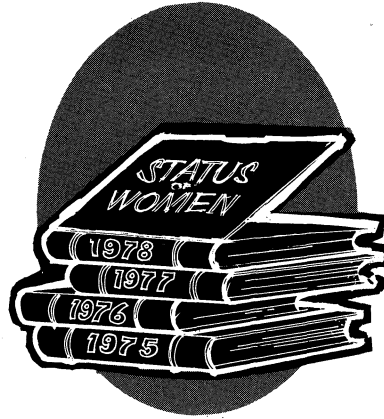


# The Politics of Affirmative Action: a lot of Firm but little Action

Diane Slaa



Cet article fait le bilan des programmes actuellement en vigueur dans quelques collèges ontariens.

This article outlines my personal observations and assessment of the Affirmative Action model currently being implemented in Ontario community colleges in an effort to demonstrate that the program is but another patriarchal ploy to maintain the *status quo* for women.

Women today tend to work outside the home more, obtain a higher level of education, have fewer children, and live longer than their foremothers. A single woman entering the work force can expect to work approximately forty-five years; a married woman, twenty-five. Accordingly, women's expectations concerning careers have changed radically within the past two decades. The majority of women no longer view a career as a stop-gap between graduation and marriage, or marriage and a family as their major concern. The situation is potentially explosive, for our educational system, on the one hand, prepares an eager and well-trained workforce of women, and on the other, moulds a culture that continues to segregate and devalue women's work. One important remedy for this situation is a legislatively based and monitored Affirmative Action program whose aim is to bring about *real* changes for all women throughout the system. The big question is, will it happen?

During the past eight years, many status-of-women studies have been conducted in colleges across Canada, as well as in government, and business and industry. Each study has disclosed problems faced by all working women: differential pay for equal work; unequal opportunities in the hiring, training, and promotion of women; unequal benefits attached to work such as status, vacation pay, sick-leave privileges, pension plans, and sabbatical leaves; and certain problems unique to working women concerning home/work conflicts and sexual harassment on the job.

In 1973, the Ontario Government published a green paper entitled *Equal Opportunities for Women in Ontario: a Plan of Action*. Further research was initiated in 1974 by the Minister of Colleges and Universities in a report entitled *Women and the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology*. This report makes seventeen recommendations for change that range from providing equal opportunity for women to fill future vacancies on the Board of Governors, to establishing women's subcommittees and actively recruiting wo-

men for jobs at all levels of the college. The last and most important recommendation stated that if the first sixteen recommendations were not implemented within sixteen months, the Ministry should consider imposing a system of financial penalties. The Ministry rejected this recommendation outright.

The Affirmative Action programs in the colleges were conceived from this historical background to identify and change the policies and practices that have caused or perpetuated sexual inequalities. The mandate called for an 'active' approach to increase opportunities for women. However, the objectives fostered an approach to equal opportunity rather than one that proceeded 'actively' to eliminate the inequalities within the system. The Ministry called for top-level commitment to the program by the president and executive committee, and further recommended that the colleges appoint a women's adviser to implement the guidelines, conduct further research, promote staff awareness, and evaluate the program. Changes were to be accomplished by internal education and benevolent management, *without* altering the existing framework for the distribution of power and funds within the system.

In my view, the program has failed for two reasons. First, the college administrations have not followed through with a full commitment to implement the recommendations of the Ministry; consequently there have been very few observable changes in the status of women within the colleges. Second, the philosophy of the program decreed that only token changes would be made to satisfy college women, the Ministry, and concerned feminists who are monitoring the progress of women within the educational institutions of Ontario.

It has been my observation that since the Affirmative-Action program was introduced, concrete changes in women's status in the colleges have been few in number and have been superficial rather than substantive. Conspicuously absent are the effective tools for change: specific schedules, quotas, and deadlines; a substantial budget for the program and a system of financial penalties against colleges indifferent to implementing the program; a methodology for executing and monitoring the program; and a comprehensive educational program to make all the people working in the colleges more aware of the inequalities the Affirmative Action model is intended to alleviate if not eradicate. Even the Ministry's recommended

tools for change, however, are being applied ineffectively or ignored altogether.

Some of the colleges, for instance, do not have a women's adviser or a college Women's Committee. In a number of colleges, the women's adviser is appointed on a part-time basis only. In others, she does not report directly to senior management. And some women's advisers do not have access to college resources such as budget information. It was the observation of a number of college women that the women's adviser was hampered in the job by overwork, isolation, ridicule, and a limited power to hold the administration accountable.

