

# Working Women's Centre

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## DO WOMEN HAVE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN EMPLOYMENT?

Although women comprise 36 percent of the workforce most women workers are clustered into a narrow occupational range. Over onethird of women workers are concentrated in just three occupations - clerical, sales, stenographer or typist.

Table I

% FEMALE <sup>a</sup> WORKFORCE IN MAJOR FEMALE OCCUPATIONS (1)	
	%
Clerical Workers	14.4
Sales and Shop Assistants	10.6
Stenographers and Typists	10.4
Bookkeepers, Bank Tellers	3.1
Nurses	3.0
Primary School Teachers	2.7
Cleaners	2.4
Textile Machinists	2.3
Catering and Kitchen Workers	2.0

Most jobs performed by women are low-paid and have little or no promotion prospects. They tend to be an extension of women's traditional "natural" role in the home, i.e. associated with food or clothing, cleaning, caring, helping. Work comes to be regarded as women's work when employers can't get men to do it at the pay offered. Because of their own limited horizons and employers' discrimination many women have little occupational choice. In professional grades women predominate as nurses or teachers, both forming the lowest paid base of their professional hierarchies. Very few women reach high-level executive positions.

### WHY ARE WOMEN EMPLOYED IN SO FEW CLASSIFICATIONS?

Much of the discrimination against women in the workforce derives from the traditional patterns of female employment: i.e. a short period in the workforce followed by a longer period of domestic responsibilities. However more recently women have been spending a shorter time in their family role and, in increasing numbers, they have been returning to the workforce after their child-bearing/rearing years are over.

Table II

LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES OF MARRIED WOMEN 20 AND OVER - 1961-1971			
Age group	1961	1966	1971
	%	%	%
20-24	24.5	37.0	44.1
25-34	17.3	26.4	33.0
35-44	21.2	32.5	41.3
45-54	19.1	29.2	36.1
55-59	12.6	20.0	23.2

### ABSENTEEISM AND TURNOVER

Because of the interruption to women's employment many employers believe that women are less efficient and less committed to their jobs. They believe that women change jobs more frequently and are more often absent. This is only marginally true. Surveys conducted by the Bureau of Statistics show that women's job turnover is higher than that of males but no account is taken of other factors known to influence job turnover such as age, occupation and levels of skill.

(1) M. Power - "The Making of a Woman's Occupation" in "Hecate", Vol. 1, No. 2 (July 1975).

Table III

## VOLUNTARY SEPARATION RATES OF MANUAL WORKERS

	1973 %		1974 %		1975 %	
	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.
Food, beverages, tobacco	11.1	19.0	7.8	12.8	6.4	11.7
Textiles, clothg, footwr	7.2	7.6	7.4	7.2	2.3	4.2
Paper and Printing	4.3	7.3	4.2	6.2	2.7	4.4
Chemical Products	6.7	6.5	3.8	5.6	2.6	3.2
Metal Prods. (engineering)	7.4	7.6	6.3	7.1	3.5	3.9

One study<sup>(2)</sup> has shown that about half the difference in separation rates is due to women being heavily concentrated in the kinds of occupations where men and women tend to leave more often while men are employed in jobs where stability of employment is rewarded. A study of the Canadian Public Service<sup>(3)</sup> found that women's turnover rates were generally higher than men's but that this was not true for all age groups. It was also found that women who left the Service were more likely to return than men. Their training and experience were thus less likely to be lost to the Service.

Most findings indicate that absenteeism and turnover are functions of the job rather than of the sex of the worker. The majority of women work in unskilled monotonous jobs which tend to have higher absentee rates. Absenteeism and turnover decrease with increasing responsibility. Middle-aged women are a more stable group than men or women under twentyfive. Women who enter the labour market in their forties have a very low turnover rate.

TRAINING

The myth of higher job turnover and absenteeism has lead many employers not only to reject women but also to refuse to expend time and money training them. Apprenticeship opportunities may have no formal bar to entry but, apart from hairdressing, are still restricted so far as women are concerned.

Married women returning to the workforce are often in need of extra training and vocational guidance but retraining is given in only relatively few cases. A Victorian Chamber of Manufactures study of three major employers of women in the footwear, clothing and textile industry found that over 60 percent of working mothers needed retraining but only 45 percent of them received it. Other industries offered no retraining facilities for such women.<sup>(4)</sup>

Women tend to lack work experience because of their interrupted working life. However in the kinds of jobs where women predominate experience counts for very little in terms of skill or pay.

WORKING HOURS

Another reason for women's low-paid status is their desire, while their children are young, for part-time jobs. Part-time employment is temporary without the security and benefits of most fulltime jobs.

Table IV

EMPLOYED MARRIED WOMEN BY INDUSTRY - AUGUST 1975 ('000)		
Industry Group	Part-time	Full-time
Agriculture	30.7	24.1
Manufacturing	46.8	193.2
Wholesale & Retail Trade	119.2	179.7
Community & Business Services	169.8	221.6
Amusement, Hotels	86.1	58.3

(2) B. Bergmann - "The Economics of Women's Liberation" in "Women and Success" ed. R. B. Kundsins (Morrow & Co. 1974).

