

# Employment Equity in Ontario School Boards

By Alison Taylor

*Depuis une quinzaine d'années, le ministère de l'Éducation de l'Ontario encourage les conseils scolaires à mettre sur pied des programmes d'équité en matière d'emploi afin d'éliminer la discrimination basée sur le sexe à l'embauche. Le présent article donne un aperçu de la politique d'équité en se fondant sur les expériences de trois directrices d'écoles qui hâtent le changement dans le système scolaire.*

In response to the demands of women's groups, for over fifteen years the Ontario Ministry of Education has been encouraging school boards to develop employment equity programs for women in order to eliminate gender-based discrimination in hiring. Currently, school boards are required to enact employment equity programs for women and provincial targets have been set by Ministers of Education.<sup>1</sup> It is expected that women will represent fifty percent of the numbers in certain administrative positions by the year 2000. The most recent statistics available indicate that there is a long way to go for these targets to be met.

There are four main components to employment equity programs within Ontario school boards. First, there is a requirement of data collection. Since 1984, school boards have been required to collect data by sex on occupational and salary distributions, and on projected vacancies, qualified candidates, and competition processes.

Second, school boards have been required since 1984 to develop affirmative action plans with goals and timetables for the hiring, promotion, and training of all female employees. These programs remain voluntary in that there are currently no sanctions for failing to meet targets.

Third, since 1986, Directors of Education have been required to include affirmative action sections in their annual reports. And finally, between 1985 and

1989, school boards were encouraged to apply to the Ministry of Education for incentive funding to assist them in starting up their programs. This funding was to be used to support the employment of an employment equity coordinator within the board for 3 years (maximum \$48,000 in funds given per board). Boards were expected to make these positions permanent.

Questions around the "success" of employment equity initiatives are frequently asked and clearly some form of policy evaluation is necessary. However, my purpose in this paper is to present and discuss some of the views and experiences of three women high school principals in Ontario school boards in order to explore how employment equity programs actually work in practice and to identify locations for resistance and change within hierarchical structures.

## Equity Policy in Practice

My discussions with three high school principals who I will call Jan, Marg, and Diane, indicated certain problems with employment equity policy — problems inherent in the formation of the policy as well as in the implementation of programs within boards. In other words, the discourse of employment equity is problematic.<sup>2</sup> I found the women administrators to be articulate in expressing locations of contradiction and tension.

For example, a critical issue concerns the justice of employment equity programs. I am sure we have all heard it expressed that employment equity programs simply perpetuate reverse discrimination. They interfere with the principle of merit, a sacred tenet of liberal democratic society. Conversely, defendants of employment equity programs tend to counter with the argument that equity for all requires treating groups differently, based on their different needs.

Rees, Joseph (1991), "Hostages to Each Other: the Transformation of Nuclear Safety Since Three Mile Island," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Law and Society Association, Amsterdam.

Rees, Joseph (1988) *Reforming the Workplace: a Study of Self Regulation in Occupational Safety* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P).

Stenning, Philip, Clifford Shearing and Susan Addario (1987), "Insider Policing: Securing Compliance and Maintaining Trust in a Financial Market."

Stenning, Philip, Clifford Shearing and Susan Addario and Mary Condon (1990), "Controlling Interests: Two Conceptions of Order in Regulating a Financial Market," in Martin Friedland (ed.), *Securing Compliance* (Toronto: U of Toronto P), 88-119.

University of Windsor (1990), "Review Committee on Employment Equity," Windsor, October.

York University (1990), *Report of the Joint Implementation Committee on Affirmative Action for Women Faculty and Librarians 1989-90* (North York).

York University (1989), *Report of the Joint Implementation Committee on Affirmative Action for Women Faculty and Librarians 1988-89* (North York).

*Ellen Baar is a sociologist who teaches in the Division of Social Science at York University. A specialist in Canadian regulatory processes, she was a member of the Joint Committee which designed York University's affirmative action program for women faculty. During 1988-90, she served as a member and Co-Chair of the Joint Implementation Committee on Affirmative Action for Women at York.*

## Correction

In our Fall 1991 issue, "Violence Against Women: Strategies for Change," a rather serious typographical error occurred in Heidi Eigenkind's article, "Bearing Witness: A Questioning of the Politics of Memory." On page 24, where it reads: "Often, the knowledge that most challenges us comes in some form of memory: body sensations, stories fathers tell us," it should in fact read: "stories others tell us." Pointing out the error, Heidi writes to us that "no story ever told me by my father contained much truth!"

The way in which employment equity policy is expressed by the Ministry of Education highlights the contradiction between views of justice. There is a clear attempt by policy makers to hold fast to the principle of merit as the fundamental principle guiding hiring practices, while making a concession to the principle of need as the premise underlying employment equity programs. They do this by referring to programs in such a way as to construct them as temporary interventions designed to bring hiring practices back in balance.

This has a couple of repercussions for people within school boards. One is the feeling of women principals that programs do not have the unconditional support of the Ministry; and second is the fact that resistance to programs within school boards is inevitable because of the contradictions inherent in policy statements developed "from above." People within schools are constantly heard to voice the fear that, under employment equity, women will be hired who are not qualified. But unfortunately, little "unpacking" seems to be going on beyond this initial negative response.

