

Women's Paid Work **The North American and Western European Experience**

Marjorie Cohen

Volume 8-9, 1981

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt8_9re03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Cohen, M. (1981). Review of [Women's Paid Work: The North American and Western European Experience]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8-9, 309–316.

Women's Paid Work:

The North American and Western European Experience

Marjorie Cohen

Ronnie Steinberg Ratner, ed. *Equal Employment Policy for Women: Strategies for Implementation in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1980)

Ann Foote Cahn, ed. *Women in the U.S. Labour Force* (New York: Praeger 1979).

Judith A. Baer, *The Chains of Protection: The Judicial Response to Women's Labor Legislation* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press 1978).

Carol Tropp Schreiber, *Changing Places: Men and Women in Transitional Occupations* (Cambridge, Ma.: The MIT Press 1979).

MOST PROGRAMMES AND LAWS designed to improve the lot of women have focused on employment. Paid work is not the most inequitable condition which women experience, yet it has become a measure by which the inequalities in the society can be gauged. There are good reasons for this: the social experiences of men and women are radically different and few spheres exist in which common ground permits comparison. The labour-market experience of men and women, however, can be compared, and more important, it can be measured. Numbers *do* establish demonstrable proof of inequalities, proof which is essential when social policies are formulated. Labour issues have been crucial for feminists because the problems of discrimination in this area are most obvious, and because legislation to deal with these problems is not only possible but also offers the promise of effectively changing existing conditions. Whether or not the promise is realized is a critical issue, and on this there is substantial disagreement.

There is less controversy on the extent to which women are disadvantaged in the labour force. The similarities in the labour-market experience of women in industrialized countries is striking. Everywhere more women are

Marjorie Cohen, "Women's Paid Work: The North American and Western European Experience," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/82), 309-316.

working for pay and are becoming a greater proportion of the labour force. But in spite of the increased participation of women, the inequalities in work and pay have remained. Women's work continues to be both separate and unequal. The range of occupations and industries where women are concentrated is conspicuously narrow, and in spite of the visibility of women in occupations which not long ago were exclusively male, there is almost no overall change in the type of work that women do. In Canada the occupational structure for women has remained fairly static over the past 35 years. Five occupational categories (clerical work, sales, service, nursing, and teaching) account for the work of three-fourths of the women who work for money. In every country there is a substantial wage gap between men and women. When measuring the wages of full-time, full-year employees, this gap is smallest in Sweden where female employees' average earnings are 86 per cent of those for males.

While a 14 per cent difference in pay is not insubstantial, the Swedish performance is in a league of its own. Canada has one of the largest differences in pay between men and women. Women earn on average 59 per cent of the earnings of males for full-time, full-year work. What is even more significant is that the gap, in percentage terms, is not narrowing. In absolute dollar amounts it is growing dramatically. In 1969 women earned about \$3,000 a year less than men. Today women get about \$7,000 less than men. The wage data are fairly powerful indicators of inequalities in the labour market but they tell only part of the story. Women are also over-represented in part-time work and among the unemployed.

The puzzle for most advocates of legislative reform is why it has not been more effective. Eventually most groups fighting for reform spend years chasing the elusive wording which will make judicial interpretation infallible. But even when the wording is right and the judges decide favoura-

bly, the result is less than satisfactory. It has become abundantly clear that equal pay legislation will not bring about substantial changes in the status quo. That this fact is now very widely recognized is shown by the direction taken by the books under review. The present stress is to find social policies which will reinforce the legislation. On the surface the legislation looks good: Why would anyone have had reason to suspect equal pay legislation when it was first introduced? The catch here has been that because women did not do the same work as men, equal pay for equal work was hardly ever an issue. A solution often attempted was to make legislation more inclusive — equal pay for work of equal value seemed to be the kind of wording which would not demand that identical work be performed in order to compare work of men and women, but would instead examine the skill, effort, responsibility, and working conditions across occupational boundaries. This legislation addresses both the causes and the effects of discrimination. While some optimists maintain that it is too early to judge the effectiveness of this type of legislation — at least in Canada — there does seem to be adequate indication that this legislation, like its predecessor, is not going to threaten the status quo. Even potentially radical legislation will have fairly limited effect because the basic understanding of the judicial and legislative system is that changes will be slow, reasonable, and will not make intolerable demands on certain sections of the society — most notably the corporate sector. No radical or sudden change is going to take place with any single piece of legislation. Any change which would suddenly bring the wages of women close to that of men would have profound effects on those groups in society which have the most to lose. This cannot be tolerated. In Ontario the corporate sector has strongly and successfully resisted legislation for equal pay for work of equal value. A closer inspection of this legislation on the federal level