On the administrative level, progress has been similarly discouraging. Because the broad government guidelines allow considerable discretionary power to the senior administrators within the college, these bureaucrats have a tremendous influence on the eventual outcome of the program. In my observation, neither benevolent management nor the government planning has been central to the successful implementation of the program. Rather, the few successes appear to be the result of collective grassroots action by college women and other concerned individuals. It is clear that for an Affirmative Action program to succeed, the consciousness of middle and senior management must be raised to the problems of women. I have seen little evidence that the program in the CAATs has educated anyone except the converted.

I found that women within the colleges reported little to recommend the Affirmative Action program. Many commented that they were unaware of or unaffected by it. At the staff, service, and student level, there was almost a complete absence of awareness. In talking to the few women involved with the program I found only discouragement. Some reported that management was not receptive to implementing the proposals made by the women's adviser or Women's Advisory Committee; others complained that decision-making was not a dialogue process and that decisions were still made by senior management without negotiating with or consulting the women's adviser.

Some of these women felt that the entire framework in which they were asked to work was defeating and dehumanizing. In their view, the basic flaw in the program is that it calls for action through the implementation of government guidelines instead of following a legislated problem-solving approach. I would add that, in my opinion, the program's weakness is that it employs an industrial-relations model stressing profit, production, and efficiency rather than a model stressing shared decision-making, egalitarianism, and an action approach to human problems.

If the actual implementation of the program *per se* has been less than inspiring, the present status of women faculty, administrative and support staff, and students in the colleges—the *raison d'être* of the program—is undeniably depressing. Although the wage differentials between male and female faculty of similar training, experience, and seniority vary from college to college, and although some colleges are in the process of 'analysing these salary differences', no college has yet celebrated the fact that disparities no longer exist.

Librarians, academically one of the most highly qualified groups of professionals in the CAAT unit, still earn less than teaching masters in other areas of the college because of biases in job classification. Nursing faculty receive the same salaries as other teaching masters, but continue to work far more hours (40 to 45 hours per week compared with the present 19-hour minimum) for their pay. The recent strike of York University's support staff underlines the fact that college and university clerical employees continue to be underpaid while performing functions, without compensation, far beyond their job responsibilities.

Feedback I have received from the network of active feminists within the colleges indicates that not only are the colleges doing little to offset the socialization process which streams men and women into sex-segregated career paths, in many cases women are counselled into a narrow range of courses. Too often women are given explicit advice against pursuing an academic career, and are still encouraged to enter 'female' professions such as nursing, teaching, and social work. Although there is now one woman college president (out of twenty-two colleges) women are still under-represented in senior levels of teaching and administration. Within the teaching profession, women are still clustered in predominantly 'female' subjects such as fashion arts and early childhood education. Consequently they are acting as role models reinforcing traditional occupational-sex stereotyping. Moreover, women still represent a higher proportion of part-time staff and suffer from the same kinds of discrimination affecting part-time women workers elsewhere: the lack of a uniform salary scale, exclusion from tenure and fringe benefits, and the lack of access to legitimate channels to redress grievances.

In observing the progress of Affirmative Action programs to improve the policies and practices affecting the status of women, I can only remark, we've come a short way, baby. Affirmative Action simply has not checked the trend showing women losing ground in salary, rank, and numbers in the college system. Even those colleges which in the early 1970s began to hire more women faculty to offset the disproportionate ratios of male to female faculty on staff have now started to fire the same women as budget restraints have influenced their administrations. The principle of last hired, first fired seems to apply right across the country, and in most colleges and universities women were the last hired.

These dismal records show that on its own terms, the Ministry's program to improve women's status in the colleges has failed. All women have the right to call the Ministry to an accounting on these terms alone. From my point of view, however, the fundamental flaw in the Affirmative Action program is that it has provided a very modest approach to promoting a very few women up the hierarchical ladder, and never even considered the concept of redistributing power to all employees throughout the system. If, on the surface, the program may seem just and logical to an oppressed minority, it is nonetheless essentially unjust and inequalitarian. It merely reinforces a system of elitism based on a competitive pecking order, and fosters the illusion that collegiality and good will are possible between those that have power and those that do not. From its very beginnings, the Feminist Movement has opposed such elitist hierarchies and programs which strive to allow women a share of the dominant cultural pie that divides people along lines of sex, class, and race. Promoting a few women to senior teaching and administrative positions is not the key to successful affirmative action in my mind. Women are essential to the running of all organizations and institutions whether their contributions centre on typing letters, hiring and promoting people, or cleaning toilet bowls. Their contribution should be recognized and fairly compensated for at all levels.

