

# Women's Participation in the Yukon Labour Force

## A Review

by S. Brodribb

In her study, "Women's Participation in the Yukon Labour Force," Maureen Jensen suggests that women's position in the labour force is greatly improving. The projected heavy industrial development of the Yukon will create many challenging opportunities and the onus is now on women to respond to them. However, it is my impression that no radical change in employers' attitudes to women has taken place in the Yukon, and consequently few dramatic changes in the realities of the workplace are likely to occur.

The present situation of women in government as outlined in the Report would seem to be a matter of great concern rather than optimism. Women are still ghettoized in the traditional, lower paid, dead-end clerical

jobs. Government personnel officers do not view women as primary wage earners--they have the idea that women work for fun or luxury and only men, who work for money or advancement, are the real workers with a right to a job. The reason there are so few women in the administrative and professional positions is supposedly because they are not competitive. It is far more likely to be the 'double life' many women are forced to lead--that other job of child care and housework at the end of the day, which is a real barrier to advancement. Also, there are no training programs or career paths from the typing pool to the board room. One thing is certain--government in the Yukon is in dire need of an affirmative action plan with teeth.

In the mining and exploration industries, the situation is no more encouraging. Perhaps the wish to reduce labour turnover was one aspect of management's decision to hire the pool of valuable resident female labour. Less altruistic employers have been known to gain considerably from the marginal, elastic and low paid nature of the female work force.

Cyprus Anvil is the largest mine in the territory, and may be representative of the Hard Rock Mining Industry. However, the host of small placer mining companies and partnerships suggest that

placer gold mining is more typical in the Yukon mining experience. It is precisely these smaller operations that are likely to refuse to hire women at camps, even as cooks, on the grounds that she will cause problems of a sexual nature. What small mineral exploration groups have included any number of women in their boy scout expeditions? Are there any female line-cutters in the territory? It seems that mining in the Yukon remains a male bastion to this day--women are the clerks at the office in town, or the barmaid/waitresses. Indeed, there has been little change in role stereotyping since the lone miner struggled out of the bush with his poke full of gold to frequent the chorus girls and gambling halls. Take this present day example: "Yukon goldminer Albert Lavoie, robbed of \$11,400 after he took two call girls to his hotel room last January, was back in Vancouver Wednesday with another \$10,000--this time in cheques--earned from his latest stint with a placer gold mining operation in the Yukon."(1) One change is that now Yukon barmaids serve the tourists who come to pay homage to these glorified images of the Gold Rush. It's the only job a working girl can get.

After considering the paternalistic views of the President of one of the Yukon's largest construction companies, we are left with some concern about women and unions. The comment "Most northern employers will hire anyone with skills"(2) leads to the conclusion

that the 'times' the employer was responding to in hiring women for blue collar jobs was not referring to any awareness brought about by the women's movement but simply a severe shortage of skilled male workers. As a warning, it should be remembered that "in a period of growth women are hired because they can be paid less, and in a recession they can easily be laid off."(3)

When women are viewed as secondary wage earners who would rather be at home, they will be the first to be laid off, and the last to be promoted. Then what protection will male dominated unions afford women when basic problems such as child care and personal rights are ignored? It is noted that the office workers in this construction company, who are expected to fill a faithful nurturing role, are not unionized.

Because of Manpower's refusal to train women in the higher paying blue collar trades, women are far more likely to find themselves employed as barmaids rather than compact operators. And tourism is an industry which will certainly exploit the large pool of undervalued female labour which increases each summer. For women in the seasonal tourist industry, there is no job or wage security, no advancement, no benefits. As it is, it keeps the female labour force underpaid, insecure and ghettoized.

Many women must be anxious to leave

lower paying 'female' jobs for higher paying blue collar jobs. Yet why are blue collar workers, such as carpenters and heavy equipment operators, paid more than clerk typists and waitresses? It is not simply because they have always been men? Why must women ignore the skills they have acquired and re-train in order to be eligible for a higher wage that they already have a right to now, in their present occupations? Perhaps creating a shortage of traditionally skilled female workers will equalize male-female rates of pay, yet this shortage is unlikely to occur.

Those women who were not Yukon residents by August 1977 will be unable to take advantage of the training provisions in Foothills Pipeline's Affirmative Action Plan. It is unlikely that when hiring begins in late 1980, these women will have been able to secure the right to this training which in

any event will take time to complete. Perhaps the affirmative action training programs for those who are Yukon residents will be limited. Unfortunately, there is a great possibility that the pool of trained blue collar female labour will remain small--a fact which may play into the hands of those who feel women are not serious about blue collar jobs. This may justify maintaining women in traditional lower paying jobs--rather than allowing them to participate in the subsequent phases of heavy industrial development in the Yukon.

One thing is certain, neither Yukon governments, employers or unions have truly changed their perception of women in the workplace. This is something we should be aware of when considering the scope of Affirmative Action Plans.

#### NOTES

1. Vancouver Provincial Daily Newspaper, September 6, 1978.
2. M. Jensen, "Women's Participation in the Yukon Labour Force," (see Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal, this issue)
3. J. Laot, "Women in the Work Force," pp. 16-17, Status of Women News, Vol. 5 No. 1 (September 1978), p. 17.