

Woman in Man's Territory: The Sexuality of the Non-Traditional Workplace

Kate Braid

*Cet article est offert à Meredith qui, à travers son enseignement,
m'a montré que le sujet de la sexualité de la femme
n'est pas un mystère et qu'il mérite d'être étudié.*

*When ... men ... look at a meeting of a board of
trustees and see only men, they think they are ob-
serving a sexually neutral or sexless world rather than
a masculine world. For ... women are the bearers of
sexuality.*

M. Millman & R.M. Kanter, 1975
Another Voice

Dedication

This article is a gift to Meredith who first assured me, through her teaching, that the subject of women's sexuality is not a Mystery above inquiry. It is given in thanks for her tremendous patience at its slow delivery.

Introduction

For hundreds of years, with a brief interlude during the World Wars, trades and blue collar work have been almost exclusively a male preserve, a 'men's only' club where men could create the kind of atmosphere and establish the kind of relationships with which they felt most comfortable and from which women were almost universally excluded.

One notable exception is the fishing industry in which wives and daughters often worked alongside their men. However, paralleling this fact is the simultaneous and deep superstition of the 'bad luck' associated with women on boats. Some men fish with women. Others will not let even their wives step on board for fear her presence will cause tangled nets, broken traps and disappearing fish runs. In general, then, women have stayed at home. The men went out to work, together.

This article begins to explore what happens when a woman works in blue collar jobs that are the traditional territory of men. It began with my own experience as a lumber piler, construction labourer and currently, carpenter's apprentice. But it is primarily based on in-depth interviews with 23

women in non-traditional jobs in B.C., the Yukon and Ontario who work as labourers, carpenters, a deckhand, fish boat operator, mechanic, oil refinery operator, truck and fork-lift driver, lumber grader, repairwoman, mill operator and maintenance engineer. These interviews, in addition to others with Canada Employment personnel, employers and union officials, were conducted in the course of research for a Master's thesis for Simon Fraser University. ('Invisible Women: Women in Non-Traditional Occupations in B.C.' Department of Communication, 1979.) They have been followed up with numerous personal conversations with tradeswomen in the Women in Trades Association of B.C. and at the first National Conference of Women in Trades in Winnipeg in September, 1980.

The article begins from Millman and Kanter's point that when men look at a gathering of men, 'they think they are observing a sexually neutral or sexless world rather than a masculine world.' It aims to show the intensely sexual attitudes and behaviour manifested in any all male or predominantly male workplace and to explore the effects of such a work environment on women's sexuality. It concludes with observations on the contradictions evoked between women's experience of themselves as female and their socialization as feminine.

The Male Territory

Womanland

Beware our small shadow

as it scuttles across your glories ...
We are the ones who have never
learned to keep our hands off things
We are the creatures you have no
pact with come to betray you.

Peter Trower, Logger, 1978
Northflight Over Wilderness

There is a common social assumption that a gathering made up entirely of men is sexless. Any woman who seeks a non-traditional occupation is therefore generally unprepared for the intensity of the male flavour of the workplace when she enters it for the first time. While she naïvely expected that her main concern would be the work, she finds instead that a major portion of her energies must be spent dealing with the effects of a strong male community whose members have come, to a large extent, to define themselves in terms of what they all, regardless of race or other defining characteristics, are most conspicuously *not* — that is, female. The fact of the presence of a woman — a solitary woman especially — increases the men's consciousness of themselves as men. They will often then seek to preserve their commonality by keeping the woman, the token, on the outside. 'We worked together really well,' one woman typically commented, 'but I always sort of felt on the outside.'

Women interviewed clearly felt that they stood outside the boundaries of the masculine work world. 'I wasn't really welcome,' observed a labourer. A fork-lift driver concurred, 'They couldn't piss in the U-drains anymore, they cut down their swearing — they just

didn't like women around them.'

Being the only woman on a crew of men thus becomes somewhat like being a double agent. You are with the boys but not one of them at the same time as you are one of the girls but (with so few women yet in trades) not with them.

One of the primary means by which male sexualization of the workplace is revealed and maintained is in language: sexual terminology, swearing and talk about women.

