

Le Travail de la Femme au Québec, l'évolution de 1940 à 1970

FRANCINE BARRY. Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1977. Pp. 80.

This all too brief monograph on the changing nature of Québec's active female labour force was published under the auspices of the Regroupement de Chercheurs en Histoire des Travailleurs Québécois. The author, hoping to curtail reader expectations, explains the limited objectives which motivated what is essentially a sympathetic over-view as opposed to an indepth descriptive analysis: the book is designed as a global approach which confirms "les idées que nous nous faisons de la femme au Québec, comme son augmentation, sa diversification ou son acceptation progressive par la société," (p. 4) and is an essential prerequisite to the understanding and evaluation of socio-economic and political changes engulfing Québec society since 1940. The perspective is dual, nationalist and feminist. The emergence of a modern Québécois society is viewed from the vantage point of a rapidly developing and maturing female labour force.

Drawing upon the wealth of quantitative data provided by Stats Canada, the author outlines an interesting profile of Québec's active female labour force. The evolution of this group was characterized by three phenomena, the most

dramatic one being its incessant and rapid growth rate--31% in the 1940's, 41% in the 1950's and 58% in the 1960's. Secondly, the period was marked by a remarkable growth in the percentage of married women in the labour force from nearly 8% in 1941 to almost 50% in 1971. To explain this shift the author relies upon a few unquestioned generalizations proffered by a 1964 Department of Labour report, namely, the war, the reduction of the work week, the evolution of household technology, the availability of prepared foods and easily maintained clothing, the gradual regression of moral and social obstacles and, finally, better education. In fact, as the author points out, the greatest increase in married women occurred in the category of factory workers, the socio-economic class most vulnerable to the ever-increasing cost of living and rising expectations of a consumer society. A third but far less dramatic development was the gradual diversification of the female labour force and a shift within the traditional occupations from service and factory to office jobs. What these developments signify in terms of status loss or gain is not discussed.

The struggle for improved working conditions reflects the changing attitudes of society but most importantly the maturing attitude of women toward themselves and their perceived role in the labour force. The major concerns of labour, religious and national organi-

zations during the 1940's was to ensure that the moral and physical well being of women was not impaired by their "temporary" participation in the work world, hence, the concentration on improving health and safety standards, shorter work hours and longer rest periods, and elimination of the night shifts for women. As women came to perceive their participation in the labour force as permanent, the reform emphasis shifted to ending all forms of discrimination based on sex. The campaign resulted in a rather weak 1964 Québec "Loi sur la discrimination dans l'emploi," its provision for salary parity almost impossible to enforce. Until quite recently organized labour was very reluctant to push for state-supported day care facilities or adequate maternity leave provisions. Only a handful of collective agreements in 1966 provided for paid maternity leave and the money was drawn from sick leave funds. Yet pregnancy still remained an illness in the minds of many male employers and union leaders!

Traditional negative attitudes towards greater participation of women in the work force were extremely slow in adjusting to the new realities. It is Francine Barry's contention that traditional attitudes and values changed considerably, especially during the latter half of the 1960's as a result of the broader "révolution tranquille" which swept Québec in the early sixties. The emergence of new norms and

values of working woman, postulates the author, was the result of the emergence of an educated middle-class sector in the female labour force and the secularization of the "groupes définisseurs de la situation, comme les syndicats, qui orientent le débat sur son aspect professionnel." (p. 59)

In sum, this synthesis, useful as it might be, needs some flesh to bring it to life and make the generalizations more meaningful. Furthermore, if this synthesis was intended to spur on more indepth and revealing research a more comprehensive bibliography should have been included.

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