced knowledge and understanding of themselves or of the national and international societies within which they reside" (p. 210).

Goldfarb and Monahan base their argument on the recentness of women's qualification for full-time appointment in postsecondary institutions. They assert that procedures for hiring and promotion have changed, though in times too recent and constrained to have any impact on the situation of women. Each suggests that Symons and Page have failed to generate information that would support such an argument. But this is simply inaccurate. Such information exists, as Monahan should certainly know, and Symons and Page supply it.

In the 1970s and 1980s a very large number of studies were made of the situation of women in institutions of postsecondary education. As Symons and Page note, more than 30 of these were status-of-women surveys conducted within universities. In some cases the surveys were followed by peer-comparison studies, examining possible anomalies in the salaries and positions of full-time women faculty. These reports and reviews did precisely the research Monahan now demands to substantiate Symons and Page's accusations. Among other information, they looked at, in Monahan's words, "highest earned degree and number of years since last degree." These studies demonstrated unarguably, some 10 years ago, a gender-linked pattern of discrimination. For instance, in 1974 a University of Alberta study reported the average salary of a male faculty member as $2,661 more than that of "a female faculty member *with the same qualifications*" (emphasis added). The study concluded that "low salary at hiring seems to have been the major problem in a number of cases" (p. 200). As Symons and Page report, these studies consistently found discrepancies in salary and status that could not be accounted for by the qualifications of the women in question. And they found them at every academic level. It appears that a decade ago there were enough academically employed women with adequate qualifications that studies could show them disadvantaged.

Few postsecondary institutions made follow-up studies after their initial status-of-women surveys (although York University will have one out this year). The University of Calgary, which did, found little change in the years 1976-1980 (p. 200). The movement up the ladder has not just been slow; it has been virtually imperceptible. The current aggregate data supplied by Symons and Page suggest that this is the situation throughout postsecondary education.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the components – and the causes – of those aggregate data are unchanged. And this is, of course, the argument made by Symons and Page. Their recommendations also, as they state, are nothing new. They basically reiterate the remedies urged after that first round of university self-examination.

I was recently asked by a concerned colleague if the Symons-Page recommendations would have been received with less hostility if the word "discrimination" had not been used. I do not think so, for Chapter IX takes the academy to task for irresponsibility in the face of an important social issue. The administrators challenged this way are being asked to rethink relevancies and social obligations in a context where their past history of bad faith is obvious. As the commission notes, the in-house studies of the status of women appear to have had little effect on hiring, promotion, tenure and salary differentials (p. 199). It is not surprising that those who run the postsecondary establishments are defensive.

At the same time, it is clear that the notion itself of "discrimination" is a difficult one. Most often, it is interpreted as an accusation of prejudice and of deliberate, knowing action against individuals because of their group identity. Symons and Page are careful to note that discrimination may be unconscious as well as conscious. Attitudes and practices that have nothing to do with disliking or despising women may nevertheless create injustices. For instance, let us look at the reasonable observation that a woman's lower rate of pay may be explicable by her having interrupted her career for domestic reasons. Symons and Page note this in passing, in fact (p. 193). However, this observation may be expanded to explain why all women are paid less – even though many of them are unmarried, or childless, or managed to have their babies during summers. It is then a short step to offering lower starting salaries to young women on the assumption that they too will interrupt their careers and therefore, sometime in the future, achieve less than the young men who are hired at the same time.

These are examples of socialization and expectation, not of prejudice. They help to explain the persistent gender-linked salary anomalies. But they are no longer either plausible or acceptable. The problem now should be to find appropriate remedies. And this is just what Symons and Page's 20 recommendations attempt.

We are now talking about affirmative action, another provocative notion. But affirmative action does not have to mean quotas. What affirmative action always means is deliberate efforts to alter the institutional and personal factors that continue to prolong an inequitable situation. The necessary first step is to move away from generalities about minorities and demands for more information. Monahan's responses suggest that academic administrators prefer the status quo to any careful examination of possible remedies such as Symons and Page provide.

For women in the academy, ladders have all too often been accompanied by the downward snakes of the children's game. Chapter IX of *Some Questions of Balance* is about how to get rid of snakes, whether visible or invisible. Then it will be possible to see how adept women are at ladder climbing – when given a balanced chance.

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