

Government Orders

About the impact of systemic discrimination against women, Ms. Simms said the following: "The cost of discrimination should not be underestimated. Ample proof has been given of the correlation between sex and poverty in Canada. Many studies conducted by the government confirm that women are poorer than men and that, among poor women, those who have disabilities, are immigrants or belong to visible minority groups, as well as native women, are the poorest".

It is not true to say, as my hon. colleague from Edmonton-Southwest and others suggested the day before last, that "it is reverse discrimination, that is means that one can get a job, be promoted or hired on the basis of physical characteristics instead of merit".

This reflects—please excuse my bluntness—a sexist and macho view of the situation.

It is a refusal to face reality, the everyday reality of thousands of Canadians and Quebecers, both women and men. I refer of course to those groups addressed by the bill: women, the disabled, visible minorities and aboriginal people.

This is the reality referred to by Ms. Simms and many other witnesses who came to represent their less privileged fellow workers.

• (1550)

A few figures clearly illustrate their demands. Statistics Canada indicates that in 1993 women working full time earned 72 per cent of what men earned. This is even the way it is at the present time in the federal public service, where women are earning 72 per cent of what men are earning. I trust that rectification of this situation within the federal public service will not be long in coming.

The average income of immigrant women workers, however, was 54 per cent of what immigrant males were earning, and close to 80 per cent of disabled women had an annual income of less than \$10 000. This is an alarming situation, therefore, and the way we must adjust our aim is to pass a law such as this. We are also aware that 75 per cent of the ten lowest paying jobs in Canada are occupied by women. According to the Council on the Status of Women, the proportion of women in the lowest paying jobs has increased four times more than their proportion in the best paying jobs. The explanation offered by the council is the division of work along gender lines, leading to an undervaluation of women's paid work, which naturally leads to salary inequities.

The women who organized the great march on Quebec City last spring were reminding us that this state of affairs, this inequality of earnings between men and women, compromises the economic security of women both now and when they retire. As for the other designated groups, we know from the figures of the Department of Human Resources Development itself that

they are characterized by a serious underrepresentation of aboriginal and disabled persons and a concentration of members of these groups in the less well paying jobs. The situation is apparently particularly acute for aboriginal people, whether female or male. This is why we need employment equity legislation.

Not content to denigrate the very foundations of employment equity legislation, our friends in the Reform Party blithely deny the harsh reality experienced by our fellow Canadians in the designated groups. Two days ago, my colleague for Edmonton Southwest said: "The premise is that somehow or other Canadians are a mean, regressive, racist, discriminating people. Canadians are nothing of the sort. We are not that. No such discrimination exists in the workplace". So they deny the problem.

"The workplace, particularly outside the federal government, is progressive. Industry leads. It is a totally unnecessary law". This is ostrich politics. We have to ask ourselves why a certain segment of the population refuses to acknowledge that their fellow citizens are victims of discrimination every day.

We have to ask ourselves if it is not because these people do not suffer the systemic discrimination repeatedly confirmed by studies in this area. As a general rule, white men do fairly well compared to other groups. So, contrary to what some people think, we, as a society, need a law promoting employment equity.

As I mentioned earlier, the existing legislation was lacking and needed improvement—hence the bill before us. In Quebec, women have a promise from government that a proactive bill on pay equity will be tabled soon. Under that bill, business will have to create a balanced mechanism for evaluating jobs, in order to identify those who are relatively underpaid. Business will then have a period of time to adjust salaries.

The following sentence in a document produced by the committee for the bread and roses march made it quite clear: "Whereas discrimination is not the exception but the rule and affects all female workers, the adoption of pro-active legislation is necessary". Reform members, if we go by their speeches, have no understanding of the situation in Quebec or of the kind of society we want to become. If they want to try their luck in Quebec, they will have to adjust their thinking to the situation in Quebec and consider the social values we want in our society.

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Of course this was about wage equity, while the bill before the House is about employment equity. In fact, the two are closely related. In both cases, the purpose is to close the gap between men and women, between white people and members of visible minorities, between persons with a disability and those who have none. It is about social justice and government policies that will help to deal with the problem.