

Making the Shift from Pink Collars to Blue Ones: Women's Non-Traditional Occupations

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Volume 57, Number 1, Spring 2006

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt57_1rn02

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Hulme, K. (2006). Making the Shift from Pink Collars to Blue Ones: Women's Non-Traditional Occupations. *Labour/Le Travail*, 57(1), 144-165.

Making the Shift from Pink Collars to Blue Ones: Women's Non-Traditional Occupations

Kristin Hulme

AS GOVERNMENT STATISTICS INDICATE, men are disproportionately represented in the trades and industrial occupations. Women are quite simply so few in number as to be non-existent or invisible; hence, for women such employment is often referred to as non-traditional. Maria Charles and David Grusky ponder whether this gender imbalance “is best regarded as an organic feature of modern economics.”¹ Gillian Creese characterizes it as “an important feature of contemporary labour markets.”² Two factors help explain the persistent absence of women from the trades and industrial occupations.

The first is that the work itself is gendered³ or sex-typed.⁴ It is viewed by most people, almost without second thought, as men's work. The trades and industrial occupations are, by their very nature, understood to be masculine because those who fill them “have a gender and their gender rubs off on the jobs they mainly do.”⁵ As Cynthia Cockburn observes, work is designated male or female by “ascribing a series of polarized characteristics, complementary paired values, to the ‘masculine’ and the ‘feminine’ . Normally men and women, things and jobs, comfortably reflect

¹Maria Charles and David B. Grusky, *Occupational Ghettos: The Worldwide Segregation of Women and Men* (Stanford 2004), 4.

²Gillian Creese, *Contracting Masculinity: Gender, Class, and Race in a White-Collar Union, 1944-1994* (Don Mills 1999), 17.

³Cynthia Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men and Technological Know-how* (London 1985), 49.

⁴Harriet Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment* (Minneapolis 1989), 1.

⁵Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance*, 169.

Kristin Hulme, “Making the Shift from Pink Collars to Blue Ones: Women's Non-Traditional Occupations,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 57 (Spring 2006), 143-65.

these complementary values.”⁶ The accumulation of experiences of working women demonstrates that the sex-typing of the trades and industrial occupations is deeply entrenched and highly resistant to challenge and change.

The second factor that explains the persistence of the dominance of men in the trades and industrial occupations is a ‘de-gendering’ of women as women by the workers themselves, unions, and the labour market.⁷ Women often believe that gender should be an irrelevant factor in the workplace and that all jobs should be unisex. As a consequence of this de-gendering, they are able to ignore sex-typing. It also permits them to treat as insignificant or non-existent any systemic and structural barriers that prevent them and others from gaining entry to most industrial occupations and trades, and concentrate more than 70 per cent of them “in a few female dominated sectors related to traditional social roles: clerical or other administrative positions, sales and services occupations, nursing and related health occupations and teaching.”⁸

Methodology

The absence and/or invisibility of female workers in specific occupations makes it difficult for researchers to find women in apprenticeships, the trades, and non-traditional occupations in unionized workplaces. To redress this imbalance, a research team composed of Margaret Little, Theresa O’Keefe, Sarah Riegel, and Kristin Hulme of the Political Studies Department at Queen’s University, and Lynne Pajot of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers [CUPW] designed a programme to encourage female CUPW members to consider working in non-traditional occupations and to minimize any negative responses to women’s presence in such sectors of the labour market. The project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and administered through the Work and Society Centre at York University.

We began with telephone calls and e-mail communications to union offices, asking about the extent and nature of women’s employment in non-traditional occupations. In response, most of those with whom we spoke and corresponded about the issue expressed surprise at our inquiries. There appears to be a strong sense among many union officials that the integration of women into non-traditional jobs and trades is a dated issue. There had been a push in the 1990s to encourage women to move off career paths as administrative assistants, secretaries, customer service representatives, and clerks. The low number of women working as electricians, pipefitters, plumbers, technicians, and tool-and-dye operators, however, indicates

⁶Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance*, 190.

⁷Liisa Rantalaiho, “Contextualising Gender,” in Liisa Rantalaiho and Tuula Heiskanen, eds., *Gendered Practices in Working Life* (London 1997), 27-28.

⁸Karen Hadley, “*And We Ain’t Satisfied*”: *Gendered Inequality in Canada — A Status Report for 2001* (Toronto 2001), 31.

that this push was short-lived and resulted in few of them making the transition. Out of 900 mechanic/technicians with the Canadian Union Postal Workers, for example, only one is a woman. The Canadian Auto Workers has fewer than 40 women in the skilled trades working for the three big automobile manufacturers. Saskenergy has six or seven women working as pipefitters. Bell Canada has a handful of female technicians.

Our telephone calls and e-mails to union representatives resulted in fifteen women in the trades and non-traditional occupations consenting to be interviewed. Most of them had experienced traditional career paths, reflecting both the gender concentration and segregation that exist in the Canadian labour market, before making the move into male-dominated occupations. Most would be regarded as working in 'pink-collar' ghettos in which their clerical and customer service work was highly monitored and repetitive, with few opportunities for advancement and promotion. They had little authority to make decisions and were expected to follow the standards and guidelines set out by supervisors or management. In some instances, the initial choice of career path was made by the company when these women first applied for jobs. Maggie Harbert,⁹ a technician with Bell Canada, remarked that until the 1980s, female job applicants were automatically routed into customer service positions because there was an explicit gender division of labour within the corporation. A woman who wanted to work as a technician would not have been hired for that position because it was deemed inappropriate by management, and the union and its members.

A questionnaire was drafted after contact had been established with a limited number of women working in non-traditional occupations. Women were asked about their experiences in apprenticeships, the trades, and other industrial occupations. The interviews were conducted in person in all but two cases. The women, living in rural and urban areas of Ontario, the prairies, and British Columbia, worked in the automotive, mail and courier, telecommunications, paper, and natural gas and petroleum industries. The nature of their work as tradespersons and labourers defines these women structurally as members of the working class, but most identify themselves as middle class. Their wage, in part because of their membership in unions, was often \$50,000 annually or higher.

*Sex-Typing and the Absence of Women in the
Trades and Industrial Occupations*

That the trades and other industrial occupations are sex-typed and considered men's work was made evident to Margaret Manwaring,¹⁰ an electrician with a long history of employment at the Ford Motor Plant in Oakville, early in her working

⁹Interview with Maggie Harbert, February 2003. In all quotations from interviews, the woman interviewed is cited the first time she is quoted, and thereafter identified in the text.

¹⁰Interview with Margaret Manwaring, June 2003.

life. She began an apprenticeship with Canadian National Railways [CN] in the 1980s and her strongest memory of her first days as an apprentice is of

a woman dressed in the clothing of an office worker coming across the floor. Quite noticeable because we didn't see other women nor people dressed in office clothing. And she came straight to me with her hand out and she introduced herself. Her name was Huguette and she told me that she had waited too many years for this day. That she was the last woman to leave the floor after the Second World War and she was determined to be there when the first woman came through the doors. And she was. And she was very happy to shake my hand because now she could retire. And ... I mean I was blown away. But I can remember her to this day. She was a petite woman ... was not a big woman ... She was just really proud that there was a woman on the floor.

