

Women In Trades

FIGHTING FOR OUR RIGHTS

In 1981, with the women's movement more than a decade old, it is comfortable and easy to assume that equality for women in the workplace proceeds apace; that inequities within the system are gradually being smoothed out.

While progress has been made, one look at the enrolment level of women in trades courses such as carpentry or heavy-duty mechanics is enough proof that, while the door is technically open, circumstances tend to keep it just as firmly closed as ever.

In fact, much of the progress of women in the workplace has tended to cluster at the upper end of the economic scale. For women in the median and lower end of the scale the difficulties of juggling the need to make a living and child care makes the possibility of training for a higher income close to insurmountable.

A new policy recently adopted by the Pacific Vocational Institute's Board of Governors appears to be a good first step towards dealing with some of the problems that are keeping women now in the "ghetto" workplaces — offices and retail stores, for instance — from enrolling for non-traditional trades training.

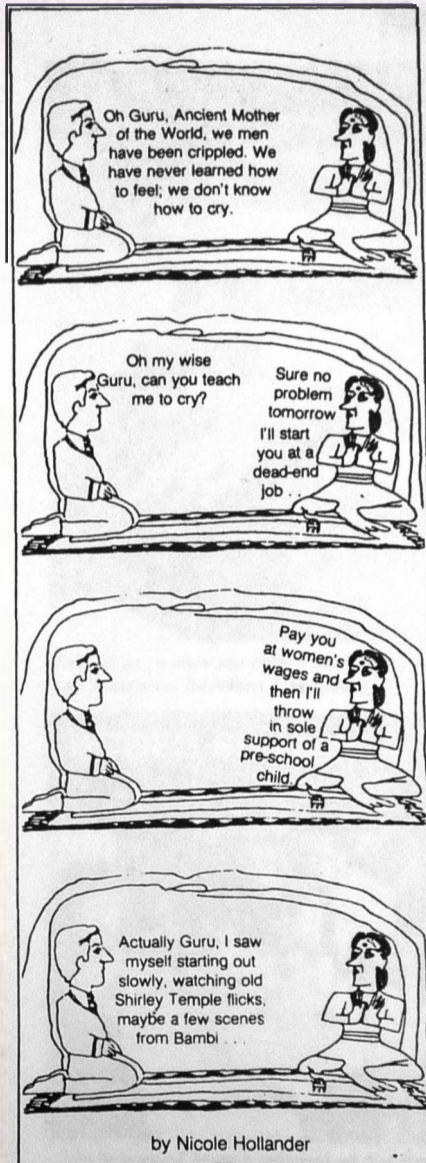
Provisions of the new policy include that Pacific Vocational Institute accept the role of advocate for women in training and employment; that PVI instigate a program to provide or upgrade facilities to accommodate increased numbers of women in training; that PVI take steps to eliminate the present minority effects upon women in training; and that PVI consult women's organizations such as the B.C. Women In Trades Association.

Fran Peterson, of PVI's Student Union Women's Committee, thinks the new policy is "great — the Board has done a really good job for a first effort. It's a good step forward."

She acknowledged the new policy would not necessarily mean the introduction of daycare at PVI. The Student Union has been trying to raise sufficient money for a daycare centre at the institute, and the necessary funding is the main obstacle.

But, she noted, the board has already set up a women's drop-in centre which operates two days per week, offering a support system for women training in non-traditional trades.

The new policy, even just as a policy statement, said Peterson, indicates the PVI Board of Governors "is futuristic



by Nicole Hollander

enough to see these problems exist and to try to do something before it gets out of hand."

Kate Braid, who has attended PVI as a Carpenter's Apprentice and now works as a Carpenter's Helper, says while the idea of the policy is "terrific", she will wait to see what concrete proposals come out of it.

Braid said she felt priorities at PVI are women's washrooms, daycare, and a tougher affirmative action program that would include active recruitment.

"The first problem facing women is getting the idea to go into a non-traditional trade," she said. "There are no role models, and most women don't imagine themselves doing that kind of work. For instance, I'd never heard of a woman carpenter when I started as an apprentice."

An active PVI recruitment program could include an ad campaign featuring photos of women in a heavy-duty mechanics' course, she cited as example.

The next problem — one which faces all applicants — is waiting to be admitted to PVI.

"One woman waited four years," said Braid. "Men have to wait that long sometimes, too, but I think the affirmative action program should be stepped up to two seats reserved for women in every course."

Students sponsored by the Ministry of Labour get in immediately but, she noted, "I don't know of any woman who's been sponsored by the ministry."

The criteria for Ministry of Labour sponsorship includes previous shop courses taken in high school, and recent high school graduation.

Braid notes most women interested in non-traditional trades training are older, and were not allowed to take shop courses in high school.

Once enrolled in a course, the next obstacle is sheer loneliness — the feeling of not only being alone, but of being "strange".

"There you are in the lunchroom," says Braid, "in your chunky boots and grubby jeans and sweat shirt, and the only other women there are taking secretarial courses and wearing high heels."

The new drop-in centre for women is a much appreciated luxury bordering on necessity, she added.

Women in trades courses often are confronted with traditionalist attitudes by both fellow students and instructors, says Braid.

"A lot of the guys were nice," she recalled, "but even they made you feel weird — they could hardly help it, when you're the only woman there."

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