would certainly alleviate their anxiety. In Canada equal pay for work of equal value legislation at the federal level has been interpreted in a fairly traditional way. While the Human Rights Commission has used the legislation and has found discrimination against women in several cases, there has, in fact, been no case which upheld the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. One case received a fair amount of publicity as an important test case for equal pay for work of equal value. Nurses at Nova Scotia's Springhill and Dorchester penitentiaries were being paid about \$1,500 less than men who were performing the same tasks but who had no professional qualifications. The Commission decided that the nurses should receive the same pay as the men. But it is clear that since the jobs were the same, this is not an equal value case at all, simply a decision which upholds the concept of equal pay for equal work. On the books the legislation looks good, but in practice it is a far cry from what its advocates had in mind.

Equal Employment Policy for Women is a collection of twenty articles which describe the routes taken in Sweden, the United States, Canada, France, Great Britain, Austria, and West Germany to improve the employment status of women. Although the book is about paid employment, there is a strong emphasis throughout about the relationship between unpaid work which women universally perform and their work in the paid labour force. The experience everywhere is that unless social policies are designed to reduce this dual labour burden women will have little chance to move toward equality.

In most of the countries discussed, the failure of legislation to go far enough fast enough has shifted the emphasis somewhat away from equal pay legislation as a solution to labour-force inequality, to policies which will foster equal opportunity. In many respects this is a much tougher issue and raises serious problems. The arguments traditionally used for equal pay were based primarily on fairness. The arguments for

equal opportunity also rest on fairness but point to past discrimination as part of the problem. In trying to counter past discrimination the way becomes murky. Equal opportunity policies rely on targeting a special group for special treatment, a direction which even in the best of times meets strong resistance in the societies where it has been tried. But the success of equal employment opportunity really demands the best of economic conditions and a particularly optimistic view which sees equality for women and the successful functioning of the economy as mutually compatible. Several articles in this collection show graphically that improved labour market performance for women can occur only when there is a high demand for labour. More specifically, they point to the failure of equal opportunity programmes when unemployment increases. Even when affirmative action is legislated, it can easily be avoided when people are being laid off. In continuing to push these programmes, it then becomes necessary to sell equal opportunity policy as a good thing for both business and employees, an argument which convinces almost no one in business.

The articles tend to emphasize that strategies for change should not be threatening and should not change the status quo too quickly. For example, in an article entitled "The Impact of Organization Structure: Models and Methods for Change," Rosabeth Moss Kanter states quite explicitly that "... only when Equal employment opportunity officers become change agents in a larger sense and are seen as resources to the system rather than agents for punishment, will their efforts truly succeed." But not only must programmes, which ultimately hope to benefit women, work for the system, they also must achieve their objective "... without initially disturbing the conventional hierarchy of the organization." And they cannot "... appear to benefit one group at the cost of another."

Nancy Seear in "Implementing Equal Pay and Equal Opportunity Legislation in Great Britain" recognizes that the general

economic climate is an obstacle to change but feels that ultimately management will see the light and recognize that it is in their interest to integrate women more fully into the labour force: "... the more it [management] recognizes that the refusal to make use of abilities women can offer is damaging to the enterprise, the more chance there is that the aims of the acts will be achieved in the not too remote future." Ultimately, then, it is seen that rational argument and prudent implementation of reform policies will achieve their goals. These are views which strike me as over-optimistic and ultimately not very helpful if longterm strategy is genuinely contemplated. There must be a recognition that certain basic features of the system simply are not compatible with female equality.

