

# Secretaries are Nation Builders too

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Audrey Ellis

Il existe dans les cours sur les pratiques de bureau,  
un besoin de section sur les questions féminines.  
Un cours ainsi conçu deviendrait une introduction  
à la fonction de la femme au travail.

*Those who do not marry  
can expect to work  
for 45 years.*

Each year I teach Office Practice and each year I become more convinced that if all I do is teach the basic skills of typing, shorthand and office procedures, I am doing my students an enormous disservice.

The girls I teach today will be young working women within a year of two. I am sending them into a working world where:

- they will earn 56 per cent of what men earn;
- 90 per cent of them will find no government-licensed day care for their children<sup>1</sup>;
- they will not have the same access to jobs, training programs and promotions that men have; and

where many of them will be sexually harassed. Most of these girls will marry and work outside the home for at least 30 years. Those who do not marry can expect to work for 45 years. Approximately 74 per cent of

these young women will have to support themselves at some point either because they have never married or because they have been widowed or divorced.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, most of these girls are totally unprepared for the reality of their lives five or 10 years hence. They have not been brought up to see themselves financially independent from a man. And because of

this, they have given very little thought either to their education beyond the secondary school level or to developing their interests and skills to ensure self-sufficiency. They do not envisage careers for themselves. Rather, they see themselves working for a few years 'before the children come along.' What they will do after the children grow up is of no concern. They cannot imagine their lives past the age of 25 or 30.

As a teacher, I have the responsibility of helping these students prepare for their futures. This is especially true precisely because I teach secretarial skills. The largest section of the female labour force is clerical and, as statistics prove, 77 per cent of all clerical workers are female. It is vital that the study of 'working women's issues' be integrated into secondary school and college curriculum

as an intrinsic part of business courses.

In thinking through and designing my office practice curriculum over the past three years, I have come to understand some of the basic attitudes which I believe have impeded us from introducing these issues. Before discussing ways of integrating 'women's studies' into Office Practice courses, I would like to share the process that I had to go through before arriving at my understanding.

I began my career as a business teacher plagued with doubts about the value of what I was doing. On the one

those who have a university education. A poignant statement by Simone deBeauvoir helped me to clarify the source of this attitude.

*No task is humiliating. But it is the framework in which this occupation is carried out, it is the conditions of work which are humiliating. What is wrong with window cleaning? It is as useful as typing! But it is the way a woman finds herself restricted to typing or window cleaning which is degrading.<sup>3</sup>*

potential for this unit is almost unlimited. I now use 'The Marriage Game—What Are You Doing With the Rest of Your Life?' (Donna Hunter, YMCA, 1978) to introduce students to some statistics concerning women. This is a simulation game in which students examine (through a number of case studies) how time and circumstances change women's lives. It can be played in two 40-minute periods. As a follow-up, a group of students may give a seminar on the findings of the *Women and Poverty Report* (National Council of Welfare, October 1979) and

***They do not envisage careers for themselves***

hand, I knew that it was important to teach students typing skills, yet on the other hand I realized that at the senior levels of secretarial practice and office procedures courses I was, in fact, training young women to take their places among millions of other women in low-paid, low-status, dead-end clerical jobs.

The fact that my colleagues did not challenge the role of women in these types of jobs made me realize that I was expected not only to teach skills — I was expected to train my students to accept their role in these under-valued jobs. To add to my doubts and feelings of guilt about this, there were the reactions of my friends and other teachers who conveyed the subtle message that teachers of commercial subjects are not as bright, qualified or valuable as those who teach academic subjects.

How many times have I heard, or said myself, 'Why would a bright girl like you want to be a secretary?' As a society, we believe that people who do manual labour or who work in service jobs are not as intelligent or as valuable to the society as

Simone deBeauvoir was saying typing was valuable! A bit of serious thinking about the extent to which society was dependent upon clerical work led me to the same conclusion. We couldn't keep the wheels turning if all the clerical workers went out on strike; we need their services. Yet we don't value clerical workers precisely because they are women. For a long time, I have been aware of the fact that the value of work that women do is not recognized — not because the work lacks intrinsic value, but because women do it. I had just never consciously applied this knowledge to clerical work.

The belief that students taking Office Practice courses are not very bright and can only cope with the learning of skills; and the insidious sexism and elitism in our own attitudes which impeded us from even considering the introduction of such issues, are, I believe, the major reasons why women's issues have not been dealt with in Office Practice courses.

It became obvious to me that I had to overcome these attitudes if I wanted to help students develop a positive self-image and a pride and belief in the value of the work they were training for. I also had to work through my personal conflicts before I could feel totally comfortable teaching either straight secretarial skills or integrating 'issues' into the course. Once I understood the source of my conflict, I became convinced that I could not justify teaching straight skills. I see it as an essential part of my job to deal with these issues in class in an attempt to help students learn to deal with them.