Long before the most recent influx of women, the industrial and crafts workplace was humming with sexual terminology and sexual reference. There are 'male' and 'female' and even 'lesbian' (female-female) connections; boards are 'dressed' or 'undressed'; something to be moved a fraction goes 'a cunt hair' right or left; there are 'studs', 'screws', 'nuts', 'wires' to be pulled and 'erections'; any small projection is a 'tit' or 'nipple'; and virtually every machine, tool and object is referred to in the feminine as 'she'. 'Lay 'er down!' or 'You've got 'er!' one carpenter will call to another when a board is in position. Sexual overtones are often overt. Once when I asked a labourer for some studs to finish framing a wall, he replied, 'Will I do?' Men often tease each other about their tools (especially those that are longer than they are wide, such as hammers) as an extension of their sexuality — hence the bigger and the more powerful, the better. An electrician reported that after five years on the job, men still stopped to watch every time she used a power tool. 'It's partly that it's somewhat sexual and partly that women aren't supposed to be able to handle anything associated with power,' she said.

It is interesting to note that while the tool is associated closely with his own body, the objects upon which a man works are associated with the female. One carpenter informed me that the slang term 'cunt' was originally the name for the slit in a carpenter's leather apron where he kept his hammer. A search in the *Oxford English Dictionary* failed to verify this information. The dictionary fails to give any definition for 'cunt' and refers the reader to 'cunye', another slang reference to the female genitals whose original meaning is clearly rooted in the trades. It's

11th century use meant 'cornerstone', perhaps a colloquial reference to the location of the 'cunye' in the angle formed by a women's legs. At any rate, the association of female sexuality with the trades seems clear.

The subtlety of sexual references can leave women feeling paranoid and over sensitive unless they are confirmed. Once a group of us, 40 men and two women, were being instructed on the use of a Hilti gun, a powder activated tool that shoots nails into concrete and metal. I sat feeling increasingly uncomfortable as the instructor spoke of 'depth of penetration', 'oiling your tool' and 'sending it all the way in' until one young man burst out in a stage whisper, 'It's really sexy, isn't it!' Everyone furiously scribbled notes but I was relieved to have my perception confirmed.

What is disturbing for a woman in non-traditional work is that in fact there *are* many sensual aspects to tradeswork. For most women the sense of physical well being and physical satisfaction inherent in their work is one of its chief rewards. 'I like the physical part,' they said. 'It feels tremendous.' 'My body changed an awful lot. I got stronger. I toned up and I found that I felt better.' Many commented that physical work was at times 'sensuous' and 'a meditation'. 'Once you got over the hurting part,' a lumber piler said, 'and set up a rhythm of work for yourself, it was almost peaceful and calming. Your body felt very graceful.' Women found themselves in the contradictory position of being more aware of their bodies, of having a particularly physical and enjoyable side to their work at the same time as they had to suppress any reminders of themselves as sexual females in a masculine environment where they already felt far too conspicuous and where they often felt uncomfortable with the way many men expressed the sensual aspects of the work.

The second way in which the sexualization of the workplace is expressed is through swearing. Women universally reported that men are uncomfortable about their language but swearing in particular makes them uneasy when there is a woman around. As a male millwright commented, 'A guy has two languages, right? One I use in public and the other I use with the