Although none of the authors in this collection make this point, it can be reasonably argued that the changing position of women has had less to do with deliberate social reform than with economic expansion. Egalitarian reform has been minimal and economic growth has obscured its failure. When women are better off, it is because everyone is better off, because the economic structure of industrial societies has changed, not because the relative position of females has improved significantly. The fears of business are justified. Discrimination against women is not merely a matter of prejudice — an irrational practice left over from earlier economic conditions. Discrimination is profitable and the dominant interests in our society have a lot to lose by women's equality. Isolating a segment of the labour force and paying it less is good business.

Advocates for equal opportunity policies intuitively sense that there is something wasteful about the underemployment of a whole sector of the labour force. In a planned and rational economy the fact of more people joining the labour force would not be a catastrophe. In our economy it is. But changing the whole economic system is not likely and feminists know that build-

ing on immediate solidarities is important. The movement quite rightly has focussed on the politics of the possible and has not simply opted for some ultimate total feminist victory in the future. Lorna Marsden's "The Role of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women in Facilitating Equal Pay Policy in Canada" is the only article in the collection which deals with the role of activists in changing legislation. It is also the only article dealing with the Canadian experience. It shows that a tremendous amount of organization, inordinate energy, and a lengthy period of time are needed to bring about new legislation. Her analysis is that working closely with government can produce results and she advocates a strategy which "... puts a group of well-prepared, articulate, and pragmatic women together with those who actually implement laws in a face-to-face negotiation." This is indisputable in cases where the objectives are specific and in particular when legislation is as complex as that governing equal pay. But ultimately feminists must come to terms with an overall strategy and this requires a much more comprehensive approach. The legislation rarely, if ever, benefits individuals. Women are skeptical of fighting discrimination cases because of the enormous personal sacrifice involved. More frequently than not, it leaves the victims in a worse position than when they began, even if money compensation is awarded. It is not even clear that it benefits women as a class. In Canada discrimination is treated by commissions and boards as though it is an occasional, sporadic, infrequent occurrence; a series of isolated and distinguishable events. Each case must be argued separately and findings in each case affect no one other than the complainant. It is not the way to topple discrimination in the labour force. Changes that really matter will necessitate a strategy which incorporates a conscious notion of a general redistribution of income in the society and which generates the commitment toward a more egalitarian society from

both labour and feminist groups.

In Sweden the improvement in the labour-force experience of women has been decidedly more dramatic than elsewhere. Alice Cook in "Collective Bargaining as a Strategy for Achieving Equal Opportunity and Equal Pay: Sweden and West Germany" shows that a solidarity wage policy can be effective. Women's wages were not singled out as a subject of bargaining. Instead, the whole issue of income distribution has been addressed and there has been a conscious effort to narrow the gap between high and low wage earners. Unions have treated the problem of low wages for women as a significant element of the problem of low wages generally. Because women have been the bulk of the low wage earners, this approach has been particularly beneficial for them. The rate of wage increases has been noticeably higher for women than for men and each year the gap between male and female earnings narrows. The articles by Rita Liljestrom and Berit Rollen show that the process has been aided by family and economic policies which treat men and women as equally responsible for individual and family issues.

Equal Employment Policy for Women is a useful book because it is the first to examine the issue from an international perspective, using the experience of countries which have roughly comparable stages of development. It is extremely convenient to have a collection which outlines the kinds of policies and problems experienced by women elsewhere. It is particularly important for Canadians because it shows how other countries have fared with policies we in Canada are either calling for or anticipating. While each author deals with specific countries, the first chapter, by Ronnie Steinberg Ratner, gives a comprehensive overview of how countries compare both in regard to policy and performance.

Singling out one group of workers for special treatment is a procedure which can be pursued only with extreme caution.

More often than not it results in unhappy consequences for the group it intended to benefit. Judith Baer's study of the effect of protective labour legislation in the United States, *The Chains of Protection*, shows how laws which appear to protect in fact can be extremely restrictive. While early legislative measures were almost always interpreted as a need to protect women because of their physical differences, Baer shows that the fact that women's working conditions were generally worse than men's made the necessity for protective legislation for women more dramatic. Because men were more likely to be organized in trade unions, they were able to achieve better working conditions through collective bargaining. Baer sees the trade-union movement's push for protective legislation as motivated by a genuine desire to protect women, even though the effect of the legislation was to have important benefits for male trade unionists, since it often eliminated competition from poorer paid female workers. Through this well-documented book, which examines the history of protective legislation and its interpretation by the courts, Baer shows both how the idea of protective legislation for women paved the way for more inclusive labour legislation which benefitted all workers and how detrimental the legislation itself was for women. While the information deals with the American experience, the issues in Canada were generally similar. Our factory legislation and minimum wage laws were first instituted to protect women, but only when they also protected men as well did they really have advantages for women.

