

## □ WOMEN IN THE BUSINESS WORLD □

**T**he position of women in economic life over the past 15 years or so is both a consequence and a symbol of a profound change in values. The number of women in the paid labour force has grown, as has their visibility. One of the most obvious but long hidden from view signs of this role is that of women who since 1975 have been called "family business partners" or "co-entrepreneurs".

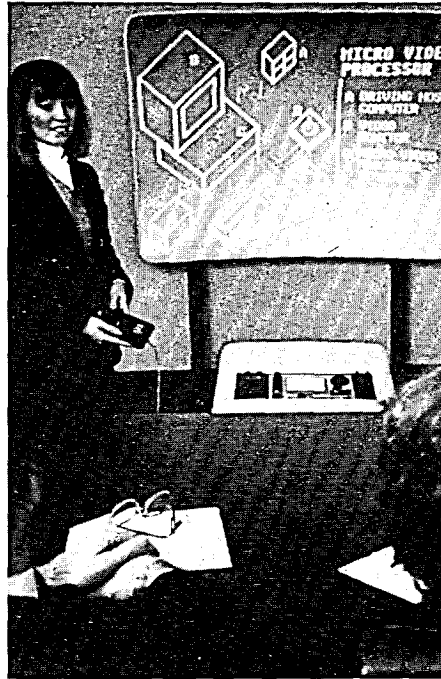
There are probably more than 560 000 such women in Canada, and their contribution is estimated to represent some 3% of the GNP, or \$9 billion. Most of them (53%) are employed in agriculture, but they are also found in PME (petite, moyenne entreprise) (43%) and professional offices (4%).

However, in 1984 only 40% of them were receiving a salary, and barely 16% held a share in the business. A mere 1.4% had partnership status.

In 1975, which was International Women's Year, the AFEAS (*Association féminine d'éducation et d'action sociale*) investigated the situation of women who worked with their husbands. Only 12% were receiving a salary.

There have been some improvements. Since 1982, women in a co-entrepreneur position have been able to claim a compensatory allowance for their contribution to the family estate when a divorce or death occurs. But they must still prove this to the satisfaction of the courts. The burden of proof rests with the woman.

Working in a family business is perhaps the oldest avenue by which women have entered economic life to play an active part. Women have invaded the labour market in recent years: between 1977 and 1985, their involvement rose by 40%.



Even more recently, although still to a marginal extent, women have begun to rise in the ranks to positions of junior, intermediate or senior management. But the percentage of women on boards of directors is still barely 2%.

There are a number of reasons for this. The first obstacle is the stereotype of the manager that is almost identical to that of the masculine male characterized by aggressiveness, authoritativeness and power. There is also a principle, well-known to organizational sociology, which states that the closer one gets to the top of a hierarchy, the less definite are the criteria of competence. People protect themselves against ambiguity by choosing others who are like them. One reason why many women prefer being called "the manager" rather than the "the manageress" is that the masculine gender is associated with a prestigious position, while the feminine is associated with subordinate duties.

Moreover, the typical career plan indicates that in order to gain ascendancy you must make your mark between the ages of 25 and 35, the precise age when women like to have babies. And since they usually take their parental responsibilities more seriously than men, they are held back. The fourth and final obstacle is that women are given very little involvement in the informal network of the social clubs.

Thus the world of senior management is still a male society where the suit and tie is the rule and where there is no place for visits to the pediatrician. In order to gain access here, women must do everything they can to minimize the differences.

Women are underestimated, underutilized and often underpaid — it is estimated that when all the variables are taken into account, the salaries of women managers are still 10 to 15% lower than those of men. This is why more and more women are choosing to launch their own businesses.

In 1978, 68% of the Canadians who started new businesses were in fact women. And the trend seems to be continuing.

Francine G. McKenzie, President of the Provincial Advisory Council of the Status of Women in Quebec, points out that according to a Canadian study the survival rate of their businesses is twice as high as that of businesses founded by men □

(From an article in the March-April, 1987 issue of the magazine *Le Devoir économique* entitled: "Women in Business: A Very Visible Minority".)