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ILO EXPERT SPEAKS IN OTTAWA

Women in most countries have some basic problems in common, and this in spite of the tremendous variety in economic conditions, industrial development and social attitudes concerning women in the various countries of the world, Mrs. Elizabeth Johnstone of the International Labour Office, Geneva, said during a recent visit to Ottawa.

Mrs. Johnstone, head of the ILO's Office for the Co-ordination of Women's and Young Worker's Questions, spoke at an informal meeting in Ottawa arranged by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labour and attended by government officials and representatives from a number of agencies interested in the problems of working women. Mrs. Johnstone is married to a Canadian, J.E. Ainsworth Johnstone, chief of the Editorial and Translation Division of the ILO.

NEW CONDITIONS

Because some of the under-developed countries are facing problems that we had to cope with half a century ago, we tend to think that the solutions we applied at the time can be applied in these countries today, Mrs. Johnstone observed. This is not true, she declared--the under-developed countries are profiting by our experience to by-pass many of our early difficulties and they are today facing many of the same basic problems as the industrially-developed countries, particularly those concerning working women.

First among these problems in vocational preparation--the education, vocational guidance and training girls receive before they start to work. "Everywhere, with a few rare exceptions, the vocational preparation of girls is inferior to that of boys both in quantity and quality and more often than not is often unrealistic in terms of their later work opportunities and work lives", Mrs. Johnstone said.

There are many reasons for this state of affairs, some well known in Canada--family reluctance to give the education of girls the same priority as that of boys, indifference on

part of girls to their own vocational futures, separation of education facilities for boys and girls, which often result in unequal facilities for girls, traditional prejudice about what constitutes men's work and women's work and inadequate vocational guidance for women. "It is obvious that so long as this situation persists, women will always find it difficult to develop their potentialities and skills and hence to have equal chances for promotion and to move into more responsible, more highly skilled and better paid work", Mrs. Johnstone said.

LESSENING OF DISCRIMINATION

Women in most countries have also experienced inequalities of opportunity or inequality of wages and treatment, but, Mrs. Johnstone went on, "it is my impression that in this whole area of discrimination against women a tremendous amount has been done to move towards greater practical fairness of treatment of women, towards applying the same rules for men and women workers and towards evaluating the work of women according to the same criteria as that of men." Forms of discrimination against women which were taken almost for granted in the 30's hardly exist now, at least in a formally-admitted way, and equal pay for equal work is becoming less a more a practical reality.

Mrs. Johnstone said that we should try to determine how relevant Canada's experience in meeting these problems would be in other parts of the world, and how this country could help in advancing the status of women elsewhere.

In 1955 the Governing Body of the ILO set up a small official committee--a panel of consultants on working women's problems. This committee is tripartite, that is, it is composed of representatives of governments, employers and workers.

PROBLEMS OF MARRIED WOMEN

The panel is paying special attention to the problems of married women at work. There is no single problem of married women, Mrs. Johnstone said. Married women fall into different categories because of the difference in the number of children they have, their ages and other aspects of the family situation. Each category has its own problems.

Another problem that is concerning this committee is that of child care--how to assure affectionate care and supervision of children of working mothers. "It is obvious that nowhere have child care needs been met adequately either nationally or locally", Mrs. Johnstone said.

Everywhere there is a fundamental confusion as to whether it is a good thing or bad thing for married women to work outside their homes; particularly married women with children. "We pay lip service often to their right to choose freely whether they wish to work or not but we restrict their free choice by our social atti-