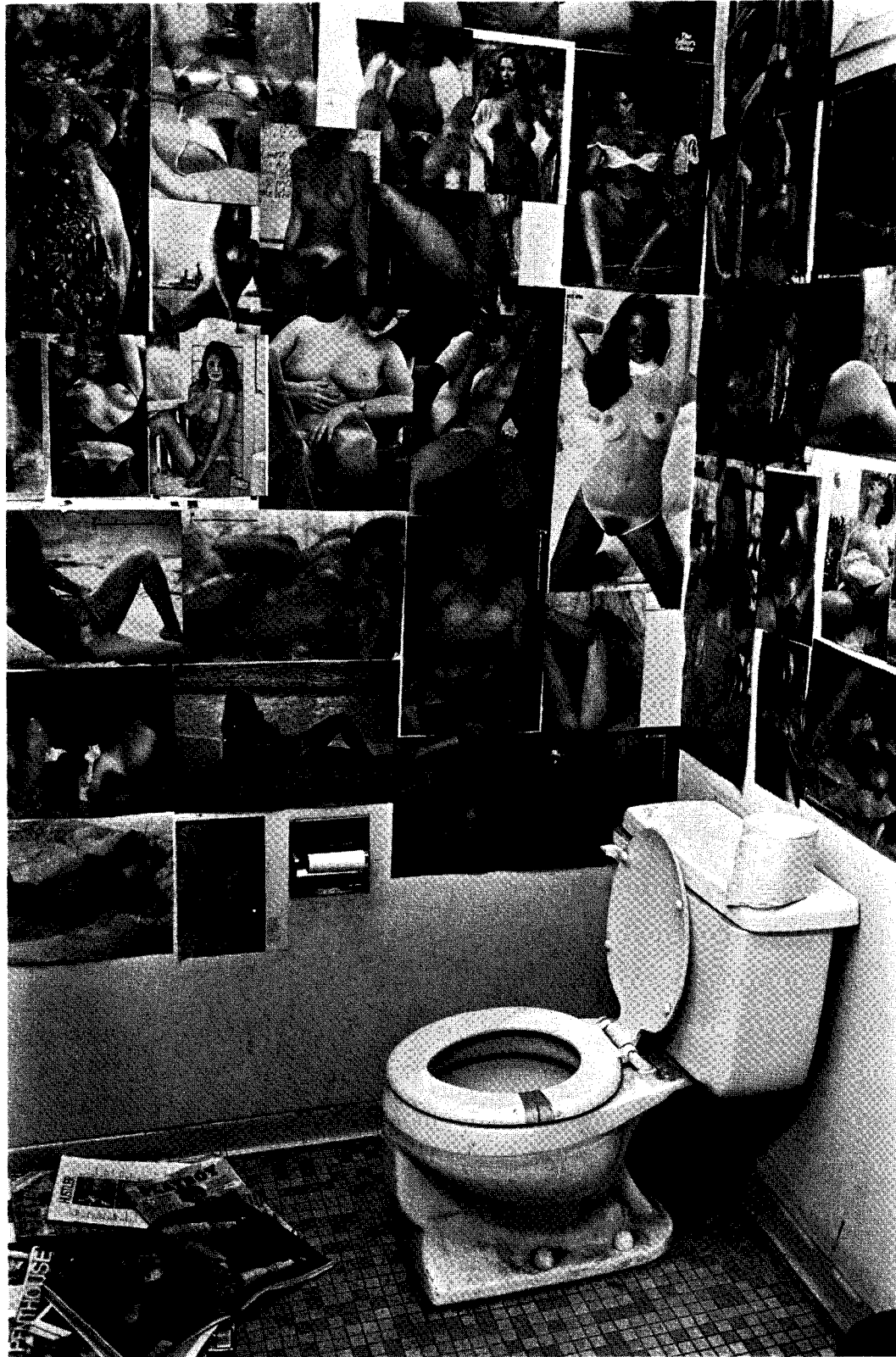
guys in the mill — f--- this and f--- that.' Some women reported that when they started work, all conversation in their presence stopped entirely. The lunchroom was quiet for two weeks, no one would talk or cuss or anything,' a repairwoman remembered.

After a few weeks, the men might feel more at ease about talking but they often remained uncomfortable about swearing. 'They'd swear and then they'd slap their hand over their mouth. "Oh no, we've got a woman in here now." They'd make a big deal about it,' a labourer said. 'Everytime I came onto a new crew, I could tell they changed their language for me by how they spoke to each other when they didn't know I was around,' added a carpenter.

In other situations, men will exaggerate their swearing, presumably to get a response. 'My first week,' a pulp and paper mill operator reported, 'I lived in a blue cloud of burping, farting and swearing while they tried to gross me out.' On one crew where I worked, one man made a point of standing very near me and swearing long and loudly. Then just as loudly he would 'apologize' saying in exaggerated fashion, 'Oops, pardon me. I didn't notice there's a lady present!' When others swore he would come over and say, 'Isn't it revolting?' or 'You couldn't be a lady after hearing all this language.'