(3) Report of Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada 1970.

(4) Victorian Chamber of Manufactures Childcare Report May 1974.

Unless society faces the reality that the majority of women need to combine family and work and therefore require part-time work and/or flexible hours during one or two decades of their working lives, most women will continue to be effectively barred from careers.

Some women become discouraged by the struggle to pursue a career because work is predominantly geared to men's life patterns and men are not expected to share domestic work and childcare.

The lack of childcare facilities also influences a woman's choice of working hours. Full day care may not be locally available or may be extremely expensive. Men are not disadvantaged on the job because of their family.

#### RECRUITMENT

Job advertisements are often discriminatory. Even when no discrimination is made in the advertisement a woman may still not be interviewed or may not get the job because of her sex. If she does reach the interview stage she is likely to be asked for detailed personal information. If she is single the question of marriage will arise. If married, employers will want to know the likelihood of her having any/more children. Surely employers have no more right to know a woman's marriage or maternity plans or how her children are being cared for while she works than they have to know about a male applicant's arrangements. In some American states it is illegal to ask about a person's marital state or even his/her age before the person is actually appointed.

#### PROTECTIVE LEGISLATION

Legislation regarding lifting weights, night work etc. may be used as a barrier to prevent women obtaining more highly-paid jobs. Restrictions on hours of work reduce women's earning potential since they cannot work at times which are paid at high rates. In any case some women can (and some men should not) lift heavy weights and many women - particularly nurses and ward assistants - continually undertake night work and heavy lifting.

#### CUSTOMER ATTITUDES

Prejudice also stems from the supposed attitudes of customers - the physical characteristics of the sales personnel being considered more important than the service given. Employers, fearing reduced sales, will prefer not to hire women.

#### ATTITUDES OF CO-WORKERS

Employers may avoid employing women in largely male-dominated work areas, fearing that any male reaction or antagonism could impair productivity. Other workers, both men and women, may have a traditional distrust of women in authority. It is likely that this attitude will disappear when people become accustomed to seeing women in senior positions.

#### SUBTLE PRESSURES

Women themselves are often blamed for not reaching senior levels. Few occupations are firmly closed to them but many women are unable to take advantage of the opportunities which may be available. Women are often afraid to apply for advancement or a pay rise. They fear, from past experience, that they may lose their jobs if they "rock the boat".

A form of subtle pressure reported by one union is sexual harassment.<sup>(5)</sup> This may take the form of verbal comments, leering or ogling or a woman's job may be threatened unless she consents to a "sexual encounter" with her boss. Both forms of sexual harassment are humiliating and an invasion of a worker's privacy.

(5) "Sex or the Sack" - Public Service Review Vol. 12, No. 29  
October 20, 1975.

SUPERANNUATION BENEFITS

Upon marriage many women must resign from superannuation schemes (if they ever had access to them) and some have to resign from their jobs. They may be able to re-apply for a temporary position but lose all accumulated sickness and long service credits.

WHAT CAN UNIONS DO?

Unions must redefine the traditional concepts of "men's" and "women's" work. We may laugh at the condescension of the union attitude towards the first women doctors in Australia expressed below:

*"They will occasionally be imported, like other curiosities, and the public will wonder at them just as it wonders at dancing dogs, fat boys and bearded ladies."*(6)

but have union attitudes changed much in the past ninety years? Consider the following:

*"It has long since been clearly established that in certain areas of employment women are much more efficient than men. This is unquestionably true in certain classes of work to be found in the clothing trades industry, the food preserving industry, the confectionery manufacturing industry and in the clerical field.*

*It has also been established beyond any real doubt that female school teachers are no less efficient than their male counterparts. On the other hand it would appear to have been clearly established that women are more suitable and more efficient in the nursing profession."*(7)

Unions should question the assumptions made from such conclusions. There was a time when all nursing and clerical work was performed by men and women were considered quite incapable of it just as the AMA considered women were unfit to be doctors. All that has been proved is that, given the training and/or experience, women are just as capable as men.

Unions should press for more on-the-job training for women. Women obviously have the same potential but natural aptitude is not enough. It is training that makes the difference.

Unions should reconsider their attitudes towards apprenticeships. All apprenticeships should be open to both sexes and pay during apprenticeship should be at a rate for the year of training - not on an age basis. Women who re-enter the workforce after marriage and child-rearing are debarred from apprenticeships because of the age barrier. They are also debarred from joining a union because they have not served an apprenticeship.

Unions should seek to educate their male members to accept their fellow women workers as equals and to fight for their rights as they would for their own. Until this happens many women will be loath to support the union movement.

(6) AMA Journal, 1865

(7) J. Riordon, Federal Secretary, Federated Clerks' Union - in paper presented to a National Conference on the Status of Women in Employment.