

WOMEN IN THE ECONOMY: A WOMEN'S STUDIES COURSE

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Letty Anderson, qui enseigne à l'Université York, dans le programme des Etudes féminines, nous dit qu'un tel programme n'est pas complet s'il n'offre pas une formation financière et économique. La plupart des étudiants ignorent que la travailleuse typique a un emploi dans un supermarché et n'est pas la jeune cadre dynamique que l'on peut voir dans les magazines. Bien que les femmes diplômées n'échappent pas par enchantement aux problèmes économiques, cela les aide à mieux se rendre compte de leur situation.

I am teaching a new course at York University (Atkinson College) called 'Women's Work: Women in the North American Economy.' It is offered jointly through the Economics Department and the Women's Studies Program and is primarily for non-majors. It has no prerequisites: that is, people can take this course without any background in economics. This was intentional. The course was initiated with the Women's Studies Program in mind.

I felt that it was necessary for women to know something about their economic condition and what determines it and designed the course so that it would be available to those who need it. To my mind, a program of Women's Studies is incomplete without some coverage of how well women are able to take care of themselves financially.

I felt very strongly that the image of the working woman has to do with the advertising stereotype of the professional woman who earns a good income; she has no children, lives in an expensive house with a professional husband and says 'Sorry I'm late,' when she gets home. She solves her cooking prob-

lem with an expensive microwave oven.

This image is not that of a typical wage-earning North American woman. It is wrong and seriously misleading. The actual news about women in the labour force is not good and is totally unglamorous. The typical working woman is better represented by the cashier in the local drugstore or supermarket. She is an unskilled clerk who operates the computerized cash register, which has replaced many of her female co-workers and which someday may replace her too. If she works full time, she earns 45 per cent less than the average male and gets fewer fringe benefits. Since she must juggle home, family and work she often works part-time which means *no* fringe benefits and no job security.

Regardless of her domestic situation, her employer and some of her fellow employees are likely to see her as not serious about her job. At work, she is subject to harassment, sexual as well as non-sexual. This working woman is not the one we meet in the television commercials, where the underlying message is that women work by choice in order to gain self-fulfillment; in fact, most women who do work *must* work if their families are to live in reasonable circumstances.

The economic situation of women is bad and does not seem to be improving. Nor do women magically escape this trap by getting a better education, although it helps. I initiated the course because it is vital

that women become aware of the gravity of their situation; it is only through awareness that they can avoid some of the more serious economic and financial pitfalls.

The course content has been fairly wide ranging; the situation of women who work for pay, described above, is only part of what we study. We also look at the economic status of women who work in the home, address the question of the economic value of housework and talk about how much would be paid for household work if it were a market activity (a lot). We also put the question of women's economic position into historical perspective by looking at the changes in women's lives which occurred as a result of the Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression and World War II. As we approach the end of the year, I sense a change in the students' attitudes. Their initial dismay at learning of the present situation of women has been replaced with an impatience to change it.

Course Readings

Required reading will *probably* include the following:

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (Harper Torch Books)

Ester Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (St. Martin's Press)

Edith Abbott, *Women in Industry* (Appleton)

Juanita Kreps, *Sex in the Marketplace: American Women at Work* (Johns Hopkins)

Pat and Hugh Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and Their Segregated Work* (McClelland and Stewart)