Women are aware that they are intruders who are defined sexually as 'ladies' and they recognize that it is important to deny the lady-like association. 'They say they watch their language because I'm a woman,' a repairwoman reported. 'I wish they wouldn't.' One woman, a mechanic, made it explicit why she did not want this tender treatment. 'If someone said, "Sorry," I'd say, "Well, fuck man, if you're going to swear do it properly. You want some lessons?" or something like that. I guess that was part of my defiance, my machoness against theirs. If I was to say, "Oh, that's all right" to his "Sorry, lady," that would be playing to his game of ladies and I don't want to do that. I'd rather swear back and he can either feel uncomfortable or comfortable with that.'

Most women took a more conciliatory position. 'It's a real buddy



Kate Williams

system on a crew,' a carpenter emphasized, 'and that's why, as much as you possibly can, you've *really* got to forget about the sex part, that it's a male and female relationship. Most of the men are *not* used to working with women, they've always worked with men and they'd *like* to be able to swear and say anything they want to. I can accept that.'

In fact, during the course of their integration into the workplace, women often take up swearing themselves, sometimes with gusto, as an excellent outlet for frustrations. 'I used to get so damn mad that it was a release for my temper,' a fork-lift driver said. 'The louder and harder I could swear, the better it felt.' And a mechanic explained that 'My biggest problem after I got into cussing was slowing it down. Someone was interviewing me and he said something about "Do you mind the swearing?" and one of the guys hollered over the said, "We don't mind when she swears!" I probably swore more than anybody in that shop.'

The contradiction in women's acceptance of men's swearing and adopting it themselves was that the men often felt that the women shouldn't swear. Women were asked to 'watch their language' and asked outright not to swear in the presence of certain men. One male carpenter reported in some outrage to his fellows after over-hearing two women at work that 'They use the big F!'

The third way in which the sexualization of the workplace is expressed is that men simply talk about women when they are together on the job in such a way that no flesh and blood woman would recognize herself in the image that is thus collectively produced. 'We talked about women 90 per cent of the time,' a male smelter worker said, 'But women were never there. It was pretty shocking when the first woman came onto the site. There's a difference between the way you usually talk about women and the woman who is actually standing there.'

Although most men working in crafts and industry do not own the objects they produce, they have tremendous effect on the industrial process by the fact that their labour exerted upon raw materials produces a final product with

commercial value. In the process of doing so, and over hundreds of years of male working companionship in which they have referred to the objects handled and the tools used with specifically sexual terminology and intent, men have come to characterize their workplace as feminine and have assumed toward it an attitude of sexual superordination and control.

It becomes apparent that a man's language on the job has come to represent more than just a convenient way of talking to the guys. It also represents a very clear and shared way of *behaviour*. All day a man treats objects as women, literally cutting and bending them to his will. It is therefore no surprise that he assumes to continue this act of control when he goes home, and treats women as objects. The 'man's world' of authority over objects all day is simply and rationally extended to women and children when the man goes home at night.

Of course this is a generalization to which there are many individual exceptions. But the hypothesis remains that we are dehumanized and objectified as women by the fact that we are associated with the literal objects (wood, fish, ore, etc.) that men handle at work. And it may be men's shared sense of domination — over objects at work; women at home — both in and out of the workplace but continually affirmed by the specifically and exclusively male sexual nature of the workplace, which reinforces their sense of 'right'.

Men's discomfort with women on the job stems from two main roots. The first is the disjuncture between the idea or expectation of woman generated by the men's talk (no doubt fed by the media's and other institution's images of what a 'lady' is, does, looks and smells like) and the actual woman herself. That is, from the conflict between a man's assumptions that 'ladies can't do this work' and the evidence of his senses that in fact they can and are doing it.

The second is that the presence of a woman disrupts and destroys the exclusively male-defined sexual nature of the workplace.

The romance of back-slapping workers sharing sexual innuendoes is not available to women. It is our very exclusion, the fact that we as a sexual class of women are its object,

that helps define the camaraderie of the men's relationship. This is no conscious conspiracy but simply the case of a common shared perspective that continually reinforces this attitude. The effects, however, are devastating to women entering non-traditional occupations, particularly at the pioneer stage when there are still so few of them. The fact that this work is touted as 'man's work' is clearly a specifically sexual boast and the non-traditional workplace is a specifically male sexual territory.

