

The Barriers to Women Seeking Non-Traditional Jobs

Leah Cohen



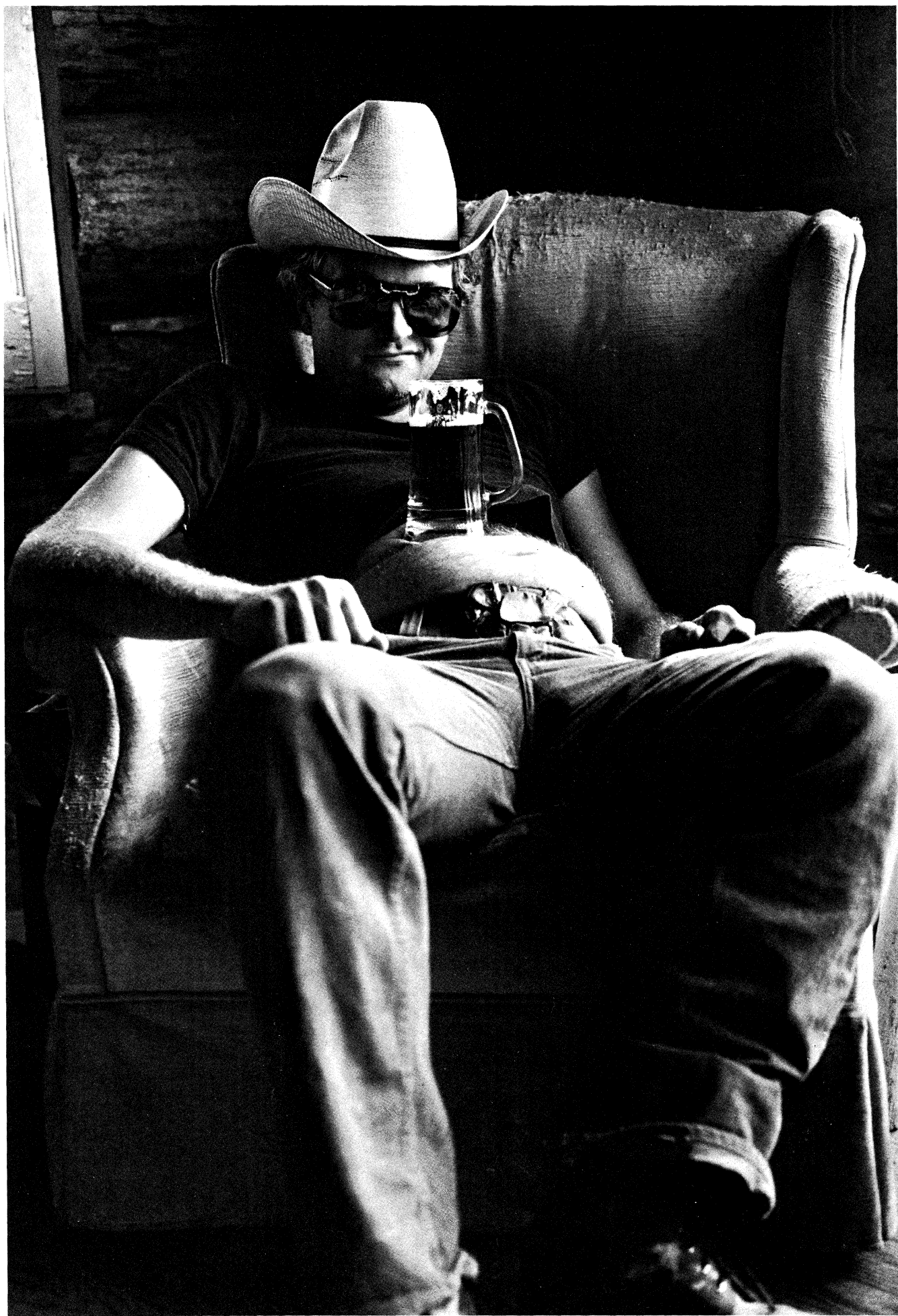
Cheryl Shaw, busy here in the harness assembly section, is among the first women to take their places 'on the line' at Chrysler Canada's Windsor truck assembly plant.

