

Native Women: Doubly Disadvantaged Workers*

Une bonne compréhension de la position de la femme indienne dans l'économie et dans l'histoire est nécessaire si l'on veut trouver des solutions valables à ses problèmes.

L'auteure commence par expliquer l'historique des réserves et le mode de vie qui y régnait. Mais petit à petit les structures traditionnelles ont disparu. De nos jours le rôle de ces femmes doit être redéfini. Des groupes d'étude se forment pour tenter d'améliorer la vie des femmes indiennes sur le marché du travail.

IN JANUARY 1981, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), a national body representing reserve and off-reserve Status, Non Status and Métis women, invited the Minister of Employment and Immigration to discuss Native women's employment needs and concerns about the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission's programs and services. The minister proposed a joint NWAC/Canada Employment Immigration Commission working group for further investigation of the problems and possible solutions, and NWAC agreed to this proposal.

The Minister and the President of NWAC announced in February 1981 the establishment of the joint Working Group with the Minister's commitment of \$700,000 in training allocations for Native women. The Working Group was designed as a long-term mechanism to explore



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issues ranging from pre-employment to post-employment needs and identity factors inhibiting the full participation of Native women in the labour force. Concerns that fell within CEIC's mandate and those relating to other jurisdictions were discussed, and directions which could be beneficially pursued by both the CEIC and NWAC in the short and longer term were brought forward.

It is recognized that many of the impediments to full labour-force participation by Native women are reflected, as well, in those facing the larger client groups to which they belong. Nevertheless, the objective of the Group has been to present an overview of the specific needs of Native women. It has not,

therefore, felt constrained in making its report by the competing interests of others.

The report outlines the historical development of Native women's labour-force participation, barriers which currently impede their full integration into the labour market, labour-force entry patterns and the need for related support services at all stages, from the initial decision to seek employment to post-placement counselling. Both short- and long-term recommendations are set out in the report for the Minister's consideration. In all cases, an attempt has been made to identify the role both CEIC and the NWAC should assume.

AN UNDERSTANDING of the position of Native women in the economy and the historical developments leading to their current employment situation is necessary in order to develop meaningful solutions. In traditional Indian and Inuit societies economic roles played by men and women were separate but of equal worth. Native women engaged in a wide variety of tasks, performing strenuous physical work, managing the economies of their families and generating artistic and cultural activities. Roles were assigned on the basis of tradition and custom and assignments based on sex were arbitrary. The community functioned economically through a symbiotic relationship between men and women.

The loss of the traditional structures of Native communities significantly altered the economic status of Native women. Prohibitions of traditional cultural and religious rituals, alien political and social systems and the introduction of coping mechanisms such as alcohol placed considerable pressures on the community, changed the socio-economic role of Native women and seriously damaged the family. The introduction of a wage economy, based on the value that one's worth and prestige are derived from the earning of income, placed an unequal status on women, for wage employment and the education and training leading to it were primarily in the male domain.

Current economic realities call for a questioning of the traditional role of women in the economy. Unemployment for the on-reserve population remains significantly above the national average. Current trends indicate that off-reserve migration is increasing and that a higher percentage of Native women than men reside off reserve. A major proportion of these women are young, unemployed single parents, often with large families and living in poverty. Such conditions lend urgency to the need for Native women to become active participants in the labour force, not only for the benefits to themselves as individual persons, but for the related benefits to their families and to the general economy through their increased input.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DATA describing Native people are often unavailable or inadequate. In most cases a reliable national data base does not exist. It is still possible, however, to ascertain that social and economic conditions of Native society are much inferior to those of non-Native society.

Most of the available data on Native people's labour-market activity is not disaggregated by sex: so it has been difficult to obtain a clear, quantitative view of Native women's problems as compared to those of Native men. The Working Group's researchers did, however,

bring forward the following statistics:

- The female participation rate hovers at about 25 per cent, although the potential participation rate has been estimated as high as 31 per cent. Native women in Winnipeg experience an unemployment rate of 40 per cent, four times the average for the city's female population. The Yukon Native Women's Association has estimated that 71 per cent of Native women are unemployed. Indications are that many who are unemployed rely on social assistance, one study in Saskatchewan estimating that 75 per cent of Status Indians live on welfare.
- Age distributions, which show a young population, suggest a future increase in potential labour-force participants. Native women between the ages of 16 and 25 form 50 per cent of the non-dependent population: those between the ages of 26 and 40 generally exhibit the highest incidence of unemployment. In terms of long-range planning, the age distribution indicates a potentially dramatic increase in the labour force, with projections in Alberta of 37 per cent by 1986 and 71 per cent in Saskatchewan by 1991.
- There has been a steady migration from reserves to urban centres. Approximately 30 per cent of Treaty and Status Indians (most of whom are Native women) now live off reserve. Those living in the cities are faced with great difficulty in seeking employment, due in part to federal/provincial jurisdictional questions, while those living in outlying areas are affected by the general lack of job opportunities in such locations.