Such experiences were part of a broader pattern of an early 1980s movement of women into industrial occupations, often associated with left-wing political organizations.¹¹ A 1984 decision by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, embracing the principle of employment equity, was responsible for Huguette's happiness and retirement.¹² The ruling came five years after Action Travail des Femmes, a women's action group, filed a complaint of systemic discrimination against women by CN with the Canadian Human Rights Commission. It alleged that the company's hiring and promotion practices contravened the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. After reviewing the practices of the corporation, the Tribunal found that the under-representation of women was not merely fortuitous. The company had systematically prevented and discouraged women from working in blue-collar jobs. Women were made, for example, to take unnecessary examinations, earn irrelevant qualifications, and endure harassment on the job. The Tribunal concluded that "the small number of women in non-traditional trades tended to perpetuate the exclusion and, in effect, to cause additional discrimination."¹³ CN, in other words, helped to re-enforce the gendered nature of work. The Tribunal imposed, for the first time in Canada, an employment equity programme on an employer, requiring the company to adopt a quota system to rectify systemic discrimination in employment

¹¹On this early 1980s development see Stan Gray, "Sharing the Shop Floor," *Labour Supplement, Canadian Dimension*, 18 (1984), 17; Jennifer Penny, ed., *Hard-Earned Wages: Women Fighting for Better Work* (Toronto 1983), esp. 191-220; Debbie Field, "A New Look at Co-Worker Harassment," in Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters: Women in the Labour Movement* (Toronto 1983), esp. 148-153; Meg Luxton and June Cornman, "Getting to Work: The Challenge of the Women Back Into Stelco Campaign," *Labour/Le Travail*, 28 (Fall 1991), 149-185.

¹²*Canadian National Railway Company v. Canada (Canadian Human Rights Commission)*, [1987] 1 S.C.R. 1114.

¹³Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, *Action Travail des Femmes v. Canadian National*, <<http://www.chrt-tcdp.gc.ca/search/view-html.asp?doid=28&lg=e&ibruling=0>> (17 March 2005).

practices. CN was instructed to increase from 0.7 per cent to 13 per cent the proportion of female blue-collar workers in the St. Lawrence region. It was also ordered to hire one woman for each blue-collar position that was filled.

The decision of the Tribunal was appealed to the Federal Court of Appeal, which set aside the employment equity requirements. In 1987, however, the Supreme Court of Canada reinstated the original order in its entirety, affirming the importance and value of programmes that seek to correct discrimination in hiring, employment, and promotion. The Court stated that

systemic discrimination in an employment context is discrimination that results from the simple operation of established procedures of recruiting, hiring and promotion, none of which is necessarily designed to promote discrimination. This discrimination is then reinforced by the very exclusion of the disadvantaged group because the exclusion fosters the belief, both within and outside the group that exclusion is the result of 'natural' forces, for example, that women 'just can't do the job'.¹⁴

In the immediate years following the Supreme Court decision, the federal government exhibited a commitment to improving the lives of working-class women. Human Resources and Development Canada [HRDC] adopted the Designated Group Policy which recognized that certain groups of people are disadvantaged in the job market and concentrated in certain types and levels of work.¹⁵ It sought to eliminate the many barriers that prevented these groups from being more fully integrated in better-paying occupations. The government made use of the Unemployment Insurance Developmental Uses Fund as well as the Canadian Jobs Strategy to create programmes and services that were specifically aimed at marginalized groups such as women, visible minorities, and people with disabilities. In the 1993-94 fiscal year, women made up almost one-half of all those benefitting from such programmes.¹⁶

In 1996, the federal government largely abandoned its commitments to marginalized groups in the labour market. Citing fiscal constraints, it discarded the Designated Group Policy, adversely affecting the ability of marginalized and disadvantaged groups to receive training or enter apprenticeships. It eliminated the *National Training Act* as well as 39 programmes, several of which were geared towards women.¹⁷ The federal government also transferred control through Labour Market Development Agreements [LMDAs] to the provinces, and did not require them to provide, maintain, or develop programmes that assisted women.

¹⁴*Canadian National Railway Company v. Canada*, 1139.

¹⁵Ursule Christoph, "Who Wins, Who Loses," in Marjorie Griffin Cohen, ed., *Training the Excluded for Work: Access and Equity for Women, Immigrants, First Nations, Youth, and People with Low Income* (Vancouver 2003), 17.

¹⁶Christoph, "Who Wins, Who Loses," 18-19.

¹⁷Public Service Alliance of Canada, *Facts Sheet: Unemployment Insurance*, <<http://www.psaac.com/documents>> (17 March 2005).

Employment Insurance [EI] is now the only substantive source of federal support for employment and training programmes. The changes made by the federal government to EI make it more difficult for many women to gain access to the remaining training programmes. Fewer women are able to qualify for EI because they often do not have enough hours to apply for benefits. Changes to Parts I and II of Unemployment Insurance have resulted in funding for women's training and employment programmes dropping from \$2 billion to less than \$80 million.¹⁸ There has also been an increase in the use of for-profit third-party providers of training and the elimination of direct purchase of training with individually negotiated financial assistance.¹⁹ Ursule Cristoph argues that "[r]ather than compensating for, or rectifying, the imbalances in the labour market for women, the sum effect of ... [changes to government employment and retraining policies and programmes] has been to exacerbate the situation."²⁰

Our difficulty in finding women to participate in the research project should not, therefore, have been unexpected. The magnitude of the gender imbalance in non-traditional trades is made obvious when one examines employment and apprenticeship statistics collected by the federal government. HRDC found that, as of 2001, the trades continue to attract more men than women.²¹ There are so few female industrial electricians in the country, for example, that government statistics set the number at zero.²² Three per cent of electricians and telecommunication oc-

¹⁸Christoph, "Who Wins, Who Loses," 18.

¹⁹National Women's Reference Group on Labour Market Issues, "Women's Access to Training and Employment Programs in the Post-Labour Market Development Agreement Era: Phase Two Report," <<http://www.nwrg-grnf.ca/Access2.htm>> (17 March 2005).

²⁰Christoph, "Who Wins, Who Loses," 18.

