

North American Women:

By Doris Anderson

À l'heure actuelle au Canada, seulement un enfant sur dix peut avoir accès à une place de garde subventionnée dans une garderie sans but lucratif. Par contre, en Belgique, au Danemark, en France et en Suède la quasi-totalité des enfants disposent d'une place de garde subventionnée et de qualité. L'auteure soutient qu'on ne réalisera jamais l'égalité des sexes en milieu de travail sans mettre en place un système efficace de soutien parental.

Without good support systems for parents—which still must be translated, in most families today, to mean mostly women—the barriers to equality in the work place is, and will continue to be, insurmountable. The solution is equal sharing and responsibility for partners in the family and much more support for raising children no matter what the living arrangements of their parents may be.

On the most elementary level, how well do services for women work? Is it possible for the majority of women who now work outside the home to have children without being penalized? Is parental leave available for both parents without fear of loss of job, salary, seniority or benefits? Is good, supervised, subsidized child care readily available so that, if a woman is in the fortunate position of being able to choose, she is able to make a real choice about whether to work outside the home? When marriages dissolve is child support adequate and is it enforced? Is there paid sick leave for the care of children, other members of the family and the elderly?

On a more philosophical level—which is a good indicator of how seriously equity is regarded—was legislation supporting maternity leave and child care enacted out of a recognized need in society or to boost a falling birth rate? Is tax legislation designed to encourage one kind of family over another, for example, one-income

families headed by a male? Are protective laws in the work place designed to safeguard everyone, men and women, or to keep women out of better paying jobs?

Canadians, bombarded as we are by U.S. television and press, naturally constantly compare ourselves to our next door neighbour. Even though Canadian women are not generally as well served as many European nations in child care, maternity leave or equal pay, we are certainly better off than U.S. women. This tends to make Canadian governments complacent about Canada's modest benefactions for women.

By any objective standard, services for women in Canada rate pretty low. Although Canada has had universal medicare since 1968, its national pension plan is not enough to keep many women who have worked all of their lives above the poverty level in their old age. Family Allowances were brought in after World War II both to encourage people to have children, and get money quickly into the economy. The amount, \$34.88, is miserly compared to other countries—barely enough per month to buy a pair of ordinary running shoes. It was de-indexed by the Mulroney government and no longer even keeps pace with inflation. In 1979 child tax credits were introduced. These came to \$585 per child per year for every family with an income under 25,215 in 1991.

In contrast, France, Norway and Sweden all pay much more generous family allowances. For example Sweden pays mothers over \$100 per month per child for the first two children and more for each subsequent child.

As for maternity leave, in Canada a 1972 law allows 17 weeks—15 of them paid through unemployment insurance which amounts to 60% of the worker's salary. An additional 24 weeks are allowed for federal employees. Either parent may choose to take leave. Several provinces allow longer leave, most of it unpaid.

Compared to the far more generous leave of many European countries like France, West Germany and the Scandinavian countries, where parental leave ranges from seven months up to a full year with pay from 84% to full salary, again, Canada is parsimonious.

A majority of Canadian women would probably like to be given a choice of whether to stay home with new babies for the first year or two. It would be less expensive to provide more generous maternity leave so women could do this than provide public creches. For example, it would cost one quarter of one percent of the total salary budget paid to women postal workers, for example, to top up maternity pay to 100%.

Both provincial and federal human rights codes prohibit firing pregnant women, but many women of child-bearing age aren't hired, because they may get pregnant. Others are fired when they become pregnant on some other pretext. It's up to the woman to prove discrimination. Since this is difficult, most of them don't bother.

Canadian women pay a heavy price in lost salary, seniority, benefits and a risk of losing their jobs as a result. Part-time employees who work 15 hours a week or less aren't eligible for maternity leave at all.

With only one in seven families with a full time mother at home, one of the biggest needs in Canada today is child care. But the responsibility is divided between the federal and provincial governments. The federal government collects income taxes and transfers payments for social programs to the provinces. Between the two jurisdictions there has been plenty of opportunity over the years to pass the buck to the other level of government and little gets done.

During the past ten years there has been a federal Task Force on Child Care followed by lengthy cross country hear-

Cinderellas at the Equity Ball

ings. Finally the government introduced a bill just before the last election. (Child care is one of those items like a causeway to Prince Edward Island that is regularly promised just before an election.) There were to be 200,000 spaces dribbled out over several years. Women pointed out that this was scarcely any improvement over the current rate. Another part of the bill allowed tax deductions for private care up to \$4,000 per child, and \$759 per child per year for mothers in the home. After the election the part of the bill providing new spaces was chopped—due to budget cuts was the excuse—but the tax deduction and money for mothers in the home went through, completely ignoring the real needs of working mothers.

Today, for every ten children needing child care, only one non-profit, subsidized space is available. The rest are taken care of in run-for-profit, private centres and family homes, etc. Income tax deductions for child care only helps the well-to-do, since poor women earn so little child care costs exceed what they pay in income tax.

In contrast, in Belgium, Denmark, France and Sweden there is good subsidized child care for almost every child requiring it from the age of two and a half on, and fairly good care for infants as well.

Another grave concern in Canada is the growing number—one in five—of women and children living in poverty. The increase is due to the number of single parent families headed by a woman. Two out of five of these families are poor because women earn two thirds of what men earn and many fathers don't pay child support. Under recent conservative governments, proportionately more taxes have fallen on lower income people where women, married or single, find themselves. The GST tax of seven percent on all goods and services became law in 1991. It is particularly hard on poor people, especially women.

