

ECONOMIC PROSPECTS & POLICIES FOR WOMEN

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Les restrictions budgétaires quant à l'orientation professionnelle des femmes, indiquent bien leur statut inférieur de travailleuses. Ce sont elles qui, les premières, souffriront des changements technologiques et de l'automatisation dans le secteur tertiaire. Il est grand temps que la femme s'intéresse à l'organisation économique, car il y va de son avenir professionnel.

WORKING LIFE for women is coming to have nearly as much continuity as for men. In fact, it is predicted that women workers will account for the bulk of Canada's labour-force growth in the 1980s. Unfortunately, government policies have not kept pace with, let alone recognized, this trend.

Current economic policies of high unemployment, high inflation and social-service cutbacks mean little reprieve for women who continue to bear a disproportionate share of the unemployment burden and to be segregated into jobs that are less well paid, less stable and less skilled than those occupied by men. The ties, which clearly hurt women more than any other group, have not abated and, unless immediately changed, paint a bleak future for women in the Eighties.

The sources of women's continuing economic inequality and totally inadequate employment opportunities are many. First policy-makers in Canada failed to come anywhere

near an accurate forecast of women's participation in the labour force during the 1970s. In January 1979, the labour-force participation rate for women reached 48.8 per cent, a rate the Finance Department predicted would not occur until 1986. Such inaccurate predictions occurred despite the fact that the influx of women into the labour force was not sudden and not a temporary aberration from normal behaviour. They did, however, contribute to this country's failure to deal with the special issues that have accompanied women's entry into the paid labour force.

INACCURATE FORECASTING may be less a function of incompetence than of an economic policy ill equipped to deal with a growing number of job-seekers. The link between occupational segregation, women's high unemployment and women workers' second-class status is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the response of government to the economic downturn. Special employment counselling and training programs for women are refused funding. Support services such as childcare and services for the aged, which enable women to combine paid employment with family responsibilities, are cut back. Public works and job-training programs to put the unemployed back to work are, for the most part, designed around the needs and skills of male workers. Indeed, the tactics of policy-makers seem to be not to find women jobs, but to get them out of the labour force altogether.

The current approach by policy-

makers and economic advisors to label women 'secondary earners' and, by implication, to blame them for part of Canada's unemployment is based on the assumption that, if women would only leave the paid labour force, we would be able to return to a 'full-employment economy.' As recently as 1979, a study by the Economic Council of Canada stated that higher energy prices resulting in fewer jobs would not necessarily mean an increase in the unemployment rate, because those associated with the secondary labour force are sensitive to income opportunity and would leave the labour force.

The underlying motive of this approach is the need to perpetuate existing economic arrangements and institutions by maintaining a controlled labour force. The Canadian economy, like other capitalist economies, depends on women as a reserve army of cheap labour and seeks to maintain women in a weak and vulnerable position. Consequently, social policies maintain women as a labour force on call in times of recession, ready for the next round of expansion, if and when it comes.

Despite the economic slowdown, the number of women in the labour force, especially married women and mothers of young children, is constantly increasing. The belief that slower economic growth discourages women from seeking employment is merely wishful thinking on the part of Canada's policy-makers, who refuse to recognize that economic necessity or personal satisfaction is sufficient reason for women's entry into the paid labour force.

INITIALY, women were somewhat protected from the economic recession because they were heavily concentrated in less-affected sectors, such as the services. However, the reprieve was short lived. Lacking adequate training and concentrated in a narrow range of traditionally feminine occupations, women are now faced with fewer opportunities in their own fields and fewer chances of finding a job in another.

Not only do women bear the brunt of the effects of slower economic growth and the resulting lower growth in job opportunities; they also bear the brunt of technological change, particularly in micro-electronics, which is leading to the automation of service jobs. There is every reason to be pessimistic about the impact of new technology on women workers. Concentrated in jobs where technology displaces women even more into low-skill and low-productivity jobs and deprived of technical training, women face higher levels of unemployment, continuing occupational segregation and heightened job dissatisfaction.

Although the immediate economic future for women does not look bright, it must not be forgotten that women have the strength of numbers to change current policy direction. Equality and economic security for women are generally accepted principles, but they will become a reality only through concerted action now and through fundamental changes in the planning and organization of our economy.

WOMEN IN CANADA have an immense stake in economic planning aimed at full employment and industrial development. Labour-market equality depends first and foremost on a full-employment policy in which every citizen, regardless of sex, has the right to full and stable employment. It also depends on industrial strategies to control capitalist investment and to create employment in the manufacturing sector.

The decline of jobs in the goods-producing sector and technological

advances in the service sector have accentuated the poor job prospects for women. A smaller percentage of the total labour force and of women is engaged in the manufacturing sector now than at the turn of the century.

Through a planned strategy of investment and development, Canada can provide the opportunity for economic self-sufficiency, the creation of new jobs and the basic conditions for the achievement of labour-market equality.

... Policy-makers think that, if only women would return home, we could have a 'full-employment economy'...

Although economic planning and full-employment strategies are a necessary prerequisite of labour-force equality, they are not sufficient. They do not guarantee access to new jobs created, if women are not trained in those fields. They do not address deep-rooted attitudes and discriminatory practices. They do not respond to the double burden for women, that of holding down a job and maintaining family responsibilities. They do not guarantee that wife-battering, child-abuse, alcoholism and family breakdown will be less prevalent in single-industry and Northern communities.

AN ECONOMIC POLICY will not succeed until it has ensured full and effective use of Canada's human resources. If it is to result in any positive change for women, three basic requirements must be met:

1. A conscious decision to change the position of women must be built into the terms of reference of economic-policy planning. As Eileen Caner, Director of the Women's Economic Rights Branch of B.C.'s Ministry of Economic Development, states:

If economic development terms of reference are drawn up with the basic assumption that women exist as dependents of men and not as persons responsible for their own economic future, then the studies, planning agreements or development schemes will be such that they deliver programs that validate and reinforce the original dependency assumptions.

2. The success of an economic policy must be based on more than economic factors such as the number of jobs created, the size of the trade deficit or the amount of profits invested in Canadian industries. Equally important is the development of a whole range of social indicators that would come to grips with human needs and benefits that are untouched by the calculation of goods and services produced.

3. Social and economic policies must be integrated and developed simultaneously to ensure not only the right of everyone to paid employment, but also the right of everyone to work under equal conditions.

THE TASK of policy-makers in Canada is to ensure that social policy is developed in conjunction with, and at the same pace as, economic policy. Women's move toward greater economic independence depends on the simultaneous pursuit of two goals. First, there must be a commitment to full employment and economic planning. Second, there must be a commitment to eliminate social barriers which restrict employment opportunities and lower women's earnings. Pursuit of either of these two goals in isolation from the other is likely to frustrate women's progress toward equality in the labour force and result in an ineffective economic policy.

The parallel and integrated development of economic and social policies is therefore essential to the goal of equality. With these policy tools and the commitment to work on behalf of women, Canada has the potential to create the conditions for full and equal participation in all aspects of society by both men and women.