

Looking at the Education/Training Section of

by Susan Lafleur

L'auteure s'interroge sur le langage utilisé pour discuter de l'éducation et

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de la formation lors de la plateforme visant à l'action. Elle parle, entre autres, d'alphabétisation, de sensibilité au sexisme à tous les niveaux d'éducation et de reconnaissance des

méthodes traditionnelles qui définissent l'apprentissage et connaissances.

Creation of an educational and social environment in which men and women, girls and boys are treated equally and encouraged to achieve their full potential, respecting their freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief and where educational resources promote non stereotyped images of women and men would be effective in the elimination of causes of discrimination against women and inequalities between men and women. (PFA, October 1995, Education and Training for Women Paragraph 72).

In January 1995, Canadian Congress of Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW) and Réseau national action éducation femmes (Réseau) were identified as the lead Canadian NGO agencies to act as a resource on issues of education and to critique the education section (Paragraphs 57-69) of the UN official document, the Platform for Action (PFA).

A small committee of women representing the two organizations met via conference call and set to work to

scrutinize, critique, and strengthen the wording of the PFA. It would be presumptuous to assert that our input made a major impact to the final document, as many NGOs and official government agencies had a hand in shaping the final product. Nevertheless, there are some glimmers of wording proposed or new ideas presented by our working group that have found their way into the final document which reflect our thinking.

As with most endeavours of this type the process becomes as important as the outcome. What was really important for CLOW and Réseau was the process of working together under tight time frames, with strict limitations on how much space could be used (e.g. improve the wording but do not exceed the length of the original section). Our deliberations employed multimedia communication links conference call, phone, fax, and email as geographical location prevented any group meetings. Many of us had never met and did not know one another. It was a process of coming together, of working to consensus, of striving for harmonization of ideas. The result of our efforts produced a feeling of enormous accomplishment, solidarity, and self-congratulation.

Which issues?

The document, in general long and wordy, was weak in language that would empower women to take control of their lives. The education section made mention of women and girls but the recommendations did not recognize or focus on the specific educational needs of women, or the importance of women in making decisions about educational policy or in the development and design of curricula. It also overlooked important educational practices such as recognition of traditional ways of learning

and knowing the Aboriginal peoples, and made no mention of prior learning assessment and recognition of foreign earned credentials.

This article will identify three of our major concerns for modifying the wording of the PFA, highlighting issues we felt were important not only within a Canadian context but also within a world perspective. Our areas of concern included literacy, gender sensitivity at all levels of education, and recognition of traditional ways of learning and knowing. Again I stress that none of our suggestions were adopted unabridged into the final PFA but that the education section benefited from word-smithing and input from numerous sources which improved the final document enormously over the original.

Education is a fundamental human right. The issues of education and training are complex because there are enormous disparities worldwide as to who has access to education and for what reasons.

In many countries, notably African and Asian, as many as 100 million children have no access to primary education. Of these, 60 million are young girls, which is more than twice the population of Canada. More than two-thirds of the world's 960 million illiterate adults are women.


Lest we become too smug, Canada too has a literacy problem. Although perhaps not on the same scale as developing nations, low level literacy in Canada is more unacceptable in light of our position as a developed nation. Although Canada has a good system of education, as verified by the United Nations Human Resource Index, it is not so impeccable that we do not have some serious pockets of marginal literacy skills.

A recent comparative study of workforce literacy in Canada, the United States, and Germany found that more than one-third or 36 per

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cent of the Canadian labour force had only marginal literacy skills. Marginal, meaning that the individual could read a medicine bottle label and accurately identify the rec-

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ommended dosages. The same individual encountered difficulty in summarizing information and could not identify which of four films

was not recommending viewing after reading a film review (Crompton).

Many of Canada's marginally literate tend to be clustered in "older" occupations such as manufacturing, mining, agriculture, construction, transportation, etc. Surprisingly, almost 20 per cent of those in supervisory/management positions also demonstrated the same low level literacy skills. These workers, if laid off from their jobs, face enormous difficulty reentering the work force and thus become economically marginalized as well. Unfortunately, the study does not break out the statistics by gender but we could safely assume that women were part of the study as they make up part of the workforce in these occupations.

Two of the PFA recommendations highlight narrowing the gender gap in primary education to ensure gender equity for girls' participation in primary education by the year 2000, and propose that literacy include life skills and scientific and technological knowledge which would expand the definition of (functional) literacy. These recommendations address the literacy perspective for both developing and developed nations (PFA, strategic objectives B2).

Education is a transformative proc-

ess that empowers and enables men and women to take control of their lives, to make choices, to access paid work, and to fully participate in the social, economic, cultural, and political areas of society. It has been shown that when women and girls are educated they pass on this knowledge to their families through better food preparation and nutrition, health care, and the recognition of continued educational opportunities within the family unit. Although rather impersonal and business-market oriented, it is nevertheless a fact that investing in education for women and girls yields a very high social and economic return on investment.