Mothers get custody in 85% of separation agreements. But child support has been shockingly low and in the past ridiculously easy to avoid paying just by moving to another province. Even today 75% of court orders are not being paid in Ontario. Only recently when welfare payments have become quite onerous, have several Canadian provinces started to crack down on defaulting fathers by tracking them down and garnishing salaries. The federal government has helped by opening its income tax files on delinquent parents so that they can be traced.

Margrit Eichler, professor of sociology in education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, says after studying different family laws in Australia, Canada and U.S., that the results are always the same, poverty for women and children. Women may get half the assets of the marriage but they also get the children and not enough money to support them. Eichler maintains the problem is that judges, who are mostly older men, don't award large enough support payments. Sweden and Denmark have the only workable systems. The state makes sure the children are adequately supported, and then collects from the parent.

Few men in unhappy relationships want to be held in them—although they certainly should be made to support the children they have fathered. More and more women prefer poverty to an unhappy and often abusive relationship. But the fact is: if the family falls apart, it's the woman and children that are punished with a much lower standard of living.

In Europe where unions are much stronger most countries long ago accepted the fact that working mothers need child care and maternity leave without penalties for being the sex that produces future workers. In Sweden a single mother with children receives a child allowance, a housing allowance, child support either from the father or the state and a full time

wage which is 80% of men's. This means her total income, working full time, would be 50% higher than a similar woman in North America.

Both men and women must be given a real choice about whether to stay home and look after small children with paid parental leave, and no penalties in job loss, benefits or seniority. Good child and infant care must be available as a top priority. Shorter work days for parents, leave for looking after sick children or other family members for either parent, now law in some European countries, must become mandatory for all parents in Canada as well. Sex education and cooperative living must be built into the school system at an early age, to encourage boys, particularly, to be better, less violent and abusive future fathers.

If this seems wildly extravagant, consider the cost of not doing it in human waste, rehabilitation, higher crime rates, etc. And make this comparison: In the name of defence of the nation, young men and women have often served a compulsory term in the army. Afterwards, they received compensation, retraining and help to re-establish them in the work force.

Parents of children are performing a service to the country which is at least as important as army service. Children are the future workers. Yet, we treat child bearing as the personal whim, and responsibility, of individual mothers. We actively punish women financially and in terms of their future options, for taking on this totally natural, very necessary and desired role.

Few societies, except the Scandinavians, have ever tackled the division of labour in and outside of the home, and the problem of trying to reward it equally. We should revise the way we count "labour" all over the world. The work women do—which is more than half the work of the world, is simply not counted

and not valued and this colours the treatment of women, the payment of women and discrimination against women, everywhere.

All the care of children, making meals, cleaning, sewing, caring for the elderly and sick isn't counted as "work" because it is unpaid, and therefore not valued. All the work women in the Third World do, including almost all of the agricultural work—isn't counted. Most women put in at least 15 more hours of work a week than men. If all of that work in the home were counted, women's contribution to the GNP would be 39% higher. Yet none of those vital tasks in the home, including looking after and teaching the next generation of workers, is counted, or paid for. On the other hand whatever men do—waiting for a signal to launch a missile or dumping wastes into rivers—all unproductive, but paid activities—is counted.

Because work in the home is not counted or valued, work that has been mainly performed by women in the public sphere—nursing, child care, secretarial, etc.—undervalued at almost every level. Resourceful, innovative, highly trained and brilliant women are also undervalued as political, business, bureaucratic, scientific, theological and academic leaders—simply because they are women. There are always more able, qualified, women than there are places for them.

Women also get very little help from men. North American gadgetry is supposed to make home-making a breeze. It helps but it also puts pressure on women, in addition to all their other responsibilities, to raise their house-keeping standards, become gourmet cooks and home-decorating experts as well as informed comparative shoppers.

The bare facts are that more women in North America work, on average, than in Europe. The myth that women are being supported by men hasn't been true for the past forty years, except for a minority of upper middle class and wealthy women. Jobs done mostly by women, such as child

care and clerical jobs, are low paid because they have traditionally been women's jobs.

Mythology is always strongest when facts and reality are farthest apart. In the U.S., and to a lesser extent in Canada and some European countries, a mythology still exists about the traditional family. The answer to high divorce, poverty for women and children, according to fundamentalist religions, politicians and right wing women's groups, is to bring back the traditional family. This simplistic solution is far removed from the economic facts and most people's desires. Today most families need two incomes to survive.

The North American mythology is that the ideal male is unencumbered, strong, silent, competitive and aggressively successful. The job of keeping the family together falls almost entirely on women whether they work outside the home or not.

Another more immediate problem is the present shift to a world economy which includes the Free Trade Agreement. We are being told that, as multinational corporations seek cheaper labour and less stringent environmental controls in the Third World, national governments everywhere will have less and less power to

protect their citizens and regulate such corporations. To combat exploitation in the Third World and pressure to diminish hard won support systems in the developed world, there will have to be more international co-operation, more involvement by the United Nations as well as a worldwide, supportive and active women's movement.

The European Community with its social charter is being hailed as the solution for Canada. Scandinavian women feel they may lose more than they will gain. Once economic boundaries are down, manufacturers might be tempted to move to countries with lower taxes, more lenient occupational health standards, fewer social programs and lower salaries. At present only Denmark is a member of the European Community, but Sweden and Norway are considering joining. But if social programs are harmonized, Danish women fear standards will drop, not rise. "Free competition and the so called 'free market' have never been a benefit to women," one feminist told me. Only time will tell how effective the European social charter which is meant to harmonize present social service networks, may prove to be.

The answer then, purely from a woman's point of view, is that free market democracies with relatively weak unions, mythological views of how society should work, and their emphasis on individual rights, are not particularly good for women. Social democratic systems have a lot of advantages because they have provided much more of the services that women need.

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