

Challenges women face in the labour market - Part II

Last week we covered two barriers facing women in the labour market.

We discussed how women still flock to clerical occupations, which are being severely affected by new technologies and are also highly competitive. We also spoke about the lack of affordable day care, which can prevent women from entering or re-entering the labour market.

The last part of the article will be devoted to barriers faced by women because of social stereotyping or systemic discrimination. These barriers are usually compounded if the woman is also a visible minority or a person with a disability.

3. Pay equity, discrimination, and other social stereotyping or systemic discrimination faced by women

Pay equity is the belief that wages ought to reflect the worth of a job not, for example, the gender or race of the individual. In the province of BC statistics have shown that women earn 73 cents for every dollar earned by a man doing the same job. In our society men continue to predominate in the good, professional and managerial jobs in the highly polarized private sector, while women work in areas that are precarious and contingent, and where part-time work is most prevalent. Most of those areas are non-unionized within retail trade, accommodation and food services, financial services, and business and personal services.

One recent example of a BC pay equity problems was where female dispatchers for the Vancouver City Police Department were being paid less than the male dispatchers at the Vancouver City Fire Department, even though the jobs duties were essentially identical. The federal government was also recently forced to pay \$3 Billion to 230,000 current and former civil servants due to pay inequity based on gender inequality.

One key question to ask is: If our own federal government is found at fault in a massive pay equity case, then when and who is going to stand up for the rights of women in the workplace? Or, for that matter for the rights of the disabled, those who are of a visible minority, youth, etc.

Even banks are not exempt from gender inequality when it comes to promoting employees. A study in the early 1990's revealed that less than 10% of top executives at some banks were women. After an expose about employment equity issues on a television show they promised to improve their standing. Sadly, we have not seen that promise come true. There are also other examples of flagrant abuse by both small and large employers, particularly in the retail trade sector. In the USA the Glass Ceiling Commission identified these trends of placing very real barriers for women within organizations. When women begin to climb the ladder of hierarchy within a company they may end up hitting a "glass ceiling" which prevents further promotion.

Clearly, women need some ability to vary hours in order to balance work and family responsibilities, to recover from illness, and to access education and training. Yet only two provinces give workers a right to take time off for childcare and other family

emergencies, leaving many precarious workers, particularly women, vulnerable to job loss when such emergencies arise.

In the USA there is a permanent underclass and we have quickly followed in their footsteps. In fact, in the past Canada has had a higher percentage of low paid women than in the USA. For many women, the opportunities for skill development and advancement in the labour market which come with a decent job have largely evaporated. Young women, between the ages of 15 and 24 are particularly vulnerable.

It can be argued that even a bad job is better than no job, but precarious and contingent work, work normally assigned to women, is much more often a trap than an opportunity. Such work usually provides little or no training or access to career ladders. The reality is, at best, movement between unemployment and short term, low skill, "dead end" jobs. Ultimately, the "casualisation" of the labour market threatens to create a society that locks women into stereotypical roles that bind and gag her development.

There is no clear answer in any of the issues I have brought before you. Many problems present "Catch 22" scenarios for women. However, it has always been and will continue to be in women's best interest to closely examine government policies in regards to implementing frameworks for developing, implementing and maintaining pay equity and fair employment standards. I strongly suggest researching the issues through every avenue at your disposal.

1. To start read the following document at URL:

http://www.ag.gov.bc.ca/legislation/pay_equity.pdf

2. And visit the Ministry of Women's Equality at URL:

<http://www.gov.bc.ca/weq/default.htm>

To combat the instability of the workplace you can start by creating clear career goals that build "employability insurance". This pathway or guide will help navigate the difficult and sometimes frustrating experience of finding and maintaining work whilst managing a family, training or upgrading skills, and maintaining financial commitments.

In conclusion, I interviewed two women, one in her early 20's and one in her 30's. Much of what they said has been incorporated into this article already. One thing for sure, women are also searching for the "Qwan". The "Qwan" is a term from the movie "Jerry MacGuire", and refers to a job that provides "love, respect and the dollars too". What I was startled to hear from the younger lady was that respect was far more important than salary. Respect, she said, is about being valued, and not being treated like an object. Often, she felt that employers thought of her as dispensable. Men have a long history of injustice and disrespect towards women, and the problems stemming from that unfairness are quickly apparent in the difficulties facing our wives, girlfriends, mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts, and every other woman in our society.

There are no easy answers for women facing these types of challenges. So to summarize I call on all men to support, love, and cherish women in the workplace, in

their homes, and in their lives. Here is a dictionary definition you may find helpful in carrying this out:

RESPECT; To consider worthy of high regard, **ESTEEM**, an act of giving particular attention, **CONSIDERATION** -- Respectable; decent or correct in character or behaviour, **PROPER**, worthy of respect, **ESTIMABLE**.