Women in the U.S. Labour Force is a collection of 17 articles prepared for the Joint Economic Committee of Congress. It deals with topics typical of compendiums of this sort — occupational barriers, day care, education, and the law. While it contains a wealth of information, the book offers no new insights into either the problems or the solutions. It is, in short, a book

one would expect from a government committee.

The editor, Ann Foote Cahn, who writes a "Summary" of the articles at the beginning of the collection, clearly has had limited analytical experience with the issue. She makes amateurish mistakes: saying, for example, that "The proportion of the labour force between the ages of 18 to 64 who were women reached 56%." What she means is that 56% of American women between 18 and 64 were in the labour force, i.e., women in this group accounted for 41% of the labour force. She also misinterprets the collective view of the authors when she sees equality and full employment as "... the logical and necessary culmination of the phenomenon of their [women's] massive entry into the labor force. . . ." One wishes it were so, but the history of human kind shows that neither equality nor full employment is inevitable.

For anyone interested in facts about just where women stand in the United States economy, there is much information in this book. But it is not the place to look for an analysis of the root of the problem or useful fronts on which to move. For example, Isabel Sawhill, senior research associate with the Urban Institute, has a particularly narrow and simplistic approach to the problem. She sees the reasons for job segregation as arising from women's discontinuous work history and from cultural stereotypes "... which affect both employers' and women's attitudes in a mutually reinforcing fashion." Her solutions are of the kind likely to appeal to government committees, but are unlikely to lead to equality in the labour force. A particularly thoughtless one is the suggestion that special apprenticeship programmes for women be instituted "... at below market wage rates." The rationale for this is akin to Ronald Reagan's solution to unemployment: low wages will be an incentive for employers to hire inexperienced workers. If this could have worked, it would have done so long ago. Low wages for

women are part of the problem — hardly the solution.

Other authors have equally short-sighted solutions. Beatrice Reubens and Edwin Reubens feel that producing occupational equality requires a more selective approach than is postulated in current legislation and court orders. To do this there should be a concentration on cases where employment is expanding. "Meanwhile, a great effort must be made to improve the earnings in female intensive occupations so that more men will be interested in entering them and women will be content to remain in them." While it certainly is important to improve wages in female occupations, attracting men to these occupations and keeping women in them should not be why it is done. Economist Steven Sandell sees that one of the basic problems is that women do not prepare realistically for their future lives. Because of this women do not train properly and do not maintain appropriate employment patterns. For him, labour force inequality is a personal, individual problem, therefore he sees government's role in a rather limited way: "The most important role government can play is to ensure that today's young women are aware of the consequences of labour force withdrawal and lack of training."

Many of the authors in the collection point to the need to expand part-time work to provide opportunities for women. The assumption is that part-time work is good for women and serves their needs. While Carol Greenwald points out that it does need to be equally available to men, she ignores the disadvantages of this form of employment and the complexities of trying to institute equal remuneration for part-time work. Any study which looks at part-time employment should consider the possibility that patterns of part-time work which exist now may in fact indicate, not the joys of part-time work, but severe underemployment. The reasons why women work part-time are far from clear and often are not a matter of choice. One

cannot rule out the very plausible possibility that women cannot find full-time work because the work is not available, or they face discrimination in full-time markets. Greenwald dwells on the advantages of part-time work to both the employer and the employee, and virtually ignores all of those factors which make part-time work a specifically exploitative labour situation. The appeal of part-time work is understandable: in a limited way it does seem to be a solution to the dual labour role of women. And, if it were possible to get men working part-time too, then perhaps they would take on some of the burdens in the home. But what is appealing about part-time work to the employer is that there is a tremendous cost-advantage through paying part-time workers lower wages and fewer benefits than full-time workers. When these benefits disappear through having to pay part-time workers on a pro-rated basis, there is a nasty tendency for part-time work to dry up. It is surprising that none of the authors have approached the problem of the dual labour role of women in a more universal way which would be less disadvantageous to women. One solution could be a general reduction of the length of the work week for all workers.

