

Future dim for women: Equal pay not in sight

by Melinda Vester

Equal work for equal pay, is this the reality of today's world?

In 1901, women earned only 53% of what their male counterparts earned, according to sociologist Don Clairmont. In 1977 it was up to 57.8%, and today it has reached 60% of the male income level. In 85 years there has only been an increase of 7% in the ratio of female to male income. Women haven't come a long way towards equality in the work force.

Poor working conditions, low pay and few benefits are the realities of for about 70% of all employed women. Women are the "marginal work force" of low status, dead-end jobs in sales, service, light manufacturing and clerking. These are people that need to work, not just supported wives looking for a little extra pin money. These are single mothers, single women and badly needed second income earners, not people who are bored and looking for something to do with their time.

If a wife is not working outside the home then she is relying on "the generosity of her husband . . . If women don't have any money, they don't have the freedom or the control in their own lives," said Gail Dreaver of the Edmonton Social Planning Council.

According to the National Council of Welfare, women make up 55.6% of the poor in Canada, but only 50.8% of the population. This means that poverty is disproportionately claiming women's lives.

Statistics aside, the feminization of poverty is a real fact in today's world. But how did it get this way?

Women no longer wait until they are married to leave their father's home, they no longer wish to be supported by their father and then their husband. In 1901 the work force was only 16% female, it is now 50% female. The traditional role of the housewife is dwindling due to the economy. Families cannot live on a single income anymore.

Unfortunately, women tend to take low status jobs, rather than high status careers. These jobs are becoming more mechanized thus decreasing the number of positions. It is estimated by the publication *Canadian Women's Studies* that due to office automation, by 1990 the unemployment rate for women will be up by 33%, further increasing the poverty of women.

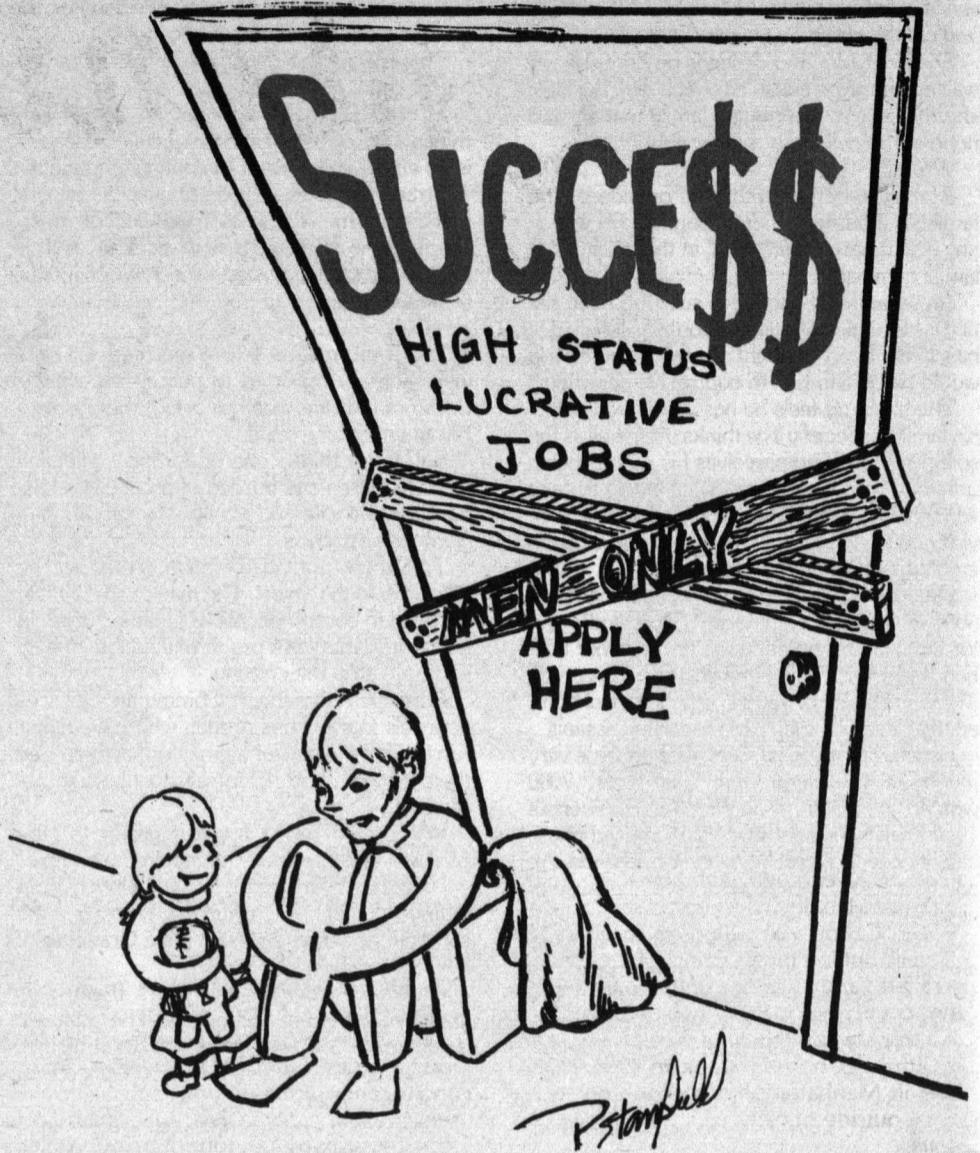
Women are also socialized into poverty through the home and the school. Primary education legitimates the male dominated economic system. Girls are not encouraged to do as well as boys in school and this concept is extended with the onset of puberty. Girls are taught that boys won't like them if they are better at sports or academics than the boys. They are taught to be submissive to boys at an early age, and play the support role. They are not taught to aspire to high positions, but to be satisfied with helping men. Fortunately this is changing, but it has not yet reached a level of equality.