²¹Government of Canada, Human Resources Development Canada [HRDC], *Jobfutures: Industrial Electricians*, <http://jobfutures.ca/noc/7242p4shtml#section4_6> (17 March 2005); Government of Canada, HRDC, *Jobfutures: Electricians and Telecommunications Occupations*, <http://jobfutures.ca/noc/724p4shtml#section4_6> (17 March 2005); Government of Canada, HRDC, *Jobfutures: Construction Millwrights and Industrial Mechanics*, <http://jobfutures.ca/noc/7311p4_shtml#section4_6> (17 March 2005); Government of Canada, HRDC, *Jobfutures: Heavy Duty Equipment Mechanics*, <http://jobfutures.ca/noc/7312p4shtml#section4_6> (17 March 2005); Government of Canada, HRDC, *Jobfutures: Machinery Transportation Equipment Mechanics*, <<http://jobfutures.ca/noc/731p4shtml>> (17 March 2005); Government of Canada, HRDC, *Jobfutures: Plumbers, Pipefitters and Gas Fitters*, <http://jobfutures.ca/noc/725p4shtml#section4_6> (17 March 2005); Government of Canada, HRDC, *Jobfutures: Automotive Service Technicians*, <http://jobfutures.ca/noc/732p4shtml#section4_6> (17 March 2005); Government of Canada, HRDC, *Jobfutures: Aircraft Mechanics and Aircraft Inspectors*, <http://jobfutures.ca/noc/7315p4shtml#section4_6> (17 March 2005); Government of Canada, HRDC, *Jobfutures: Construction Trades*, <http://jobfutures.ca/noc/729p4shtml#section4_6> (17 March 2005).

²²HRDC, *Jobfutures: Industrial Electricians*.

cupations are comprised of women.²³ They account for less than 1 per cent of all construction millwrights and industrial mechanics, plumbers, pipefitters and gas fitters, heavy duty equipment mechanics, and machinery transportation equipment mechanics.²⁴ Two per cent of automotive service technicians are women²⁵ and 3 per cent of aircraft mechanics and aircraft inspectors are female. Women in the construction trades constitute 7 per cent of all workers.

A recent report by Statistics Canada sought to present a glowing picture of the success of women in registering and completing apprenticeships.²⁶ An apprenticeship lasts from two to five years, combining in-class learning with on-the-job training. The provincial governments set standards, regulations, examinations, and certification for each of the trades and are responsible for the registration of apprentices and the monitoring of their progress. The apprentices learn the theoretical component of a trade at a community college and gain practical experience by working under the guidance and supervision of journeymen. The Report highlighted the fact that more women were registered in non-traditional programmes than ever before. During the years between 1995 and 2001, “the number of registered women soared 76%, more than twice the rate of growth of 29% among men. Gains in registration among women during this period were higher in every major group.”²⁷

A closer examination of the information gathered by Statistics Canada reveals that 13,620 of the 20,060 registered female apprentices are concentrated in the food and service trade group. They are training to become hairdresser/hairstylists, aestheticians, and cooks. These occupations are usually low paying and often non-unionized. Only 6,440 women were registered as apprentices in male-dominated apprenticeship programmes, which consist of building construction trades, electrical/electronics trades, industrial and mechanical trades, metal fabricating trades, and motor vehicle and heavy equipment trades.²⁸ By comparison, there were 176,030 men registered in these programmes.²⁹ The picture of women and non-traditional employment becomes even more bleak when the rates of completion of apprenticeships are considered. In 2001, 18,260 people received their certificates, of which only 2,050 were women. Excluding the 1,860 women in the food

²³HRDC, *Jobfutures: Electricians and Telecommunications Occupations*.

²⁴HRDC, *Jobfutures: Construction Millwrights and Industrial Mechanics; Jobfutures: Heavy Duty Equipment Mechanics; Jobfutures: Machinery Transportation Equipment Mechanic; Jobfutures: Plumbers, Pipefitters and Gas Fitters*.

²⁵HRDC, *Jobfutures: Automotive Service Technicians; Jobfutures: Aircraft Mechanics and Aircraft Inspectors; Jobfutures: Construction Trades*.

²⁶Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, *The Daily: Registered Apprenticeship Training Programs*, <<http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/031120/d031120b.html>> (17 March 2005).

²⁷Statistics Canada, *The Daily*.

²⁸Statistics Canada, *The Daily*.

²⁹Statistics Canada, *The Daily*.

and service group, only 190 women qualified as tradespersons in industries traditionally dominated by men. This represents just 1 per cent of all completions.³⁰

These statistics demonstrate the persistence of gendering or sex-typing of the trades and the continuing barriers women completing apprenticeships and other training must face. A comment by Michelle Carter,³¹ a journey person pipefitter with Saskenergy, seemed prophetic in its assessment of when women in great numbers will be present on industrial work sites. She was of the opinion that women “are about 150 years behind. As much progress as we’ve made, we’re still about 150 years behind.” In other words, if one waits for enough individual women to make career choices that will significantly challenge and alter the patterns of segregation and concentration, the gendered nature of the trades and other industrial occupations will remain unchanged for a long time.

*The Experiences of Women in the Gendered Trades
and Industrial Occupations*

Margaret Manwaring often asks herself why “the trades are such a long-standing holdout. And I don’t think that there is one simple answer. And the answer is definitely not that tradesmen are somehow more backwards, or have their ... you know ... *esprit de corps* ... [or] that they’re arm-in-arm determined that women will never be here.” She fears that this explanation, based on an unfair and inaccurate characterization of the working class as more oppressive of women and less progressive in its thinking, may be adopted by those in positions of power and authority. Manwaring categorically rejects negative characterizations of the working class as backward or more repressive, believing that

there is a well of respect amongst men for women. And I think there is this innate and inherent sense that we do carry a pretty heavy load. You know the mothers and the homemakers who are also now the workers are carrying a pretty big share. And I think in the general scheme of things in the working classes that there is a real respect for women. There are though ... misogynists and there’s all of that still out there but I would submit that in the main, guys are very good.

It would appear that women who might enter the trades or other industrial occupations are not prevented or deterred from doing so by overtly old-fashioned beliefs about gender and employment uniquely held by the men in their lives.³²

³⁰Statistics Canada, *The Daily*.

³¹Interview with Michelle Carter, February 2003.

³²Of particular note is the fact that none of the women recounted any adverse reactions from management. The depth of commitment to integration into the trades and non-traditional occupations was questioned by some of the women. Monika Mildner observed that “management, they know what is proper, they know what is politically correct now. So they say the right things, whatever they think.” There was an acute awareness that the presence of women

The problem, as Cockburn observes, is “not casual but structured, not local but extensive, not transitory but stable, with a tendency to self-reproduction.”³³ The trades and industrial occupations are ‘hold-outs’ in part, she would argue, because their gendered or sex-typed natures have not been sufficiently acknowledged and challenged by government, employers and the labour movement in particular and society more generally.

Sex-typing is maintained and reinforced by socially constructed preconceptions about the work and its suitability for women. These preconceptions are not the property of one specific class but rather of society as a whole. The absence of women from the trades and industrial occupations is seldom considered as abnormal or unusual. Any acknowledgement of a gender imbalance in the trades and industrial occupations is viewed as natural, or reflective of the fact that “women cannot do the work” or choose not to do it. Cockburn, however, maintains that there are social norms about gender that set out “[w]hat a man ‘is’, what a woman ‘is’, what is right and proper, what is possible and impossible, what should be hoped for and what should be feared. The hegemonic ideology of masculinism involves a definition of men and women as different, contrasted, complementary, and unequal.”³⁴

The segregation of women from these occupations is nurtured and re-enforced by the country’s education systems. Manwaring believes that the absence of information about the trades and other industrial occupations in high school helps to reinforce public perceptions about the appropriateness of certain types of work for women. Boys and girls often continue to be directed into gender-appropriate career choices. Teenage girls are generally not exposed to the nature of the work nor the process through which one becomes a tradesperson. Michelle Carter observes that “[i]t’s how we’re raised too. Like you’d go and they [high school guidance counselors] basically lead to roads being, if you were female, you were either a teacher or a nurse or a wife.”