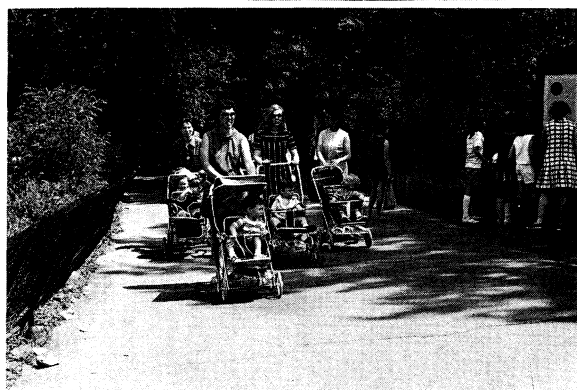
Women are justified in worrying that while the rhetoric has changed the game has not. Affirmative Action is but another way to maintain the *status quo* for most women by promoting a token few and passing oppression down the line to other sisters who are in double or triple jeopardy. It's rather like a game of twenty musical chairs with only two people changing places. The Affirmative Action program maintains the same power balance by promoting the notion of equality of opportunity for all, while providing opportunities for few, and locating decision-making power where it has always rested—in the hands of those who have the most to lose by a fair, equitable, and shared governing process.

In examining the games that patriarchs play, it becomes clear that there are a number of obvious benefits to maintaining both the present system and a theoretically receptive but non-action-oriented approach toward minority groups. Most obviously, the government's focus on equal opportunity is vastly less expensive than an approach to equal pay for equal work. Additionally, the present system encourages the practice of dividing work (not to mention the implementation of the Affirmative Action programs) along sex lines, and therefore keeps women in low-paying and powerless job ghettos.