Traditionally, women get the children in divorce situations. Although men are challenging this now it is still very much the case. Trying to raise children on a low salary or welfare means the whole family is in poverty. "As far as social implications are concerned, I think it affects the whole society," replied Dreaver to the concern of single mothers. "It (poverty) effects what women can do," and what concerns society should concern the government.

Is the government doing anything to relieve the problems of the poor? In a few words, not really. "They have the widow's pension, which has been extended to widowers. It's not a lot and it also doesn't provide for women who are separated or divorced," said Dreaver "for that matter people who are not working or in those age groups are not helped. . . . I don't really think the government is doing a lot, particularly for women."

The future looks dim for women in our economy. "I think it's going to get worse because during the recession the government is looking for ways to cut back in every area. It seems to be easiest to cut back on social programs, like welfare payments, which more women are effected by, . . ." said Dreaver. "In another sense, employers are certainly trying to pay lower wages, they're trying to cut back on the staff and cut back the wages that people are already making. . . . Plus employers are more likely to lay-off part-time staff, and part-time workers are more likely to be women. So I can see it getting worse, definitely."

There will be a forum on the feminization of poverty on campus April 2nd, in which the Edmonton Social Planning Council will be participating.



Industry exploits the Third World

by Emma Sadgrove

In many parts of the Third World young women fill the factories of multinational corporations, earning as much in one day as a person in North America would earn for one hour of similar work.

As high labor costs have greatly increased manufacturing costs in the United States and other industrial countries, corporations have looked to the cheap labor of undeveloped countries, especially that of women, to save money.

These women often work under conditions which threaten their health. In electronics factories women spend all day working with microscopes. Here, eye problems are common. The textiles industry also strains the eyesight and requires women to work in an atmosphere

which causes lung problems. Also, many factories use dangerous chemicals.

Most of the women providing this cheap labour are in their late teens and early twenties. Many of them will be out of work after the job destroys their health. Others will be laid off to save money.

It is common for women to be given a probationary period of about six months at less than regular wage. Companies save money by laying off these women at the end of the period and hiring new probationers.

As with most places, women are treated as the subsidiary workers in their families and commonly earn less than men so it is cheaper to hire them. But as a result of high male unemployment, many of these women are becoming the child wage earners in their families.

Single women are also preferred and many companies require pregnancy tests. It saves them money to avoid paying maternity benefits. In the Phillipines, Mattel offers prizes to women who undergo sterilization.

The majority of Third World women earn a subsistence wage. Many earn less than the basic cost of living, which means a scarce diet and crowded, unhealthy accommodation.

But it is difficult for these women to try to improve their situation. Unions are illegal in many places, and even if not, union organizers and other women seen as threats are usually laid off.

Besides that, if women in one place demand better wages and working conditions, companies can easily move elsewhere. For example, in 1974 Mattel moved its factory in Mexicali, Mexico in search of cheaper labor.

Multinational corporations know how to squeeze the most out of the worker. And in Canada many people unknowingly buy the products of cheap labor.

If the label says it was made in a Third World country it rarely means that you are contributing to the development of poor countries, but rather to the exploitation of women who have no other choice.

Main information source: *Women In the Global Factory* by Annette Fuentes and Barbara Ehrenreich. South End Press; Boston, 1983.

Women looked into abortion, labour, and immigrant rights on Saturday in a series of workshops held in the Tory Turtle. Discussion was open and interesting as the direction of the women's movement was considered.



photo Ron Checora