With the exception of Andrea Prodahl,³⁵ none of the women who participated in the research project had ever contemplated, as teenagers, careers in the trades or in industrial occupations traditionally held by men. The continued identification of certain types of work as inappropriate for women is evident in the experiences of Prodahl, a 20-year-old woman who works as a paper machine process operator at a

served the interests of their employers, who were able to make claims about being progressive or concerned about the inclusion of women and visible minorities in their workforce. Andrea Prodahl remarked that the ability to assert employee diversity was of value, from a public relations perspective, to Weyerhaeuser.

³³Cynthia Cockburn, *In the Way of Women: Men’s Resistance to Sexual Equality in Organizations* (London 1991), 6.

³⁴Cynthia Cockburn, “The Relations of Technology,” in Rosemary Crompton and Michael Mann, eds., *Gender and Stratification* (Cambridge 1986), 84-85.

³⁵Interview with Andrea Prodahl, February 2003.

Weyerhaeuser mill in Prince Albert. As a child, she dreamed of being an electrician but she has only been able to complete the first year of her apprenticeship because there are still “a lot of very traditional companies out there that just absolutely refuse to hire a woman.” Her efforts to enter the trades reveal a collision between two socially constructed polarized values of masculine and feminine. Pro Dahl’s difficulty in finding an employer willing to supervise her is an example of what happens “when women step into male work ... [and] upset a widely accepted sense of order and meaning.”³⁶

The women interviewed originally accepted without question commonly held assumptions that only men had the necessary brute force, physical strength, and endurance to master work in the trades. These assumptions were only discarded when they observed other women working in industrial occupations or they themselves made the shift into work of this sort. The socially constructed “identification of masculinity with physicality and strength”³⁷ thus re-enforces the sex-typing of the trades and industrial occupations and serves as a barrier to their de-gendering and desegregation. Margaret Manwaring explained that

the view of the skilled tradesman as brawn ... viewed from the outside is harder for women to overcome. Like the physical working of the trade rather than the intellectual work involved in being an engineer. You don’t have to have any brawn. Or seeing yourself as the nurturing medical professional or the professor or whatever. The image of the work is qualitatively different than that of the tradesperson.

She argued that “[o]ne of the reasons that these trades are more accessible to women is precisely because you don’t have to be a big beef, you don’t have to have 200 pounds on the end of the wrench to get the job done.” Advances in technology, the development of new machinery and tools, and the increasing presence of computers has resulted in physical stamina becoming a largely irrelevant factor. In spite of the fact that tools are not gender specific and technological change means, as Manwaring observed, that “there is a power tool for every job,” the fiction of brawn is still accepted as fact. As a result, the stereotypes persist and the gendering of jobs remains largely immune from challenge.

Resistance to de-segregation is also deepened by commonly held beliefs that women lack the necessary mechanical inclination and/or knowledge of mathematics and sciences to pursue careers in these fields. In essence, women are thought by others and, as a result, think of themselves, as lacking in intelligence and aptitude. Michelle Carter remarked that

the biggest misconception is and ... it’s not meant to be derogatory but a lot of women are afraid to get into the trades because they think you have to be real smart for some reason. You

³⁶Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance*, 190.

³⁷Creese, *Contracting Masculinity*, 18.

don't have to be smart to get into anything. As long as you can learn and you have a passion or an interest, you can do anything and be anything you want... You know ... anyone can do anything. Everyone's smart enough to do what they're interested in.

The women had few difficulties, intellectually, during the academic components of their apprenticeships. Marie,³⁸ a service technician, explained that because "we were all in this learning process together ... everyone struggled and I was welcomed into the group ... treated as one of the guys." Her gender was, in her opinion, irrelevant to her colleagues, whom she outperformed on all examinations and assignments. Trish Girard,³⁹ an apprentice electrician at the Ford Motor Plant in Oakville, said that after she "established being basically at the top of the class, they asked for help." One is left to wonder, however, whether the advice and assistance given by the women to their colleagues may have fit within stereotypical assumptions about women and their helping or caring nature. By seeking out their assistance, men may have been able to characterize them as women rather than apprentices against whom it was unnecessary to compete.

The willingness of the women to ask questions or request additional explanations, while welcomed by classmates, was also potentially troubling because it re-enforced notions of acceptable behaviour by the two genders. Karel Larson,⁴⁰ a service technician with Saskenergy, explained, "I'm a firm believer that if you don't know, you have to ask ... They would say to me afterward 'Oh, I'm so glad you were there because I didn't understand it but I didn't want to look like a dummy'." The men were often too embarrassed to admit to instructors their ignorance or their inability to fully understand new material. They relied on the women to ask questions and expose their ignorance or difficulty in comprehension. A consequence of this reliance might have been the confirmation, subconsciously, of preconceptions that women lack mechanical aptitude or intelligence.

Monika Mildner,⁴¹ an apprentice electrician with Ford, was the only woman to identify an encounter with a classmate as sexist. She recounted that, on the first day,

I got there and it said Electrical Intermediate, Room Number 10 for orientation. So I go there and there is 40 guys standing in front of the room and looking at me. And one guy goes "sweetheart, cooking or some jewelry or whatever they have is over there." I'm like "Are you serious?"... "No, no I'm quite certain that I am right here." I should have told him, "No, I am just here looking for a husband."... I am happy to report that that guy failed.

The paucity of overtly negative reactions to the presence of women in the classroom may reflect the fact that the colleges, in which the academic components of apprenticeship occur, have equity policies that address issues of gender discrimi-

³⁸Interview with Marie (pseudonym), February 2003.

³⁹Interview with Trish Girard, June 2003.

⁴⁰Interview with Karel Larson, February 2003.

⁴¹Interview with Darlene Gordon, February 2003.

nation and harassment. Most of the instructors appear to be receptive to the presence of both genders. Only one woman spoke of an incident in which animosity was exhibited. The vitriol was directed at one particular woman rather than all women in general. Michelle Carter explained:

it was just an attitude of an instructor thinking that she didn't belong in that course. It was a sexist thing ... which was too bad cuz ... she was way better than a lot of the guys that made it through.... He had a thing against her and from the get-go, she wasn't going to make it. So you know, some of them get a little attitude and they decide.... And it's your word against theirs, right? If you're being tested and there's only you and the tester in there and you say "well I did this" and I say "well, no you didn't"... Yeah, she kind of got the raw end of the deal there.

