

Women in the labour force: Facts, figures, present and future projections

In 1986, 68.3% of all women in British Columbia between the ages of 15 and 54 worked in the paid labour force. This percentage is up from 1976, when the average figure was 56%. The comparable statistic for men was 77.1% in 1976 and 77.9% in 1981.

The number of women in the paid labour force is clearly on the rise, with more women working today than at any other time since World War II. Women represented 42.7% of the total workforce in 1986, as opposed to 34% in 1976.

Forty-one percent of all women who work are heads of households. The other 59% are married and most of these women work to bring their family's income above the poverty line. Less than one out of 14 employed wives have husbands with an income above \$2,000 per month.

These statistics make it fairly clear that women work primarily for economic need — the same economic needs that men have. Of course, they also look for the same kinds of other job satisfactions that men do — producing a needed product, satisfaction of a job well done, and enjoyment of the camaraderie of teamwork. But economic need is the primary reason.

A Canadian woman can now expect to spend nearly five times as many years working outside the home as she spends working at home full time. Most women spend seven years or less at home caring for children, and work 30-50 years in the paid labour force.

In exploring where these women are in the paid work force, it is interesting to note that they make up 82.5% of all workers in clerical occupations, 58.8% of workers in all service occupations, and 45.4% of workers in all managerial, professional and administrative occupations (of which the largest concentration are in teaching and nursing).

The average wage for a female head of family, in British Columbia, is \$11,000 per year; the average wage for a male head of family, is \$20,000 per year.

Based on 1980 statistics: At the managerial level, women doing the same or similar work as men earn 55% of what the men do. In sales, they earn 50% of what men do. In the service industries, where we might expect something different, as these are the jobs that women have been doing at home for years, women continue to earn exactly 1/2 of what men earn for the same or similar work. This has not changed significantly since then.

One in every six Canadian women lives below the poverty line, and the numbers are growing. Many different kinds of women are included here: older women, young women with children, single women, and married women. Most women have been taught to believe that marriage will protect them from financial hardship. But the fact is that 75% of women living in poverty today are currently married, or have been married in the past.

About 42% of all female-headed families live below the poverty line. The comparable figure for male-headed families is only 7%.

Projections were that seven out of every 10 new entrants to the labour force in the 1980s would be women. The most recent statistics from StatsCanada show that women have made up 90% of the new entrants to the labour force in this decade. We cannot afford to ignore the majority of the potential human resources available.

Women who have previously expected to survive by other means are recognizing the economic realities of these times: many of the clerical, service and manufacturing jobs that were open to them in the past will be lost to technological change. Ottawa has projected that two million Canadian jobs will be lost to technology by the 1990s. The jobs that will be created by the new technology are in fields that have traditionally been dominated by men.

Another reality that we have to face is the number of tradesmen in this country who are over 50 years old, and the number of younger workers not being trained to replace them. Even if we acknowledge that the projections for resource development growth made by Employment and Immigration Canada and the provincial governments in the 1980s were unrealistic, the numbers lost to attrition are proving to be a major factor in critical trades worker shortages.

Before World War II, the trades were respected occupations, but during post-war periods of the 1950s and 1960s, parents tended to encourage their children to go into white-collar work. Blue-collar work was looked down upon for about 20 years. In the past 20 years or so, this attitude has changed — unions have brought the living standards of blue-collar workers up to a reasonable level, and the resource and construction industries have been crying out for skilled workers.

It is true that some parts of the country have been in a recession, but even those parts are beginning to turn around. We need to be prepared. We need to start training people now before we lose the expertise of our older workers.

More and more women are becoming interested in the skilled trades and technologies. They are being encouraged — by government and their own economic need — to fill the vacancies we expect to be created by attrition and industrial requirements. It makes sense that women would choose occupational fields that tend to be more economically viable as well as providing the reward of personal satisfaction in the work accomplished. It also makes sense that employers and unions would recognize their potential and appreciate the capacity of women who bring to the workplace technical skills, commitment to doing the job well, and a strong desire to succeed.

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