Historically, small numbers of women have always worked at what are currently defined as non-traditional occupations. In this century, during both World Wars, women have been recruited in large numbers to work in forestry, construction, heavy industry, mining and transportation. Under war-time conditions, women's participation in these non-traditional occupations was considered to be socially acceptable and indeed, an economic necessity. After both the First and Second World Wars, working women were exhorted to return to their pre-war traditional occupations so that men could resume their 'rightful' place in the workplace. Non-traditional jobs reverted back to being an exclusive male domain.¹

There is a current public perception that women are making significant in-roads into non-traditional

areas such as trades, technical and supervisory. In reality, women's positions in the labour force are not improving, but rather steadily deteriorating to the extent that occupational ghettoization is more prevalent in 1980 than it was in 1970.² For 81 percent of working women, segregation into traditional occupations — clerical, service, professional-technical and sales — is still the norm.³

It is estimated that women's participation in the workforce will approximate men's within the next 20 years. This is the result of a number of significant variables: women are working out of economic necessity, since 40 per cent are either separated, divorced, or widowed; and 51 per cent of two-spouse families would experience serious financial deprivation if wives did not work outside the home.⁴



Kerstin Ring, Centennial College

Although more and more women are working for economic survival, the wage differential between men and women continues to widen. In 1978, a full-year woman worker earned 58 per cent of the average male wage. This gap shows little sign of closing and if current trends prevail it may continue to widen.⁵

With so many woman working at poorly paid, dead-end jobs, the concept of training women to move into non-traditional areas has tremendous potential.

Unfortunately, there are a number of very real barriers which have thwarted the efforts of those women brave enough to try.

Attitudinal Barriers

In the never ending saga of breaking down the occupational segregation of women, success is defined as getting one woman where previously there was none. These individual women experience a bewildering number of negative and discriminatory attitudes and practices. In the first instance, they generally confront opposition from family members, friends and the public perception that non-traditional work is dangerous, dirty and a threat to their femininity. If they persist in their efforts to receive training and an entry level position, they are then subject to the probable skepticism and often subtle or overt opposition of teachers, employers, unions, male students and ultimately, co-workers and supervisors.

More specifically, women find that employers express negative and even hostile attitudes including being told that they are physically inadequate because they are too short and or too light; that there are no special washroom facilities; and that they are required to qualify at standards much higher than those set for men. Co-workers often refuse to cooperate in tasks requiring a team effort or deliberately sabotage an individual woman's work. In addition, they can poison a woman's work environment by subjecting her to physical and psychological harassment including offensive, sexist jokes, ridicule, criticism, grabbing, pinching, pushing, and in extreme cases, sexual assault.⁶

Sandy Mitchell's case as a construction worker is not atypical of reactions in that industry.

It was incredible, she said. The men were shocked when they saw me march onto the construction site wearing workmen's clothing and special safety boots. They hooted, hollered, whistled, and stamped their feet everytime I walked by. That didn't bother me, she emphasized, because I was expecting it. And I was prepared to put up with it.

But things got much worse, she continued. When these men realized that I was darn good; that I was efficient and a quick learner; that I was serious and determined to stick it out to the end, they became openly hostile.

They started to get physical with me. Every chance they got they would grab at my body. I can't count the number of times I was pinched.

Their next tactic, she frowned, was to make obscene phone calls at my home. I was also sent threatening letters. It was just awful and it really did get to me. I started to feel very alienated and lonely.

I finally got so upset that I complained to my union. My union rep just laughed and told me if I wasn't tough enough to take it, I should get out.

Just as I was about to quit, she said, the foreman told me I was the best apprentice he'd seen in years. He also told me — if I stuck it out, the men would eventually give up. They would get used to me and probably decide I was some kind of "freaky" woman.

Sandy Mitchell and the small number of other women working in non-traditional jobs are, in effect, threatening the male sense of superiority. Women such as Sandy Mitchell who persevere, often receive the message that they are not really women, but rather a freak or some aberration. Most women in this environment quickly recognize that they are merely token concessions to the notion of female equality in the workforce. As long as women enter non-traditional, all-male work sites alone, they will continue to suffer victimization and blatant sexual discrimination. At present, the only choices open to women are to endure patronization, sexual and psychological harassment, and/or hatred and isolation. The results of this one by one approach is that only exceptional and extremely self-confident women attempt to train and work in non-traditional jobs.

Policy Initiatives

Despite recent federal policy initiatives to upgrade women's skills in non-traditional occupations, eight occupational groups accounted for 85 per cent of all female trainees started in 1978-79 and these consisted

overwhelmingly of traditional female jobs. In the apprenticeship training program, women comprise 3 per cent of the trainees and of these, 85 per cent were in the personal and service areas. This 3 per cent participation rate has remained constant over the last 10 years.⁷

Even when women do enter non-traditional areas, they tend to cluster in small, non-union firms, with little potential for expansion. As a result, they are particularly vulnerable to lay-offs and unemployment.