In her years at Canadian National and at the Ford Motor Plant, Margaret Manwaring argued that there had

never been a real backlash from the men ... the problems would happen at a very individual level ... of individual guys who had a hard time with women. But there were never concerted efforts to drive us out. I am not aware, from my experience in the shops where I worked in the trades of examples of sexual harassment.... In the general scheme of things in the working classes, there is a real respect for women.... They've been very supportive. They think they relate to us, thinking about their wives and their daughters and their mothers.... There are exceptions and the exceptions are important to note in order to make progress. But I would say that the general norm is one of tremendous support.

The absence of a 'real' backlash may, perhaps, stem from the fact that the number of women entering the trades and industrial work sites remains small.

Michelle Carter was the only one who had experienced what might be deemed by many as sexual assault:

I was bent over wrenching a two inch pipe and this guy like he's on top of me. Literally on top of me so I just kept on working and ignoring him. I've got this big wrench if he touches me I can just whack him and knock him out pretty good. So I'm just kind of dicking around waiting to see what he's gonna do and he just keeps leaning harder and harder into me. So okay, you lean, so I waited until he leaned a little bit harder and pushed ... up against me and I went and squatted down and he fell down on top of me. He says "oh, oh I'm sorry." I said "well you shouldn't be standing that close." ... I always have a wrench handy around or a long screw-driver so if somebody does do anything I can do some pretty darn good damage to them.

She herself did not describe this encounter as a sexual assault because she felt that she could defend herself if and when the need arose. Her characterization of the event as insignificant reflected the sense of personal strength of character and self-reliance to which all of the women laid claim. They, as individuals, had achieved their goals. They were capable, as individuals, of standing up to individ-

ual men who were opposed to their presence, and of defending themselves, as individuals, from aggressive behaviour, sexual or otherwise.

The resistant nature of sex-typing in the trades and other industrial occupations was more often exhibited or displayed in less overt ways. Sex-typing was discernable in the atmosphere of the work environment and the nuanced working relationships with men. All of the women spoke of bad experiences of one sort or another with male colleagues and supervisors. Few of them were viewed as symptomatic of a larger problem. When clustered together rather than viewed individually, however, they do raise questions about whether the presence of the women challenges fundamental assumptions held by male colleagues about the nature of the work and its appropriateness for women.

Darlene Gordon⁴² described how the establishment of a Women's Committee at Weyerhaeuser led to comments about "male-bashing" by some workers and posters being defaced with graffiti. Michelle Carter has heard men say "women are taking over the world." Andrea Prodahl encountered male colleagues who believed she did not belong in the paper mill and "that it's taking jobs away from another man." Monika Mildner was called "a token woman." Trish Girard was told by co-workers that "obviously they have a different standard for the women than for the men," that "we got it because we are women," and that "in the real world, I would never make it. Never."

The women, often the only non-male worker in a group or on the floor, described their experiences as similar to entering a different culture or a man's world. Differences in work ethics, attitudes, and humour confronted the women on a daily basis, making it difficult for them to fit in. These feelings of isolation, Cockburn argues, are linked to gender and "a workplace or occupation that is characterized as male."⁴³ In making the transition to non-traditional occupations, the women did "not exactly ... court disaster, [but they] invite discomfort."⁴⁴

Their gender and appearance made them conspicuous in an industrial workplace populated almost exclusively by men. Male apprentices could disappear among other workers, becoming anonymous. Trish Girard and Monika Mildner knew, however, that male colleagues were aware of their presence when they were out on a call. The latter explained, "we are visible. They know. They see you only and they know that's the female apprentice." The women stood out because of their gender, prompting many of them to express desires to be just "one of the guys." Harriet Bradley argues that the desire to be just like everyone else is evidence of the difficulty faced by women entering and fitting into a male occupational culture.⁴⁵

The desire to be invisible or anonymous drove many of the women to feel a need to be perfect in their work. Kim Brons-Hewitt explained that men "don't let

⁴²Interview with Darlene Gordon, February 2003.

⁴³Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance*, 175.

⁴⁴Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance*, 232.

⁴⁵Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, 229.

go and if they have a bad experience or a couple with a certain woman, that carries through and they tell the next guy and the next guy.” Karel Larson stated that the inability or difficulty of one woman to do a specific task or lift a heavy object was sometimes used to make generalizations about all tradeswomen and their limitations. A woman who failed, she added, “just makes us all look bad.” Andrea Prodahl observed that while they are few and far between, “there’s a couple of crews I wouldn’t enjoy working on.” A simple mistake, according to her, could potentially prompt vocal criticism from the one man in the unit or on the team who objected to her presence and wanted to make her look bad in front of her boss. She explained that the situation might be “blown out of proportion. He would end up talking to the supervisor rather than to you and the supervisor’s gotta come to you.”

There was also concern that the failure to measure up would subject these women to comments and a loss of respect from colleagues and supervisors. Karel Larson said that she “wasn’t given the respect of the guys I worked with. I had to earn it and I think that’s really important.” She added that the need to win the respect of others never disappeared completely. Each transfer or arrival of a new co-worker or supervisor who had an issue with women in the trades might reignite the need on her part to demonstrate her abilities. Cockburn argues that the “effort of adaptation is needed not just for one day’s work but every day through a working life.”⁴⁶ Her argument was echoed by Michelle Carter’s observation that “it just wears on you ... having to prove yourself every single day, all day.”

Rather than characterizing the reactions of male colleagues to their presence as discriminatory, adversarial, or hostile, these women described them as evidence of awkwardness. Monika Mildner believed that her male colleagues just “don’t know how to react to women ... it is just a learning experience for them.” Michelle Carter observed that “they don’t know what to expect out of you” and are afraid of causing offence. Trish Girard believed that men’s behaviour sometimes stemmed from a concern that friendliness might be misunderstood and construed as harassment or a pass.

In addition to awkwardness, some men reacted to the presence of women by attempting to behave as “perfect gentlemen.” Darlene Gordon remarked that they continuously “apologize for the use of foul language in the presence of a lady.” Margaret Manwaring, after 20 years in industrial work sites, continues to encounter men “excusing themselves for saying something a little off colour.” Monika Mildner laughed during the interview as she remembered colleagues “trying to open the door for you while carrying a ladder ... They are carrying the ladder.” Karel Larson recounted similar stories in which men, laden down with tools, would reach to open the door for her:

Now we’re working shoulder to shoulder and I’m carrying wrenches and one of the guys that I actually spend a lot of time with. And he’s a good close friend of mine, he had a heck of a

⁴⁶Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance*, 232.

time, because we would be walking in somewhere and I'd have a meter and the tool box and he'd have a meter and a tool box. And instead of setting down the tool box and opening the door for me, I would say "you don't have to, you know." But then he couldn't get his head around it and that's the way life is ... And they still do it. If we're walking down a hallway, they'll stop and open a door and we just don't talk about it.