For example, what does it mean to be qualified for a position, and is merit an objective and appropriate principle of justice? Iris Young argues that impartial, value-neutral, scientific measures of merit do not exist and therefore an important question is *who decides* what constitutes merit when determining the appropriate qualifications for a position and how candidates are subsequently assessed.<sup>3</sup> This becomes particularly important given that those who decide what constitutes merit most often use themselves as models for delineating appropriate behaviours and practices. If men are making these decisions, women are less likely to fit the "model," given their different experiences and locations in society.

Indeed, in practice the principle of merit tends to ignore the social context of gender inequity in which competition for jobs occurs. For example, we are well aware of the difficulties faced by women who bear the brunt of childbearing and housework and who also want a career. We are conscious of subtle barriers such as the norm developed by male incumbents of holding staff meetings over dinner hours, or requiring vice-principals to en-

force certain forms of discipline when those forms have been constructed as the preserve of males. Until women have input into deciding the norms and practices that are appropriate to the organization of education, adopting a discourse of merit is unacceptable.

However, the discourse supporting employment equity policy also has its problems when we consider the realities of women. There is a tendency to accept existing hierarchical structures as given and to argue within the paradigm adopted by a liberal discourse of equality. The discourse of need in our society is most often translated as follows: women, as a disadvantaged group, need preferential treatment until they are able to compete on an equal basis with men for jobs. Thus

women's inequity in society becomes constructed as women's inferiority.

In my discussions with women principals, they strongly reject this view and attempt to distance themselves from policy which labels them as "target group members" and "beneficiaries." At the same time they are aware of some of the problems with the merit principle in practice. Their tendency to reject both discourses for and against employment equity probably occurs because the way in which these discourses have developed in our society makes members of oppressed groups into losers either way. Either they are rendered invisible by proponents of the merit principle or they enter the "spotlight" as a result of the way in which employment equity programs have been articulated.

Another problem that emerged in my conversation with one woman principal, Jan, relates to the Ministry of Education's primary focus on equity for women in administration, which could be described as elitist since it obscures issues of class and race. This topic arose in a conversation in which Jan raised issues around women and poverty in society and commented that, relative to many women, she is doing fine. Her recognition of her economic and social privilege as a white, middle-class woman raised questions for me about the "exclusiveness" of equity policy in practice.

Although it is the case that employment equity policy was expanded at the Ministry level in 1987 to address equity concerns of racial minorities, persons with disabilities, francophones, and aboriginal peoples, at present little has been done to expand programs within school boards. Women are assumed to be a homogeneous group in which all members have equal opportunities to aspire to administrative positions. Interestingly, nothing has been done in terms of introducing equity in recruiting into faculties of education, that is, intervening earlier in the employment process.

A final problem that was highlighted in my conversation with women principals concerns the issue of how change can and should occur with respect to the positions of women within organizations. Iris Young suggests that affirmative action programs challenge principles of liberal equality more directly than many proponents are

## SHEILA JAMES

### Affirmative Action Song\*

Affirmative Action in the  
workplace  
removes some barriers that we  
face  
because of our sex, our creed,  
our race.

Employment Equity could help  
achieve  
a place of equal opportunity  
for women, disabled and visible  
minorities.

Is there bias in my decisions  
Do our policies need revision  
Am I fair to favour my race  
Do I really discriminate?

You bet!!

Hiring policies would guarantee  
we would be judged on our  
ability  
not standards discriminatory  
Not standards discriminatory.

*\* This song is from The  
Company of Sirens' production,  
EEC: Employment Equity Count-  
down! It was not selected  
by our Poetry Editor.*

willing to admit.<sup>4</sup> They encourage the questioning of traditional concepts of justice and existing hierarchical structures. In fact, mandatory programs are regarded as quite revolutionary.

My discussion with Diane reinforced this perception. She spoke about the unpleasant backlash that occurred in a board where there was an employment equity coordinator who made recommendations about targets and timelines and who was supported in this by the Director. She clearly viewed this approach as revolutionary for a couple of reasons. First, a board was actually enforcing as well as articulating an employment equity policy (clearly an unusual occurrence); and second, there was apparently a great deal of resistance to change within this board. Obviously, how one thinks about revolutionary change is shaped by the existing ideas and norms around "fairness" and "justice" within the particular setting.

All three women principals felt that change must take place gradually in order to be sustained. Probably because of their locations within the system, all three had a degree of faith that change could occur within the existing structures of the institution. Another factor that in my view influenced their perspectives was the desire of women for change to occur in a way that does not reproduce patriarchal practices. Diane talked about "going to war" over issues of equity for women and hesitated over the prospect. Her collaborative manner of dealing with problems made it difficult for her to envision the necessity for confrontation and conflict.

Of course, the views of these women were also influenced by their perceptions of equity policy in practice, perceptions which gathered to form an attitude of "cynical realism." They saw that in most cases employment equity coordinators had very little power; they knew that much of the oppression they felt was subtle or became individualized and therefore could not be easily documented; and they were aware of the attempts by those in power to "keep the lid on" equity initiatives by lowering their priority and by interpreting policy in the loosest possible way.