The Women

I use [the terms "feminine" and "masculine"] to refer to roles/stereotypes/sets of characteristics which are essentially distorted and destructive to the Self and to her process and environment.

Mary Daly, 1978

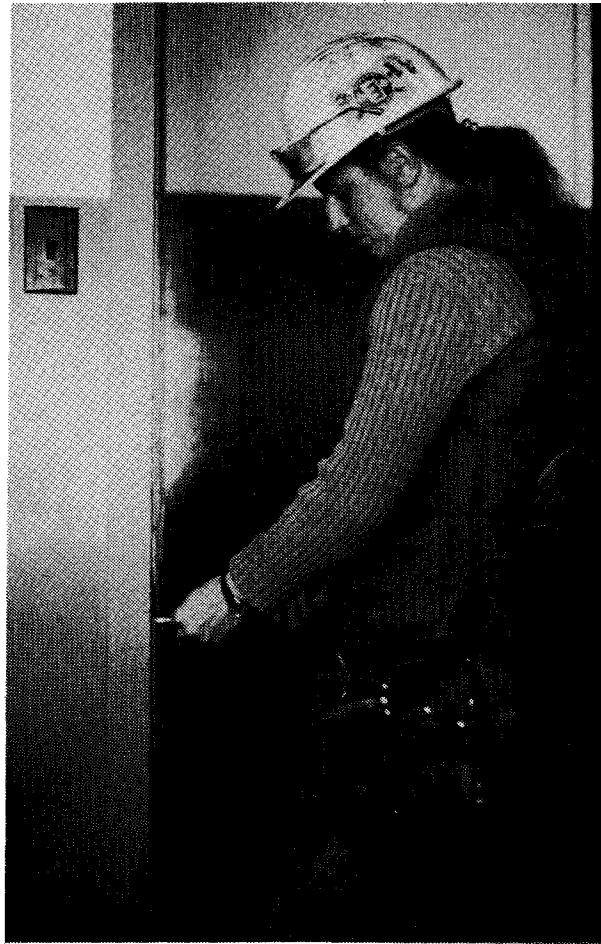
Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism

Tradition tells us how we should act and feel about ourselves as 'feminine' women. But most of these traditional behaviours extolling the attractiveness of passivity, dependence, gentleness, physical weakness and so on, specifically exclude many of the qualities which women in non-traditional work begin to acquire, such as confidence, assertiveness, physical strength, competence, responsibility for self and mechanical skill.

It is no surprise that many women in non-traditional occupations experience contradiction and conflict between how they are and what they do and social expectations of how they *should* be and what they ought to do. 'When I turned 14 and the time came to stop being a tomboy and put on a skirt,' as one put it, 'I couldn't do it.' Our socialization as tomboys and then as grown women has been incomplete. 'I always liked wearing jeans and a T-shirt,' apologized a pulp and paper worker. 'A lot of people don't consider me that feminine anyway.'