These experiences, in which issues of gender are clearly at play, did not lead the women to reconsider their self-identification as genderless union members or workers. They dismiss efforts by others to acknowledge diversity or to be more inclusive because they highlight the fact that they were not just one of the guys. Monika Mildner stated that "everyone is used to saying 'journeymen' or 'his' but in your presence, they start to say 'journey ... journey person' ... men ... and women, guys ... and gals ... It's annoying ... drawing attention to you're kind of different." Michelle Carter recounted an experience in which an instructor used inclusive language when speaking. She recalled that

we had this guy come and give us a talk on something. And with me being the only female ... "guys and woman,"...he kept singling me out. You're talking to the guys, call me a guy. If there's 50 guys and one of me, don't single me out. I'm in the group. I'm a guy.... After the first hour of this, one of the guys stood up. He said "I've had enough of this. She's one of the guys ... She can handle us, call her a guy."

Michelle Carter, together with most of the women who participated in our research project, rejected as unacceptable and harmful any attempts to acknowledge gender differences. She explained: "don't accommodate me. I don't want to be noticed. I just want to be in the group. I don't want to be any specific thing out there. I'm here to do like everybody else." Sam Scriver,⁴⁷ who worked at the Ford Motor Plant in Oakville, had to remind colleagues that "in here I am not a lady, I am an apprentice. Treat me as such."

The desire to fit in and to be one of the guys may help to explain why most of the women preferred not to respond to behaviour or comments that bothered or offended them. They have been called bitches, sluts, and cunts in bids to undermine their self-confidence or challenge their right to be in the trades and industrial occupations. They all worked for corporations with gender equity and sexual harassment policies, but preferred not to make use of official complaint processes, deciding, instead, to handle disputes and disagreements on their own. Their reticence to lodge an official complaint arose, in part, because none of the women wanted to be regarded by colleagues as being unable to take a joke or easy to provoke.

Bad behaviour and comments were instead construed by the women as failed attempts at humour by individual men rather than evidence of a gendered work en-

⁴⁷Interview with Sandra "Sam" Scriver, June 2003.

vironment which treats this behaviour as acceptable. This rationalization was grounded in the strongly developed sense of self-reliance and an almost unshakable belief on the part of the women that they, as individuals, could and must take care of themselves. Michelle Carter believed that “you get guys ... trying to embarrass you.” Darlene Gordon shrugged off comments about “a woman’s place is in the kitchen” as poor attempts at humour. Monika Mildner observed that if the remark or behaviour provoked a response from a woman, she could anticipate its repetition because

[t]hey get a reaction ... If there is some interesting reaction going on, they’re going to be saying it all the time.... I started [not as a tradesperson but on the line] in truck painting. And it was full of older ... men ... So he was telling me about what he does with the sheep. There is no reaction whatsoever. There was a girl who started a week after me and again surprisingly the same story. And she got offended and she got red in her face. And you know what, for a few months after that every time she would go by, they would go “baaaaa.”

Sam Scriver concurred, saying that “[a]ny sort of reaction and of course they’re going to come back at you again with something else.”

More common than the offensive terms were words and behaviour that were not sexist or offensive on their face. Michelle Carter explained that men who had problems with her presence would use words that could be construed in a number of different ways. The comments were “[d]erogatory I would say in their tone. Like they’ll say ‘oh women’ or ‘girls’ or ‘those females’... Like stuff more so in their delivery.” Karel Larson was called “sweetie” or “honey” or “dear.” She said that she finally had to say to one of her colleagues “‘Please not to do that.’ And it wasn’t that it bothered me. But the fact was that if I let him, it gives everyone else permission.... It was no problem but ... I didn’t want the rest of the guys to think they could too.”

The gendered nature of the work environment led most of the women to believe that battles with co-workers and supervisors had to be carefully chosen. This belief stemmed, in part, from a desire to avoid garnering a reputation as someone who was overly sensitive, an easy target, or unable to laugh at herself. Michelle Carter believed that women in the trades and industrial occupations needed to know when to draw the line. If complaints were made too early or too frequently, the men would continue to bait them. She spoke of an experience at a construction site during which

it was just getting a little too much and so I went over to my boss and said “you know me, I can dish it out, I can take it and stuff, but today was getting a little much”... So he went and talked to the guys and most of them came by the next morning at work to the truck and, you know, they apologized to me for things going too far.

Many of these experiences were also characterized as generational. The women drew distinctions between the behaviour of older and younger colleagues.

Younger men were viewed as more welcoming and accepting. Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor argue that the older tradesmen link their occupations to socially constructed and re-enforced stereotypes about manhood. Their reactions are fueled, in part, by “a determination to maintain the traditional balance of power in families where men had always acted as primary breadwinners.”⁴⁸ The women believed that older men, many of whom supervised and trained apprentices, had difficulty with their presence because it challenged preconceptions about gender and the suitability of certain types of work. Margaret Manwaring, for example, was “told politely that the trades were not appropriate occupations for ladies.” Michelle Carter experienced months of silence from the first journeyman with whom she trained. He subsequently became a mentor and a close friend, but during those initial weeks, he would not greet her, acknowledge her presence, or talk to her directly because he “had the old ways of thinking and ... was really peeled that a woman got the bid.”

According to Karel Larson some of the journeymen “could not get their heads around it because that is the way life is.” Having to train women “made them uncomfortable.” She recounted that

one gentleman came up to me and said “Karel, I really like you and I don’t want you to take this personally but I just don’t think I can work with a girl standing there looking over my shoulder.” And I don’t think it had anything to do with me. I just think he’s got 33 years with the company and his whole life, it had been guys. He just couldn’t He certainly never said to me “you don’t belong, I think you’re stupid.” That was none of it. It was just that’s gonna make me uncomfortable and let’s not go there. I go for coffee with the guy.... He’s friendly. He’s nice to me.... He just couldn’t bear the thought of me getting in his truck. I respected that.

Trish Girard observed that “we’re in their private world.” Michelle Carter argued that

men have always had this thing about their jobs being really something special and tough and only men can do it. So when a woman comes in and starts doing it ... their whole little empire world starts crumbling on them. So you’re a threat because you know their reality ... they’re scared and they don’t know what to expect of you and their whole social being changes.

The focus on the age of these men meant that hostile reactions could be characterized as isolated rather than growing out of structural discrimination and systemic barriers to women entering non-traditional trades.

The belief that younger men were less resistant to the presence of women was linked to conceptualizations of gender and work outside the home. The women be-

⁴⁸ Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, “Sex and Skill: Notes Towards a Feminist Economics,” *Feminist Review*, 6 (1980), 82.

lieved that men under the age of 40 did not assume that they would be the primary breadwinner in their family. There was a sense, as a result, that it was only a question of time before the resistance of the trades and industrial occupations to desegregation and the integration of women waned. The presence of a generational divide is, however, challenged by some of the personal experiences. A male colleague described Trish Girard's salary as "pin money." Marie, who wished to remain anonymous, described a co-worker who

was talking behind my back and then phoning my supervisor and telling him I'm having hormone problems and stuff like that. And I was really offended ... One day I walked out of the office and ... I heard something and I turned and looked and he wouldn't acknowledge me. So then I just went out and shut the door ... My boss said to him at that point, "you know you could be charged with harassment ... you're on the verge or you're harassing her already." ... It was getting to the point apparently where ... he was trying to scheme up ways of trying to make me leave, trying to make me move somewhere else.