The authors who deal with education and employment see career education as the pivotal issue for equality on the labour force. Anita Mitchell names three major inhibitors to the full employment of women. They are "... women's concepts of themselves as workers; their failure to develop personal traits and worker traits that help them compete with men for existing jobs; and stereotypical role expectations in the community." That is, with insight women (all by themselves and personally) can lick the system. I do not want to imply that career education is unimportant, but it is necessary to have a less simplistic understanding of why things are wrong and to recognize the limits of education as a solution. Pamela Ann Roby fortunately does just this. In her article on

"Vocational Education" she states that "... lack of training and education has been overemphasized as a cause of unemployment and poverty." But she does show in a graphic way the sexist nature of vocational programmes in the United States and their effect on females.

Changing Places: Men and Women in Transitional Occupations by Carol Tropp Schreiber is a more serious book than the dust-jacket blurb would lead one to believe. It is an excellent examination of females and males in sex-atypical jobs. While studies of this type have been done before, this one is unusual in that it is not about women who move into high-status, high-paying, professional jobs usually performed by men or about men who move into nursing or social work. Rather, she looks at males in typically female clerical jobs and females in typically male blue-collar or technical jobs. One of the most interesting findings in this study is that the stress associated with moving into sex-atypical occupations does not have a negative effect either on performance or on employee satisfaction with the job. This finding is contrary to most accepted beliefs about the major problems in instituting affirmative action programmes. While the author is very cautious about making any general claims about the findings in her study, she does show that when affirmative action programmes are properly instituted they can work. Its success notwithstanding, the programme which Schreiber studied was decimated by the larger problem of a declining national economy. Many participants in a demonstrably successful programme were soon out of work again; they had been the last hired.

It is not a lack of knowing what kinds of changes are necessary to make life better for working women. The problem is that change is painfully slow, and the final arbiter of any policy designed to help women is an economy in which the vagaries of the market are supreme. Trying to mould women so that they will fit the needs of the

market is unlikely to produce equality. The effectiveness of equal pay legislation and even affirmative action is highly questionable when demand for labour is decreasing. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the importance of strong direction from government to improve the female labour position as in Sweden where even in times of increased unemployment women have continued to improve their labour force position. A government committed to equality can make an important difference. For this reason governments must continue

to be pressed to provide more equitable legislation and employment policies. But at the same time it becomes increasingly important to examine carefully the economic context in which various programmes and laws are being implemented. Although it is still necessary to address specific needs and to redress specific grievances, an understanding of the economic context of the problems will better explain why the successes are so minimal. It may also point to a more comprehensive approach to the whole issue of equality.

A Social History of Canada's Labour Press

I am now researching the role of Canada's labour press in the development of social legislation for my masters thesis on the topic.

I intend to review all the major labour papers. I hope to provide a glimpse at our fine labour press heritage — the vitality, political slants, editorial uniqueness, and even graphic appearance of labour papers. All of this falls within the context of a thesis on the role of our labour papers in pressing for progressive social legislation in areas like social security, health and safety, education, women and child labour, and housing.

Uncovering this social history of the labour press presents an enormous research task. To accomplish it, I am asking CCLH members to provide me with any information (sources, names, published and unpublished writings) on the labour press and its history. Your own views on the subject are also most welcome. Perhaps you have letters from a particularly interesting and able former editor on the role of the labour press? What role do you think the labour press has played in our social development? Has the labour press improved or worsened as a medium of social change since 1867? What is the social role of the labour press today? Will the labour press disappear as a result of increased use of television as a labour movement tool for social awareness? Other comments, suggestions?

By responding to this request as soon as possible, you will help me immensely to contribute what I hope will be a useful addition to Canadian labour history research.

Ron Verzuh,
201 Primrose Ave.,
Ottawa, Ont.
K1R 7V5