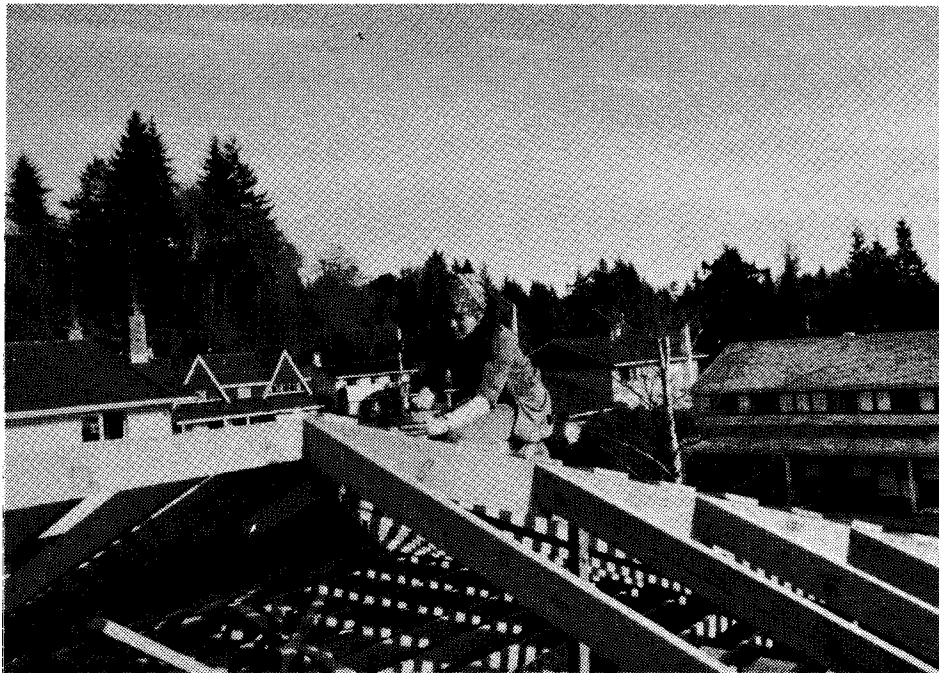
These women have put themselves into a new social situation, a play in which they have not yet learned their lines, in which in fact, the 'part' for a woman has not yet been written.

The fact that they do not 'fit in', cannot play 'correctly' because there is as yet no socially evolved part for them to play, in turn



Kate Braid

Pat Omer, carpenter/repairperson



J. Carpay

The author, Kate Braid, apprentice carpenter

threatens men in their self-esteem, in the convincing quality of their sense of themselves as men doing what (only?) men can do. It may be that many men don't so much resent the individual women on the job so much as they resent the need to change. Women's challenge to their traditional role demands that men re-evaluate theirs as well. Maybe this explains why the pressures on a job often focus on simplifying, reducing the woman and all her responses to what men could safely call 'feminine'. That way, perhaps, the women could be made predictable, explicable. 'Why would a woman want a job like this?' is a very common question addressed to the woman on the job. Some men wait for, expect and are quick to pick up any action that shows physical weakness or disability on the woman's part. This reduction of behaviours is a danger because it does not allow a woman to find a synthesis, to be both powerful *and* feminine. If women allowed it they would fail at a job because, *by definition*, any feminine woman, any Lady, must fail. After all, as someone will always remind you, 'This is *man's* work.'

So exactly how is the traditional feminine role being challenged? How do these women go about writing a new script for themselves and each other?

There is a common sense of confusion about their sense of themselves as women, as females and as feminine. All of these words are in the slow process of being redefined in the course of women's evolving behaviours. Many women who begin non-traditional work do it with their traditional sense of what is appropriately feminine, largely intact. 'When I started working I wore eye makeup,' a blaster remembered. 'I'd wash and curl my hair every night so I used to look fairly nice.' Another woman noted that, 'For the first couple of years I worried about what to wear to work.' A labourer burst out laughing when asked what had changed for her at work. 'Are you ready? I washed my rain-gear every night! I couldn't stand being dirty. I'd come out every day in my fresh rain-gear, bright yellow like a canary.' And now? 'Now I don't give a damn. Things like that become unimportant after a while.'

Women spoke of 'losing their

identity', assuming that not to be feminine was to be masculine. 'In the beginning you tried to keep your identity, your "being a woman", right?' asked a mine mill operator. 'I did, anyway. I tried wearing shirts under my coveralls just so that I wouldn't become too masculine.'

Some accepted what they felt was an inevitable eroding of their femininity. As one labourer explained, 'At first I really enjoyed construction but after a while trying to be clean was a big problem. I had grease underneath everything and you get muscular. I feel like I'm not a woman anymore.'

It was not always clear if this was considered an advantage or not. 'Being feminine is when a guy can look after you,' a labourer began, and in the next breath protested, 'but now I can look after myself.'

My own experience is that certain traditionally feminine behaviours are a strong liability for a woman in a non-traditional occupation. This was most conspicuous when I started work on a large framing crew where there had been resistance to hiring me in the first place, where I was uncertain of my skills or of how I would perform in the high pressure work that is framing. What was most shocking to me was not so much their behaviour as my own. I approached the job with the idea that I would be silent and just watch for a few days until I got the feel of things. I thought I was being smart in those first few days of silence. In fact, what became obvious over the course of several weeks in which my silence did not end, even under extreme provocation, was that I did not seem able to break it. My response to their aggressive language and behaviour was to assume an entirely 'feminine' silence and passiveness.