Kim Brons-Hewitt,⁴⁹ who works at the Weyerhaeuser paper mill in Prince Albert, has trained men who "don't wanna admit that a woman might know more than they do."

The challenges posed by women to the sex-typing of the trades and industrial occupations were also visible in patterns of socialization. One could discern gender boundaries⁵⁰ which lead to the emotional exclusion and isolation of women. They were not invited for a beer after work or included in gatherings. Micki, another woman who wished to remain anonymous, said that she did not eat lunch with colleagues because "it cramps their style. They think that they have to be careful with the topics of conversation." The limited number of topics of conversation can also preclude the participation of women. Darlene Gordon remarked, "I lose interest. A lot of topics — hunting ... hockey ... ball — carry on for a long time. Over and over and over again."

The resulting isolation because of the patterns of socialization was also evidenced by the difficulties some women have experienced in forging friendships with male colleagues. Trish Girard lamented the fact that she will probably never develop strong personal bonds with her co-workers, all of whom are male:

I don't have a social life outside of my family. And that's one thing I find tough, coming into an all-male environment. And I know I am not going to become buddies with these guys. Sure we can get along in there. They're very pleasant.... But I know for my career here, I am not going to make any really long term friendships. And I do get along with men. But I'm married and I'm not going to start bringing these guys home. And it's kind of like there's a certain line you can't cross.... So I see it, if we are willing, we have a job here for the next 30 years and we can retire. I am not going to have one of those long term solid friendships.

⁴⁹Interview with Kim Brons-Hewitt, February 2003.

⁵⁰Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, 69.

The absence of the ‘real’ backlash, mentioned by Margaret Manwaring, is not surprising. It may, in fact, be another indication of the persistent and deeply entrenched gendering of the trades and industrial occupations. The sex-typing is so secure that there is no need for a ‘real’ backlash. One may speculate, as Virginia Novarra does, “what will happen when they become significant [in numbers] as members of the skilled workers elite ...”⁵¹ For the time being, however, the characterizations of negative experiences as exceptional, as conflicts of personality, or as the result of individual biases help to shield from view the fact that the sex-typing exists and persists, both protecting and re-enforcing systemic barriers that make more difficult the de-segregation of these jobs.

De-Gendering and the ‘Individual’ Worker

The characterization of negative male reactions as isolated, random, or unusual by most of the women who participated in our research project enabled them to deny the gendered nature of industrial occupations and the existence of systemic and structural obstacles that prevent women from gaining access. These denials were predicated, in part, upon a belief that gender differences should be irrelevant to the workplace. The denial of the importance of gender as an obstacle to the integration of women into industrial occupations was facilitated by the self-identification of the women as ‘individuals’, taking advantage of opportunities by developing skills and acquiring qualifications. They chose to enter the trades and other industrial occupations. Other individual women could make the same choices, if possessed of enough drive and determination. The illusion of choice, as Novarra argues, may, however, be “one of the greatest obstacles to improving the position of women.”⁵²

The women did not conceptualize themselves as members of a disadvantaged group with limited options and choices. They knew that most women are concentrated in a limited number of occupations and segregated from others. This concentration was characterized, however, as the result of personal choices rather than the existence of structural barriers. The women viewed themselves as individuals who were personally responsible for their successes and failures. This enabled them to maintain beliefs that policies and provisions that recognized and accommodated diversity contravened the principle of equality and were unfair to male colleagues. Trish Girard, in arguing against reserving a set number of apprenticeship spots for women, stated that “it’s not fair ... you’re lowering the standard.... You can’t take away from your male counterpart.... Everyone is getting the same. It’s not like anyone is getting an advantage.”

Most of the women espoused a strong commitment to the principle of formal equality but viewed any efforts to assist women as a group as inherently unfair because distinctions would have to be drawn among individual union members on the

⁵¹Virginia Novarra, *Women’s Work, Men’s Work* (London 1980), 46.

⁵²Novarra, *Women’s Work, Men’s Work*, 104.

basis of gender. Unions and employers fostered and re-enforced these beliefs by adopting traditional, if not conservative, understandings of the principle of equality, predicated upon the sameness of workers and their identical treatment. Formal equality often uses the experiences, needs, and expectations of white men as a norm or standard against which others are measured. Inequality, as a result, only becomes “visible when women’s treatment differs from men ... gender inequality [is] not visible when identical treatment disadvantage[s] women ...”⁵³ The women rejected the arguments of theorists such as Cockburn that there is a need for women to assert that

as women, we can be both the same as you [men] and different from you, at various times and in various ways. We can also be both the same and different from each other. What we are seeking is not in fact *equality*, but *equivalence*, not *sameness* for individual women and men, but *parity* for women as a sex, or for groups of women in their specificity.⁵⁴

A psychological ‘de-gendering’ within the context of the workplace appears to have occurred. The abstract conceptualization of genderless workers and union members helped to obscure from view the existence of white male privilege and the structured and systemic barriers that marginalized everyone else. The ‘de-gendering’ that resulted from the principle of formal equality was partnered with principles of seniority and solidarity which could themselves be characterized as gendered and more beneficial to male union members than to female ones. Both offer the greatest protection to those who have been working in an industrial workplace the longest. Careers started later in life and/or interrupted by the birth and rearing of children may ensure that many women never gain enough seniority to meet eligibility requirements for applying for apprenticeships or occupational vacancies. Andrea Prodahl, for example, will have to work for Weyerhaeuser for a number of years before having enough seniority to apply for an apprenticeship position. By comparison, the three apprentices at the Ford Motor Plant in Oakville benefitted from the fact that the right to apply for these spots was not based on years of service. The union local did not use seniority as a requirement for apprenticeships and, as a result, any worker, however recently hired, could apply for the 30 positions that are available annually.

In addition to concerns about seniority and equality, there was also a strong belief among the women working in the trades and non-traditional occupations that any accommodation based on gender would make women more visible than they already were on industrial work sites. Their right to be considered a fully qualified worker by men who opposed their presence in the trades and non-traditional occupations could, as a result, be undermined. They feared, in other words, that ‘special treatment’ could precipitate a backlash from male colleagues. This sentiment was

⁵³Creese, *Contracting Masculinity*, 132.

⁵⁴Cockburn, *In the Way of Women*, 10-11.

inherent in the comments of Andrea Prodahl, who explained: "I've earned it just the same way that they have so.... I mean they can't say anything 'cause I've worked the hours'." Monika Mildner believed that any efforts to acknowledge gender imbalances "would make the position harder because you would not ... feel equal to the guys."