A STUDY UNDERTAKEN for the recent CEIC Task Force on Labour Market Development focused on the specific case of urban Natives living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The study is highly localized, but it is the Working Group's sense that its finding are indicative of the nature of the existing problems, even though they may be present with greater severity in other centres. Using the

1979-80 Institute for Urban Studies Native Data Base, the study found the following:

- Females comprise the largest segment of both Status Indian (66 per cent) and Métis and Non Status Indian (57 per cent) residents in the city, and the largest segment (63 per cent) of recent migrants.
- Most of the women are young (90 per cent are below 45 years) and indicated they initially moved to the city for reasons other than employment. Other sources suggest that once they are in the city employment becomes a greater concern in view of the cost of living.
- Mother-led, single-parent families comprise 43 per cent of Native households and 53 per cent of Native family households, more than twice the headship rate of the general female population of the city. Similar percentages were found in a province-wide study undertaken by the Ontario Native Women's Association in 1978.
- The education level of labour-force-age Native women is substantially below that of the general urban population (73 per cent have completed grade ten or less). The national educational average for Natives is grade eight. The Winnipeg study also found that a significant proportion of Native women (40 per cent) has very limited or no prior employment experience. Their participation rate is one third lower than the city's female average.
- Employment among Winnipeg's Native women was found to be irregular and periodic, and their unemployment of long duration (70 per cent did not work during the six months prior to the interview). The unemployment problem is most severe among the younger (15 - 24 years) and Status Indian sub-populations. A study conducted in Regina reported that among employed Native women, however, turnover rates are fairly low (74 per cent had held their jobs for two years or more).
- Employment is heavily concentrated in low-skill/low-entry-level/low-wage occupations within the service and manufacturing/process-

ing industries, a pattern also evident in the Ontario study. Forecasts for these industries indicate a general decline in the employment opportunities over the medium term.

- More than 70 per cent of Native households reported incomes below the Statistics Canada poverty line. Most, particularly single-parent families, are dependent on transfer-payment income, commonly social assistance.

The study suggests that, although Native males experience great difficulties in the urban-labour market, the problems are more acute among Native women. Three distinct sets of factors appear to inhibit Native women's labour-force participation:

1. Labour-market segmentation based on sex and Native ancestry.
2. Levels of Native education and skill development and opportunities for occupational training. (Substantial occupational training appears necessary to expand the employment opportunities available to this group.)
3. Family responsibilities and other demographic constraints. (Native women often have large families, the fertility rate being 3.0 compared to the national average of 1.8. In addition, the fact that a large proportion of Native communities lie in remote areas where job opportunities are limited serves to inhibit labour-force participation.)

THE WORKING GROUP has identified what it believes to be a comprehensive approach to the employment issues for this clientele. The model's premise is that all aspects of Native women's employment must be addressed to prevent falling short of goals. It is not possible to look at employment without considering the environment Native women live in or to ignore attitudinal and value-based perceptions affecting their employment. It will be the task of the ongoing consulting group further to define specific strategies. The issues coincide with the priorities established by the Working Group — support services, limiting criteria,



Photo: Judy McGrath

CEIC delivery of services and financial and technical assistance. Priority recommendations are summarized under in the conclusions, as are the long-term issues presented in Appendix I. The recommendations are presented as they relate to progressive stages of labour-market entry through to full employment.

During the course of its discussion and review of available documentation, the Working Group remained aware that the employment circumstances of Native women will require not only immediate remedial efforts on the part of CEIC, Native women's groups and others, but also a long-term investment of support services and intensified programming if significant progress is to be made in reducing the social and economic inequalities which exist for this group. In this first report, the Working Group has set out an initial slate of both short-and long-term recommendations which it feels move toward this ultimate objective. Continued consultation and assessment

may reveal new directions and modifications which are required to increase the effectiveness of efforts made on behalf of Native women, and it is the Working Group's belief that all parties should remain open to the evolution of policy and program responses as issues regarding Native women's employment are pursued more intensively.

At this particular time, however, the Working Group has chosen to submit to the Minister of Employment and Immigration selected recommendations as priority items for immediate action. It is the Working Groups's belief that these measures represent feasible, easily implemented, low- or no-cost responses which can largely alleviate the labour-market hardship experienced by Native women in Canada.

**Excerpts from a report — Native Women — Labour Force Development, July 1981, Employment Canada.*