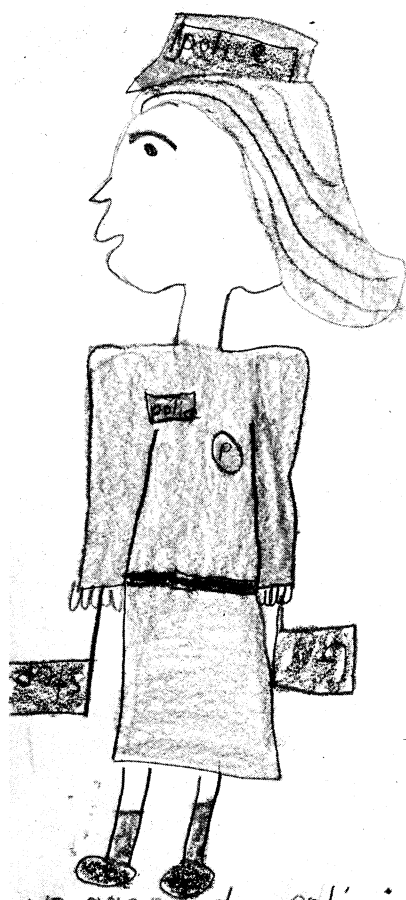
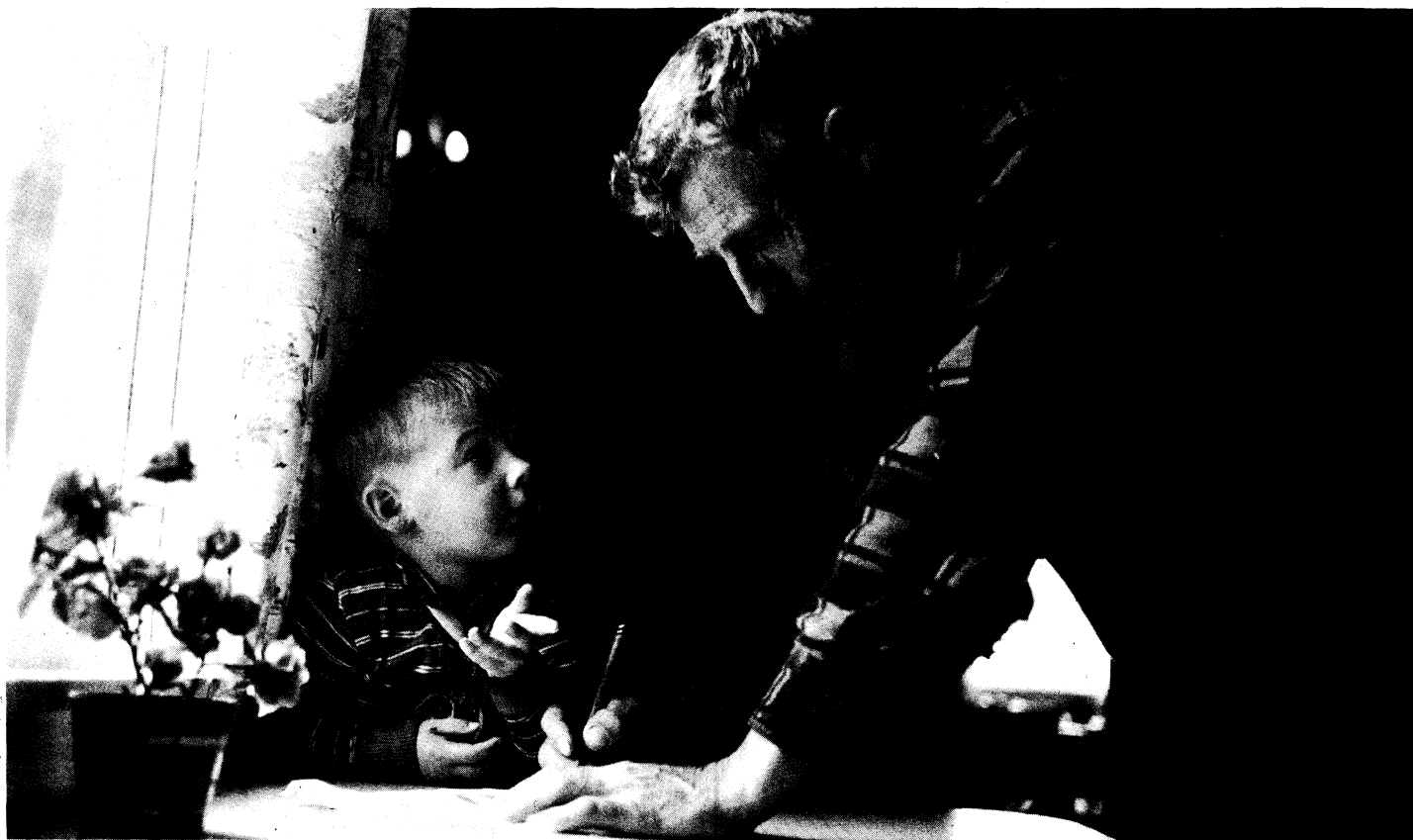
Perhaps the most insidious effect of the program has been its promotion of the liberal attitude, 'be patient, changes take time,' which at best delays the achievement of equality for women, and at worst fosters the illusion of change while business continues as usual. The tokenism of the program dramatizes small actions and small budgetary allotments to women's advancement, deflects attention away from the roots of women's inequality, and obscures government and college inactivity on the issue. It could be argued in some instances that Affirmative Action programs fan the fires of conservatism (reverse sexism charges have become the new catch-phrase of die-hard sexists) and buy time for administrations reluctant to commit themselves to the massive changes and expenses required to purchase equality. Status of women reports, research reports, and the drawing up of Affirmative Action plans

take time and buy time. Appointing women's advisers with power to recommend further studies and plans, but without power to make and execute them, only buys more time. The record of Affirmative Action programs in the colleges to date suggests that, when pressured to come to grips with the inequalities that oppress women, the system generates research in an apparent gesture toward change and then fails, at a later date, to unite research and action to effect real changes.

Affirmative Action will only work when a full commitment is made to restructure the fundamental way in which people relate to each other and share power and the goods and services of their labour. Since it is apparent that the current Affirmative Action model in the colleges is not about this kind of change, it is incumbent on all people who believe in equality for women not to be deceived by tokenism, not to be placated by status reports and theoretical recommendations rather than actions, and not to be paralysed by the accumulating evidence that in recent years women have been sold a bill of goods with Affirmative Action plans which have been neither drafted nor administered in good faith. Given that the educational system plays a vital role in preparing the next generation to shape the world in its own image, it is time for a number of patriarchal and institutional heads to be called to an accounting.



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Nancy Linn  
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un agent de police.



un pompier.



un facteur.

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