Notions of individualism and meritocracy also helped to explain the psychological de-gendering that women exhibited. While women lamented the fact that so few of them worked in these jobs, they opposed policies and provisions, grounded in the recognition of diversity among members, being designed, negotiated, and adopted by unions. One interviewee, who wished to remain anonymous, remarked:

they treat me like one of the guys. I'm not special or different. I'm one of the guys and I really work hard to be one of the guys. I don't want to be singled out. I just want to be one of the guys.... You can't have women claiming to be one of the guys and, at the same time, being treated as a special case. Because they aren't. That's the job they're doing. Base the reward on the job you're doing, not on that person.

The belief that women would get an unfair advantage, according to Darlene Gordon, resulted in the local branch of the union at the Prince Albert Weyerhaeuser paper mill vetoing an effort on the part of management to designate two of eight apprenticeships as diversity positions. Entrance into apprenticeships in most companies is based on seniority, barring many women and members of minority groups from bidding on the positions because they have not worked long enough. Weyerhaeuser sought to circumvent the issue of seniority in the selection process in order to enable members of under-represented groups, such as women and Aborigines, the opportunity to apprentice. The local members of the union voted against the proposal because they wanted to protect the principle of seniority and opposed any notion of differentiation among members based on personal attributes. Andrea Prodahl, who had insufficient seniority to bid on apprenticeship positions, might have personally benefitted from the Weyerhaeuser employment equity programme and been able to complete her training as an electrician. She maintained, however, that she "wouldn't want to be treated like a woman, I would rather be treated equal like anyone else" and believed that any special treatment or any acknowledgement of gender would preclude her being "one of the guys."

All of the women took satisfaction in having competed with and beaten men in competitions 'fairly', establishing a superiority at their own game. There was an undeniable sense of pride for Trish Girard, Monika Mildner, and Sam Scriver at having passed the tests and succeeded in entering apprenticeships when numerous men failed. Mildner believed that affirmative action would "lower the deal for me" and adversely affect her sense of self-worth. Scriver concurred, stating that she would feel that "they lowered the standard for you. So you're not up to par."

This strongly developed sense of self-worth meant that most of these women did not want those who will follow in their footsteps to receive special treatment

based on gender because they, as individuals, have had to succeed on their own. Mildner explains that “it kind of bugs you because we had to do it the hard way.” The three apprentices at the Ford Motor Plant in Oakville, for example, expressed opposition to the existence of a one-week “women’s-only” programme run by the CAW because men could not attend and, as a result, suffered discrimination. The objective of Women Inside the Trades [WIST] was to introduce potential applicants to the trades and highlight problems and obstacles that they might encounter if they pursued career changes. They viewed it as preferential treatment or the granting of “special rights” to women. The three approved of another union-run programme, two days in length, that both men and women could attend. As Girard explained, “they’re still on an even keel. Everyone is getting the same. It’s not like anyone is getting an advantage.”

The only advocate for recognition of diversity in order to ensure substantive equality for all union members was Margaret Manwaring. Unlike the others, she did not characterize the difficulties that she had encountered as isolated, random, or unique in nature. In her opinion, her personal experiences were evidence of a gendering of industrial occupations and the existence of structural obstacles which all women face when pursuing non-traditional careers. As a result of this characterization, she believed that “without teeth and in terms obliging employers to take women, we’re not going to make significant gains ... because of the general societal barriers that have existed for women in the trades. That unless we start doing affirmative action measures, we’re not going to get big numbers.” It is not, in her opinion, a question of giving women special rights or preferential treatment. It is, instead, a recognition of the fact that treating members in an identical manner does not always benefit those who are already marginalized or oppressed because of their divergence from the norm of the white male.

The psychological de-gendering did not blind the women to the knowledge that their presence challenged certain assumptions about industrial occupations and their appropriateness for women. They, however, individualized the consequences of their presence. Particular women, rather than women as a group, would be inspired and follow suit. The female journeymen pipefitters at Saskenergy all made reference to the first woman to complete the apprenticeship programme and work in the trade. Karel Larson remarked that she “broke new ground ... [and] those who come behind us will have an easier time because they weren’t first.” The three apprentices at the Ford Motor plant in Oakville describe Margaret Manwaring as a role model. Her successful completion of the apprenticeship process and her mere presence on the floor was sufficient to inspire them and others. Trish Girard stated emphatically:

Margaret is the reason, the only reason that I was aware of it. I kid you not.... I worked in truck chassis. And I was lent out to truck body for a day on the box side.... And she’s working on a gun or I don’t know. I didn’t know the difference. And I said to the guys around me — ‘cause it’s all men — “what is she doing?” “Oh, she’s an electrician”... and I thought I can do that.

Trish Girard, Monika Mildner, and Sam Scriver also knew that their success as apprentices pointed the way for others. They spoke of their personal experiences of women on the line at the Ford Motor Plant in Oakville clapping or shouting their approval when they were sent out on a job. Mildner, an apprentice electrician, remarked that the “women on the line usually go ‘alright for you’. They actually cheer for you.” One of the interviewees⁵⁵ explained that all women in non-traditional jobs “become role models and what an excellent thing to hand on to someone else. I had a summer student come up to me and thank me for being such a good mentor. She said if you can do this, I can do this. And those kinds of comments are just worth their weight in gold.”

Conclusion

The recognition of the importance of role models may, however, prove as valuable as fool’s gold. The women knew that their success could inspire others, but emphasized notions of individualism and formal equality rather than gender imbalances and discrimination on the job. They, as individuals, had succeeded and their individual success served as examples for other individual women, who, by developing their abilities and acquiring the necessary qualifications, could follow in their footsteps. The conceptualization of women as genderless individuals both grounded and reinforced beliefs that they were personally responsible for any successes or failures in their working lives. They had made choices that have led to their entry into the trades and other industrial occupations.

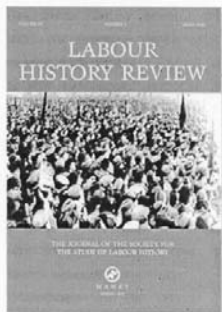
Most of the women did not identify themselves as being members of a marginalized or oppressed group in the labour market. The difficulties and obstacles that all of the women have encountered indicate, however, that their gender, rather than private decisions and choices, have affected educational as well as career choices and advancement, and day-to-day work experiences. The continued absence of tradeswomen and female industrial workers persists, many of them argue, because of the choices made by individuals rather than systemic or structural barriers against women as a group. Personal choices, however, cannot fully explain the continued segregation of women from the trades and industrial occupations. Women will continue to be excluded from the trades and industrial occupations because of their gendered nature. As government statistics indicate, there are so few women working in many of these jobs that men make up 100 per cent of the rank-and-file. The deeply entrenched and largely unchallenged sex-typing of these types of jobs makes them highly resistant to desegregation and the integration of women in large numbers. This resistance will not be weakened by the individual successes of a handful of highly determined women working in isolation one from the other.

⁵⁵ Anonymous interview, February 2003.



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Volume 71 (2006), 3 issues per year
Print ISSN: 0961-5652
Online ISSN: 1745-8188
Individual rate: £27.00/US\$48.00
Institutional rate (including online access):
£102.00/US\$181.00

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