

At this point, Mr. Speaker, I would like to draw your attention to what I consider to be the major changes proposed in Part III, and I am referring to those that cover the leave of absence for child care and sexual harassment in the work place.

Over the last thirty years, a very substantial shift has occurred in the labour force in Canada. From 1951 to 1980, the proportion of women in the labour force rose from 22.2 per cent to 40.1 per cent. In 1980, Canada broke through a critical barrier when the women's participation rate went over 50 per cent. In other words, the percentage of women actively engaged in the country's economy simply doubled in barely 20 years. From a social standpoint, this massive influx of women in Canadian plants and offices has to be one of the most lasting and notable changes in this day and age. It has forced all Canadians to reassess their personal views based on tradition and compelled Governments to redesign and redraft their public policies.

● (1610)

Some 15 or 20 years ago, there was no need to account for an employee's family responsibilities when drafting employment policies. Once married, most women would quit working and devote themselves to their home and the education of their children. Husbands were supposed to give all their attention to their own career to ensure the financial security of their families. The reasons behind the disappearance of work distribution on the basis of sex are many and varied, and they are due to economic, educational, demographic and psychological considerations on which I would like to comment briefly.

From an economic viewpoint, it is obvious that two salaries were needed by the many families that wanted to raise their standard of living. Unfortunately, it is equally obvious that, in a good many families, the husband's take-home pay is hardly enough to maintain the family income above the poverty level. Indeed, a recent study revealed that the number of families living in poverty would increase by 51 per cent if women did not have any income. Another factor which did contribute to boost female representation on the labour market is that the educational standards of men and women at all levels have been rising.

Statistical data and plain common sense indicate that there is a genuine and solid link between the level of education of women and their rate of participation in the labour force. With respect to demography, higher divorce rates, fewer marriages and the upward trend in the average age of newlyweds are all factors which had an influence on the economic activities of women. In that respect, it should be noted that, even though the participation rate of women of all age groups has increased considerably, that increase has been even more striking in the 25-to-34 age bracket. In 1981, almost two thirds of women of child-bearing age were on the labour market.

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Finally, let us not forget that psychological factors are just as significant as all other factors combined. Many women like the independence which comes with gainful employment. Whether we like it or not, independence spells respect in industrialized democracies and a regular pay cheque is the guarantee of that independence. In addition, it would seem that women exert more influence in the family decision-making process simply because they can get a job and earn a salary. As women are more and more present on the labour market, they quite naturally demand equal pay for work of equal value. Along with many others, the federal government launched a number of programs to advance the status of women. Unfortunately, as was admitted by Kathleen Newland, of the Worldwatch Institute, progress toward a new and fair distribution of jobs in the area of paid work force is hindered by the persistence of the former and unequal distribution of household tasks. In other words, even though men no longer exert a domination over paid jobs, women have found themselves, quite against their will, with a real monopoly over non-paid household tasks.

The results are obvious. As long as men do not assume a larger share of the work within the household, women will be unable to benefit from attractive work opportunities on the labour market. Also, according to Ms. Newland, employers will continue to treat women without any consideration as long as they presume, and rightly so, that women will be the ones who will quit their jobs, even temporarily, in order to look after their young children, take time off in order to nurse a sick child, refuse to work overtime because of their domestic responsibilities and follow their husband when he is transferred.

As a great number of women workers know too well, the interruptions in their career caused by pregnancies and child rearing have a tendency to reduce their seniority, to have a negative influence on their promotion opportunities and to hinder their eligibility for fringe benefits.

All these considerations are powerful arguments for the reforms to Part III that are included in Bill C-34. In short, these amendments are the result of considerable effort on the part of the federal Government to help workers covered by the Canada Labour Code to reconcile their domestic and professional responsibilities. For example, at the present time, women employees must have been employed for 12 months in order to be eligible for maternity leave. It is proposed to reduce this eligibility period to three months, reflecting the far reaching changes which have dramatically modified the structure of the activity rate. As we are all aware, the birth rate in Canada has been plummeting ever since 1960. In fact, since 1972, it has been below the population replacement rate. In other words, as long as women continue to show a deep commitment to their career, it will no longer be necessary to require of them a long eligibility period. Under the current legislation, only pregnant employees are entitled to this type of