

The Unstoppable Women of the Yukon

Leslie Scrivener

Les femmes du Yukon vont de l'avant dans des postes non traditionnels



Toronto Star

The author

Sisterhood is blooming, springtime will never be the same

—Sign in a Whitehorse office

WHITEHORSE - They told Joanne Linzey it was too cold for women to run a city bus system. Besides, they said, northerners are too independent and didn't want a woman telling them what to do.

That was six years ago. Since then they've had a woman mayor, a woman territorial commissioner and now Linzey herself is an alderman. They saw more women become fur trappers and they watched them go into the mines.

Observers noted that women in the North were unstoppable — what the songwriters call an irrepressible force.

Corps of workers

Linzey, 34, with a corps of workers from the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, wanted the bus system to be run by women only, to provide part-time jobs where they could develop management skills. She also knew that during the long, dark winters, women can be victims of cabin fever even more than men and a bus service would ease the pressure.

'It doesn't matter if you live across the river or isolated 50 miles away. When it's 50 below and you have three little kids, you can't get out,' says the wife and mother of two who came from the interior of British Columbia eight years ago.

The bus system, which now has a few male drivers, has since become a city-operated transit commission. Linzey coordinates a Yukon government pre-trades course for women in-

terested in non traditional jobs as miners, carpenters and heavy-equipment operators among others.

The Yukon has the highest labour participation rate for women in Canada — 59 per cent, based on 1976 statistics — and a very young labour force where 51 per cent of all workers are aged less than 30.

Work as cooks

Most job openings for women are as clerks with the government, the territory's largest employer. There is also some opportunity in middle management jobs. Women can find work in non-traditional jobs in the mines; with a rush of gold exploration expected this summer, there should be plenty of work in camps as cooks.

Although the Yukon has Canada's highest average weekly wage — \$413, compared to the national average of \$293 — most women do not have high-paying jobs and the cost of living in the Yukon is one-third higher than the rest of Canada.

'There is more opportunity for women in the non-traditional jobs than on the outside,' says Maureen Jensen, the tough-talking community relations coordinator for Foothills Pipeline (Yukon) Ltd. 'But women don't have the skills and there is limited capacity for training here.'

Jensen says her research has shown that employers are not opposed to hiring female workers in the mining and construction industry. In fact, personnel officers say women in the mines are more stable and have fewer accidents than men. Female workers are also reported to work harder and tend to improve camp morale, Jensen says.

Traps alone

Women who have taken the plunge into the mines or out on the traplines are seen as crusaders by some of their shyer sisters.

They're women, like Talina Tchulokovsky, a single woman who traps alone on 576 square miles of northern wilderness, or Janeane MacGillivray, the first woman to go underground in the Yukon mines.

Tchulokovsky, a Russian immigrant who came north via Vancouver, is taking a break from trapping this season to work for the federal government's rehabilitation services. Like many women in the North she's multi-talented. She can skin a wolf, teach braille, write children's stories and compose music.

The bright-eyed, sturdily built 33-year-old shows a visitor her photo album, an invitation into another world. There are rustic log cabins, which she built herself, beaver smoking over a fire pit, fur pelts drying in the sun.

'I do it for sheer pleasure,' says Tchulokovsky. 'I'm not competitive.'

Trapping does not make you a rich woman. Because of high overhead costs — she has to charter a plane, \$490 one way, to get her in and out of her Swan Lake wilderness — Tchulokovsky made \$5,600 as a trapper last year.

She has spent up to six months in total solitude, making her way to each of 26 hand-made camps along her trapline in search of wolf, fox, marten and muskrat. She travels by dog team.

'I never took time to master mechanics. I find dogs more dependable than snowmobiles. If one breaks down, I just toss him into the sleigh.'

Those same dogs, her only companions in the bush, are also what she calls 'tasty hors d'oeuvres for the wolves.'

MacGillivray, 28, the first woman to go underground in the Yukon in 1976, says that even though she is a strong, strapping woman, the copper mines broke her health. She was coughing up black bile in the mornings and was hospitalized after an asthma attack. She earned about \$2,200 a month when she quit more than a year ago.

'But I shut everything off. I put on blinders. I felt I was on top of the world, and though I was breaking down healthwise I was walking tall.'

MacGillivray, who came from Nanaimo, B.C. about eight years ago, worked her way up from mine elevator operator to driller. Then her nerve gave out.

'We were getting into some tight spots . . . rocks the size of this room were falling down,' she says.

Now she is an apprentice carpenter, earning \$9.77 an hour (seasonally) and consulting on the territorial government's pre-trades course — sharing her mining experience with other women.

More valuable

Many women in the North believe their work is more valuable in a developing com-

munity in need of more services than in the civilized south.

'It's not easy economically, and I know I'm never going to be rich,' says Eva Van Loon, the single proprietor of a Whitehorse handicraft shop. 'But down there, it's not important what you do — nobody needs it. Here they really need you.'

Van Loon quotes Robert W. Service, with a wry twist, saying she lives on the marge of Lake LaBerge where she hauls water and chops wood. Then she adds, 'It's easier for a woman here where you're not trapped by feminine roles. There's no catering to those who need to appear sexually desirable to a man.'

'As for the men,' she says, 'the North hauls up a different sort, a Neo-Tarzan type . . .

'Men up here have a long way to go,' agrees Shelagh Rea, coordinator of the Yukon's Women's Bureau, which looks into changing social legislation.

'Looking at them, they're really traditional. They're the ones who bring home the bacon. Even though 59 per cent of women work, because men earn more money than women they still think of us as the second sex,' adds Rea, who is living common-law.

These hard-headed, soft-hearted women have their work cut out for them. The status-of-women group recently made submissions on a new matrimonial property ordinance, similar to the sections of Ontario's Family Law Reform Act which relate to property and the family home and which became effective Jan. 1.

Women have also pushed for a new day-care ordinance which will establish standards and provide for a board to monitor day-care facilities. That becomes effective May 1.

'We're way behind in legislation, but because we're small it doesn't take us long to change,' says Rea whose Yukon salary is in the \$20,000 range.

There is still no Yukon human rights commission, no legislated maternity leave, no provision for an affirmative-action program. And under the Fair Practices Ordinance, discrimination on the basis of age is allowed,' Rea says. The status of native women is an on-going battle.

In the quiet and cultured atmosphere of Annabelle restaurant where Matisse and Van Gogh prints hang on the wall, a different story is told.

'After nearly 10 years I'm really bored up here,' says the proprietor Elizabeth Erkiletian, who came from Ontario when she was 22. 'I can't give you a glowing account of the North. It used to be really fun living in the bush. I caught the backlash of earth motherhood, having a young baby, with an apple pie cooling on the window. That tends to pall.'

She's tired of making quilts and the call of the wild, and her business is up for sale.

'You know in the Robert W. Service poems he says you are always called back. I wonder if it's true? I'll have to leave to find out.' ☉

Reprinted with kind permission from the Toronto Star