

*Supply*

the concerns of women were represented both in last February's First Ministers' Conference on the economy which was held in Regina and then at the National Economic Conference that was held here in Ottawa last March.

One thing that has clearly emerged from all of these discussions is that women's issues are essentially economic issues. They are bread and butter issues.

Women are an integral part of the economic process, yet they suffer the most from major economic inequalities. Over the past few decades, women have continually increased their contribution to the national economic effort. They contribute in their presence in the labour force and also increasingly as entrepreneurs. Today, 60 per cent of all Canadian women aged 15 to 64 are in the labour force. This percentage increases each year and it is expected that by the end of this century the participation rate of women and men will be at the same level, with about equal representation of both sexes in the labour force. Today, women make up 41.7 per cent of the total workforce but the full potential of the Canadian economy will be achieved only through the best use of all available resources.

[Translation]

Women have always been on the same footing as men in assuming many economic burdens. However, they have rarely been able to earn the same recognition and the same remuneration.

[English]

Women's rightful claim to equality has been met with a built-in systemic barrier in our society. As a result, women's economic activity has been confined to a narrow range of sectors or occupations. Women's unemployment rate has historically been higher than men's. Added to this, structural changes which are currently taking place in the economy threaten a whole range of other jobs traditionally held by women. The productive potential of Canada's women is therefore largely underutilized, depriving women of a much needed income for the provision of their family and their own economic security.

I believe that society pays a double price for the underutilization of half of its population, through welfare payments to families and individuals and through a less than maximum level of general activity.

Policies to address the unequal economic situation of women in this country have, until now, generally been of a collective nature. They have been oriented toward social rather than economic objectives. These policies all tend to compensate for the perverse effects that our economic system has on women.

Through years of application they have been progressively refined. Yet their mutually reinforcing effects could have been considerably enhanced if they were challenged through an integrated framework. It is just such a framework that my Government has begun to build.

Need I remind the House of the quick action the Government took in responding to the recommendations of the Abella

Inquiry into equality in employment. We have adopted employment equity as a priority for this Government.

The employment equity principle brings together measures related to equal opportunities, affirmative action, equal pay for work of equal value and supportive measures in the areas of training and child care. It is a principle that has strong potential to change the status of women in the workforce.

Employment equity is not a new idea. Previous Governments have paid lip service to the concept of labour force equality. It has been talked about, worried about and studied but it was not until this Government was elected that anyone took action.

We have taken the first step. We have moved to require Crown corporations, federally regulated businesses and contractors providing goods and services to the Government to implement employment equity. My colleague, the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Miss MacDonald), has been discussing these measures with representatives of business and labour and with those whom the measures are designed to benefit—women, members of the visible minority groups, native people and disabled individuals.

In attending some of these briefings with her, we have been impressed by the desire to work with us to find a meaningful application.

[Translation]

The legislation required to implement these initiatives will soon be introduced in this House. Once more, this is only a first step in tackling the many barriers to equality in the work place.

[English]

The Government's commitment to the concept of equal pay for work of equal value was clearly stated in the Speech from the Throne.

Legislation guaranteeing equal pay for work of equal value has been on the books since 1977. But legislation by itself, of course, is not sufficient. It must also be effectively enforced. The previous Government relied on what might best be described as a fire-fighting approach. As complaints were made, Treasury Board worked with the Human Rights Commission on a resolution. What was lacking was a positive approach.

Our Government has moved to ensure that the principle of equal pay for work of equal value is applied in the federal Public Service.

As an employer, the Government intends to take a proactive stance to ensure the principle is fully implemented. We have established a senior level, joint union-management committee to do a detailed study on implementing equal pay for work of equal value. The committee's preliminary report is expected at the end of next month.

We expect that our efforts to implement equal pay for work of equal value will be a model for the private sector and other levels of Government. At the same time, we have taken additional steps to encourage private sector compliance with the legislation.