Several factors continue to remain real barriers to female participation in education and training in all countries. They include lack of financial resources, child and elder care responsibilities, accessibility to educational programs, pregnancy, and in some cases, expectations of early marriage. Canada does not escape scrutiny on lack of response to these identified barriers as financial resources and lack of adequate and affordable child care are lingering barriers that politicians have abandoned any pretext of addressing.


Marginal literacy skills is only one issue facing Canadian women. Perhaps more pressing for those who do have access to education and continue their studies to post-secondary and graduate level, is the issue of gender stereotyping and exclusion from educational and training programs focusing on technology, science, and engineering. Indeed it is not stated in college or university calendars that women may not apply for these programs, but nor do we see stated equity enrollment policies or active and aggressive recruitment practices to attract women into them. Women who find their way into electronics or repair and maintenance

programs, for example, tend to be lone pioneers, or part of an experimental study that focuses on an all-women's class.

It is not simply a matter of becoming more inclusive of women in the sciences, technologies, and engineering disciplines, it is also a matter of recognizing how women learn and of gender-sensitivity training for teachers/instructors/professors within these disciplines. Women have to feel respected and welcomed into these programs and subsequently into the workplace.¹ Attitudes are shaped at home in the early years, however, schools and post-secondary institutions also reflect, shape, and influence attitudes and social norms. Women and girls must see themselves reflected in their education. Curricula and teaching materials must mirror the achievements of women in all aspects of their contributions—social, cultural, economic, technical, and political. The PFA recognizes and makes recommendations on all aspects of the above (strategic objectives B3 and B4).

The third area of concern that our

More pressing is the issue of gender stereotyping and exclusion from educational and training programs focusing on technology, science, and engineering.



NGO group felt was a major oversight was the recognition of traditional, Indigenous wisdom and knowledge. We recommended that opportunities be provided within primary and secondary school systems for Indigenous peoples to learn traditional knowledge and skills ... (and) to provide opportunities for transmission

of traditional knowledge through oral traditions, incorporating the knowledge of elders into the educational experience.

The PFA includes this theme and makes the recommendation to recognize and support the right of Indigenous women and girls to education and promote a multicultural approach to education that is responsive to the needs, aspirations, and cultures of Indigenous women, including developing appropriate education programs, curricula, and teaching aids, to the extent possible in the languages of indigenous people, and by providing for the participation of Indigenous women in these processes (Platform for Action, Strategic objectives B4 (n)).

Whose responsibility?

Financial and human resources have generally been insufficient for the advancement of women. This has contributed to the slow progress to date in implementing the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women.... To implement the Platform for Action, funding will need to be identified and mobilized from all sources and across all sectors.... (PFA, October 1995, Financial Arrangement Paragraph 345)

(At the National level) ... the primary responsibility for implementing the strategic objectives of the Platform for Action rests with Governments. (PFA, October 1995, Financial Arrangements Paragraph 346)

It is quite clear that signatories to the PFA, the nation states and elected central governments, recognize and accept the responsibility of follow-up and implementation of all the recommendations of the report. The question of course is will they actually honour their commitment? The track record does not look very promising. A federal government that pledged to implement a national daycare system

allowed the promise to slip into oblivion and the current Canadian government has made no move to revive the promise. The current federal government has abandoned the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women under the pretext that its work was completed. In Ontario, most of the Women in Trades and Technology (WITT) programs offered at community colleges have disappeared. Of the few that remain, funding is doled out in six month packets thus precluding any organization or planning for ongoing programs. Transfer payments to the provinces for education, health, and social welfare programs have been drastically cut and post-secondary students have been promised a minimum 20-25 per cent increment in fees. The Conservative government of Ontario has boastfully rejected the principles of employment equity and by implication education and training for employment equity. All of these measures affect women and diminish their ability to reach their full potential in terms of life style and full participation in society.

To rely on government, provincial or federal, is not the answer. The status quo for women speaking up for women will remain the order of the day, as governments have clearly demonstrated their indifference.

There are tools to help us. Two documents that will assist in keeping the watch, and to remain vigilant against further erosions to equity in education and training are *Gender-Based Analysis: A Guide for Policy Making and Take Action for Equality, Peace, and Development: A Canadian Follow-up Guide to Beijing '95*. *Gender-Based Analysis*, a publication of Status of Women Canada, is a guide which benchmarks and protects gender equity in all areas of policy analysis and policy making. The applications are broad and the fit with education and training is very appropriate. *Take Action* is the NGO follow-up document to the Beijing Conference. It provides suggestions for practical activities that any woman or women's group could initiate with very

little expense.

As we cannot assume that because Canada was a signatory to the PFA that there will be automatic and unequivocal follow through on recommendations, we will have to set up system across the country to track progress, or lack of it, and to hold governments using public moneys to be accountable for their expressed intentions.

Susan Lafleur is Program Manager for equity education and training programs for the Canadian Automotive Repair and Service Knowledge Network (CARS KN). CARS KN is a national sectoral council addressing the training needs of the automotive sector recognizing the critical requirement for competency based learning and national standards.

¹Women in Trades and Technology National Network (WITT) has developed a Checklist of Strategies for ensuring a welcoming workplace and for use in postsecondary institutions.

References

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