Having arrived at this conclusion, I began thinking about how I could integrate 'issues' into my courses. I decided to begin with 'Careers and Applying for a Job'. This unit traditionally covers such topics as resumé preparation, appropriate interview dress and behaviour and completion of application forms. The

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another group gathers information for a bulletin board comparing pay differences between traditional men's and women's work and between salaries for men and women doing essentially the same work.

These three activities give students a realistic picture of women's place in the working world and forces students to see the necessity of considering themselves responsible for their own financial survival. The development of this attitude is an essential prerequisite for any career discussions.

At this point in the unit, a search of the classified section of the newspaper can lead to the teaching of resumé and covering letters. Students' observations of the classified section are quite different from what I used to find before I introduced the above topics. They have become much more aware of the kinds of jobs available for males and females and the pay differential in favour of the males despite, in many cases, the higher educational requirements for females.

The unit on careers can also include the study of laws relating to women in the

labour force. The Women's Bureau of the Ministry of Labour has numerous free publications concerning discrimination in hiring and promotion, sexual harassment and general regulations of interest to working women. The filling out of sample application forms should come after the study of these laws. The students will find many discrepancies between the law and current practice. This can lead to discussions concerning what one can do when confronted with application forms

*The students will find many discrepancies between the law and current practice.*

requesting prohibited information or employers asking prohibited questions during an interview. Students should be encouraged to explore the various responses and to discuss their implications.

This unit also provides an excellent opportunity to introduce assertiveness training. Role-playing activities can help students learn how to present themselves for an interview, how to ask for a raise, request a promotion or admission to a training program. Students can also practise dealing with on-the-job conflicts, employee-boss conflicts and sexual harassment.

Many of our students already have part-time jobs and have experienced sexual harassment first-hand — as well as discrimination in pay and promotions. What they have lacked is a forum to discuss and share their concerns. Many young women feel these things are happening only to them and they are afraid to discuss the problems with anyone else. These issues can be explored individually or in groups.

Most Office Practice courses include a section on the use of reference materials. Indeed, the Ministry Guidelines from which Office Practice courses are written is entitled 'Communications and Business Procedures'. The unit on reference materials can be expanded to deal not only with those reference books which are specifically business/secretarial, but with the use of a library in general. Students can be assigned research topics, to be done primarily outside of class time, on a variety of issues related to working women. Their findings can be presented either in written form or orally to the class as a seminar. Either form gives the student needed practice in communication skills. A list of some of the topics my students have researched:

Equal Pay Legislation  
Availability of Day Care  
Pension and Insurance Plans for Women  
Sexual Harassment on the Job  
Women in Management  
Poverty Amongst Working Women  
Organizing Clerical Workers  
The Changing Nature of Clerical Work (Word Processing)  
Affirmative Action Programs  
Advancement Possibilities for Women

I have found this to be an extremely valuable exercise for a number of reasons. First, it exposes students to a variety of issues which will affect them as working women. Although each student only researches one topic, she learns about the other topics through seminars or by reading the reports of the other students which are distributed as handouts. Second, the assignment gives the students needed experience in using reference tools and in doing general research and third, it gives them experience in analyzing information and organizing and writing or presenting it in their own words.

Although this is a brief explanation of two ways in which I have integrated 'women's issues' into my secretarial courses they can also be included in almost any unit in the course. When teaching 'Word Processing', discussions can focus on the changing nature of clerical work and what this will mean to office relations in general and to women in particular. The units on filing and handling the mail can include discussions on the routine nature of clerical work and what this means to one's job satisfaction. Short readings can be assigned from books such as *All the Livelong Day* (Barbara Garson, Penguin, 1977), *Pink Collar Workers* (Louise Kapp Howe, Avon, 1977), and *Not Servants, Not Machines* (Jean Tepperman, Beacon

Press, 1976). All these books discuss the nature of clerical work and the frustrations involved in doing work which is undervalued and underpaid. Throughout the year, discussions can focus on the changing roles and expectations of men and women both in and out of the office. A 'Women At Work' bulletin board is maintained by my class throughout the year simply by posting newspaper and magazine articles relating to working women.

*A non-sexist/feminist attitude or perspective permeates your lessons.*

The most important element in successfully integrating these issues into a secretarial course, or any course for that matter, is the attitude of the teacher. A non-sexist/feminist attitude or perspective permeates your lessons. And if you believe in the value of your students and of the work they are training to do, they will sense it and they will have pride and respect for themselves. Instilling this pride and respect is our responsibility. We cannot forget that most of our senior students will be working in a year. They will be faced with numerous situations ranging from lack of appreciation for their work to overt discrimination and exploitation in the forms of poor wages and sexual harassment. If we do not bring these topics out into the open for discussion, we are sending our students into the working world totally unprepared. ☺

1. Fact Sheets, Women's Bureau, Ontario Ministry of Labour.
2. *Women and Poverty*, National Council of Welfare, October 1979.
3. *MS.*, July, 1977, p.12.

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