As a feminist, I had spent years learning to break my inappropriate silences, learning how my passivity was a learned response that male authorities rewarded as the most 'appropriate' for a woman — and the most convenient for them. I had become increasingly proud of my outspokenness and my anger.

Yet, here I was, keeping my mouth shut when inwardly I was screaming. At a woman's meeting I could roar, sweat pouring off my forehead, pounding a pillow until my fists hurt, 'If you touch me

again I'll rip your bloody balls off!' and on the job saying mildly, quietly to the man's face, 'Don't do that again.' I might have said please.

Buried deep in my 'feminized' self was a part of me that first learned, long ago, what a woman does when she is under attack. I can clearly remember nights at the dinner table when my father mocked my mother until she said less and less, becoming a veritable pillar of concentrated power, sucked in, held together with incredible will, saying nothing. By her silence we knew her anger. She said it most effectively with silence, I guessed, because silence must be most effective. I was her daughter and I learned silence from my mother, as she had learned it from hers, as dutifully as I learned that I could also be brave and cross the tracks.

When I dived into the reasons behind my immense difficulty in speaking out at the violence done to me on the job, I quickly found my mother, or more accurately, I found the social mores my mother, as a 'good' mother, had taught me, that 'nice girls' do not yell and scream and protest, especially when they are angry.

In order to survive on the non-traditional work site, women are learning to say goodbye to some of the ways they learned of dealing with the world, as girls, that are inappropriate in the new context of non-traditional work.

Other women felt more at ease with their changes than I. 'I'm not sure what being "feminine" is,' a carpenter stated, 'but it's not important to me as much anymore. It's more important to me to find out who I really am, what sort of real strengths or weaknesses I have as a person.'

Women begin to recognize their identity as formed by their acts, not in their passivity or in their physical appearance. 'I'd say my idea of what is "feminine" has changed,' declared a mine mill operator. 'In the beginning I fought to keep it, thinking I was going to lose it. Then I realized these were just physical things, so I slowly did away with them as I matured. I'm still a woman even though I don't buy slinky clothes. I'm still a woman even though I'm doing what is considered a man's job.' 'Feminine, is just the difference,'

said another.

These women are struggling to understand that difference in the context of the non-traditional worksite, to find a comfortable way of living that 'difference' that is comfortable, desirable and appropriate for them. 'I wouldn't be working here if I was all that feminine,' as one driver put it, is exactly the point. Women in non-

traditional working situations must wear steel-toed boots and strong, practical working clothes. They become assertive, strong and competent — all traditionally 'masculine' characteristics — because those characteristics are most appropriate to that work. It becomes clear that the structure of the work situation and the severe restrictions that have been placed

on men and women in the past in terms of what is appropriate work for them, may have had much more of an effect on what we call our 'femininity' and 'masculinity' than we have recognized. It begins to be clear, as women enter non-traditional occupations, that the structures of the work situation, not simply the personality of the women, have a major impact on behaviour. ☉

This article is part of a book to be published in 1982.

NAUFRAGE

dehors il faisait encore jour
j'ai dressé la table
y ai déposé les restes du repas d'hier
du vin
et deux bougies de fête

il a parlé
longuement
la nuit est tombée d'un coup
le disque s'est arrêté
et sa voix s'est tue

seule la flamme des deux bougies
faisait valser le monde
silencieux et immobile
doucement qui lentement
sombrait
dans les profondeurs
de la finitude

il a tendu la main
a dit viens
ai mis ma main
dans cette main
par-dessus la bougie
sommes allés ainsi
main dans la main
dans l'autre pièce
la dernière fois
pour une dernière fois

il s'est rhabillé
a fermé son sac de voyage
le taxi est venu
trop vite
sur le pas de la porte
il m'a prise dans ses bras
a dit *Adios, amor mio*
la portière a claqué

Thérèse Lior