A recent American study of 400 non-traditional occupations for women revealed that there is a greater acceptance of women in shrinking or dying non-traditional jobs which men no longer want. The study also found that crafts with a strong growth of males did not have much increase in female employment. Men apparently continue to dominate high paid, supervisory, skilled and professional posts as well as the upward mobile channels.⁸

This American experience is no doubt comparable to the situation in Canada. Although we have not, as yet, studied the operations of our own labour force to determine the scope of wage and promotional discrimination in the non-traditional areas, we do know that the goal to promote women into better paying industries and jobs that have been traditionally dominated by men is not being satisfied. In fact, what may evolve is a mirror ghetto of women in traditional jobs.

The Solutions

Obviously women stand a far better chance of success in non-traditional occupations if they entered a male-dominated area in groups rather than one by one. Sweden, unlike Canada, has developed a policy on the group approach, a policy which combines a shopfloor orientation for male employees on working in a mixed environment, with an orientation for female trainees on how best to handle physical and psychological harassment and how to provide mutual support.

Another policy initiative which could be instrumental in breaking down systemic discrimination is the concept of Contract Compliance. Contract Compliance is an American federal government directive which requires federal contractors to prepare and implement an affirmative action program to ensure that women and minorities have equal opportunity and access to entry level positions, training and promotion.

Contract Compliance alone is insufficient. It should be combined with strong equal pay legislation which would clearly define a policy of equal pay for work with the same skill, effort, and responsibility. This would go a long way to eradicate the current practice of paying a woman less for the same job by

subterfuges of title and classification.

These policy initiatives have little chance for success unless women receive adequate support services. One of the most serious deterrents to women's equal participation in the workforce is the lack of high quality day care which is reliable, affordable, and convenient. An equally essential support service is quality pre-trades training to provide women with access to hands-on experience in a variety of trades before making a final selection. At the most fundamental level, sensitive and informed employment counselling is a necessary and at present inadequate support service. There is a tendency, on the part of counsellors, to stream women into traditional occupations. Unfortunately, the federal employment counselling system is primarily geared for placement, not counselling and training. This places the onus on the female client to ask the appropriate questions and to demonstrate a serious interest in a non-traditional occupation. The qualities of persistence and assertiveness — often the necessary prerequisites in eliciting comprehensive information on training and opportunities in non-traditional occupations — are precisely those qualities which so many female clients have never developed. What is needed is a new breed of counsellor, trained to provide in-depth counselling, accurate information, and positive reinforcement.

Moving women into non-traditional occupations is certainly not a panacea, but rather one of the ways that our society can begin to redress the gross inequities that women confront in the workforce. The current practice of ghettoizing women into so few occupations is wasteful of the skills of 53 per cent of the population. Change can only come through a strong legislative base that prohibits discrimination against women in both education and employment.

Our present system which is loosely based on a voluntary approach is hopelessly inadequate to affect significant change in women's equal participation in either traditional or non-traditional occupations. ©

FOOTNOTES

1. Braid, Kate. *Invisible Women: Women in Non-Traditional Occupations in B.C.*, A M.A. Thesis, Department of Communication, Simon Fraser University, December, 1979, p. iii.
2. Hagerman, Dave. Discussion Paper, *Women in Non-Traditional Jobs: A Review of Manpower Policies and Programs*, CEIC, March, 1979, p.29.
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4. National Council of Welfare, *Women and Poverty*, Ottawa, 1979, p. 21.
5. Blumrosen, Ruth. "Wage Discrimination, Job Segregation and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964", *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform*, Vol. 12, Spring, 1979, No. 3, p. 425.
6. A summary of the analysis in Backhouse, Constance and Leah Cohen. *The Secret Oppression: Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, Macmillan of Canada, Ltd., Toronto, 1978.
7. Dale, Patricia. *Women and Jobs: The Impact of Federal Government Employment Strategies on Women*, Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, June, 1980, pp. 52-57.
8. Reubens, Beatrice, G. and Edwin P. Reubens. "Women Workers, Nontraditional Occupations and Full Employment", *American Women Workers in a Full Employment Economy*, A Compendium of Papers submitted to the Subcommittee on Economic Growth and Stabilization of the Joint Economic Committee Congress of the United States, Washington, 1977, pp. 113-122.