The intention of this discussion of employment equity in practice has been to explore the complexities of discourse around equity and to expose some of the institutional constraints that limit change.

At the same time, my conversations with the three principals indicated that there are also locations for resistance and for what Kathleen Weiler would describe as counter-hegemonic activity.<sup>5</sup> It is these locations and practices that I would like to describe in the concluding section.

### Women as Agents of Change

Jan, Marg, and Diane all see themselves as agents of change within the education system. Jan spoke about entering administration so that she could implement her philosophy of education and positively influence what happens to students. Marg spoke about changing attitudes for those women who would follow her into administrative positions. And Diane spoke about her early recognition that women have an obligation to enter administration if they want to effect change. All three women emphasized the importance of providing role models for female students.

Jan spoke at length about what she believes and how she has acted to bring about change. For example, when she was a vice-principal and a single parent she "risked" changing the norm of holding meetings over the dinner hour because of her family commitments. She also questioned the norms of pre-defined career paths and movement upward in the hierarchy.

Rejecting the norm of moving upward at regular intervals, she counselled women teachers to view administration as another direction rather than as something to which they would have to "sell their souls." Her personal feeling was one of frustration that as one moves up the hierarchy, one has less and less contact with students. Therefore, as principal, she ensured that she maintained contact by "filling in" for teachers.

In our discussions of women in administration, Jan described the positive ways of managing and interacting that she felt women bring to the task. For example, her primary purpose was to encourage people to work together collaboratively. She felt that as more women enter administrative positions, they may be able to "have things think a little differently." She hoped, for instance, that the degree of competition among administrative aspirants would lessen.

Jan saw herself as an implementor of employment equity initiatives rather than as a beneficiary. She spoke of her attempts to structure for staff positive experiences of working with each other. She also made conscious efforts to role model for students by hiring female teachers in areas of disproportionate male representation, etc. In her discussion of areas where individual women must bring about change, she referred to the need for women entering administration to support one another. It was also necessary, in her view, for women to work toward changing relationships within their own families.

Like Jan, Marg also emphasized the need for women in administration to support each other. Marg had spent much of her career as the only woman administrator in her county and knew how difficult it was to overcome the negative attitudes. She considered it to be part of her job to try and build support for younger women aspirants. Marg tended to view herself as a pioneer and as a "survivor" within the system, someone who had to fight for access and acceptance on her own.

Diane was luckier than Marg in that she knew other women aspirants to administration in her area and they formed a support group early on in her career. The group formed largely because it was felt that women had no voice in the running of schools. The initial purpose was to share information about the process of entering administration and to support one another in this endeavour. When most of the women had achieved administrative positions, the purpose seemed to change to one of providing personal support around managing families and careers. Although participants have come and gone, a group of women continues to meet to provide educational and personal support to one another.

It is clear from Diane's discussion of this group that it played an important function in her career. Diane is confident in the ability of women to negotiate change within the system, probably because she has spent a great deal of time doing just that. She has been active in issues around gender in education at both district and provincial levels and has been involved in lobbying within her board for changes in hiring and training practices.

## Conclusion

The issue of equity for women in education clearly indicates that there are both constraints and possibilities when it comes to organizational change. Discourses around gender equity contest and contradict one another with the result that discussion is framed by ideas and practices that are frequently outside of women's experience. At the same time, women working within institutions are aware of the necessity for various locations of resistance and change.

Women are acutely aware of the social context of gender inequity within which employment equity policy exists. They are aware that change must occur within the family, the labour force, and other institutions; and they are not waiting for government initiatives to bring about change. Returning to my conversations with the three women principals, it is clear to me that Jan constructs herself as an implementor of employment equity policy, Marg, as a survivor and pioneer within the system, and Diane, as a skilled negotiator for the interests of women. These three women, probably along with countless others, have begun to build what Miles and Finn refer to as "a revolution from the ground up."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written in June 1991.

<sup>2</sup> I use the phrase "discourse of employment equity" to refer both to texts and material practices in which issues of equity for women are embedded.

<sup>3</sup> Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics* (1990) 192.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn (eds.), *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1982) 303.

## Deuxième Congrès Pan-Canadien sur les Droits des lesbiennes et des Gais

Vancouver,  
Automne 1992

L'immense étendue géographique de notre pays rend difficile la communication entre nous. Par conséquent, nous avons besoin d'un forum où nous pouvons obtenir de l'information et développer des stratégies — aux niveaux de la politique, du droit, et de l'organisation — qui nous mèneront vers l'avenir.

Thèmes provisoires : *Le sida et le droit ; Sommes-nous des familles ? ; Les lesbiennes et les gais dans le droit ; Contre l'homophobie ; Mobilisation dans nos communautés ; Des stratégies pour les droits des gais et lesbiennes.*

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Toutes les réunions seront accessibles aux chaises roulantes, et une garderie sera disponible. La traduction simultanée en anglais, en français, et en LSA sera prévue pour autant de réunions que possible.

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