

EMPLOYMENT EQUITY PROJECT

What is employment equity?

It is a balanced workforce that reflects the diversity of society and provides equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes. This may mean more than just treating people the same. Employment equity may mean that special measures need to be taken to remedy the effects of past discrimination and that differences be accommodated reasonably to enable equality of outcomes. In Canada, the equity target groups are women, aboriginal people, visible minorities and persons with disabilities.

What is the WKWA Employment Equity project all about?

The employment equity project is a two-year project funded by Status of Women Canada. Its general purpose is to help change people's attitudes and behaviors as well as policies and structures in the West Kootenays in order to improve the employment equity situation.

The project has several areas of focus. They are:

- Researching and analyzing the current employment equity situation in the region to provide a snapshot of the current situation
- Conducting public education and communication about employment equity in the West Kootenays and practical ideas of what can be done to improve the situation
- Developing lists of practical resources, success stories and good models for organizations and individuals to put employment equity strategies into practice
- Building relationships with groups and individuals who are in the position to act as long term resources for employment equity issues after the project is over
- Advocating for improved employment equity practices on major construction projects in the region such as the Columbia Basin Hydro projects
- Assisting local governments to develop employment equity policies and implementation committees

What can be done about the current situation?

Employment equity means instituting fair and effective human resource practices which will benefit everyone. And everyone has a role to play in making sure we achieve equity. Employers and managers, unions, educational and training institutions, women, men, governments, the media and families can all take steps towards making the workforce more representative of all workers' abilities, aspirations and career choices. It's easy to see how employers might need to change. But we all have a role. For example, we need to encourage young women to develop the skills, abilities and educational pre-requisites necessary to pursue livelihoods that will satisfy them and pay well.

The project will be taking a positive approach - pointing out what can be done to improve on current practices. Change is a step-by-step process. The project wants to encourage anyone and everyone to take even a small step to break with old practices that have resulted in unfairness. We want to focus on people's responsibility and motivation to improve employment equity rather than blame for past wrongs.

Employment equity means a better future for the girls and boys of the West Kootenay. Working towards that goal is our bottom-line commitment.

What can you do to assist the Employment Equity project?

- **Supply a success story.** Let me know the names of any organizations that have a good approach to employment equity or that have taken steps to improve equity through a particular approach, policy or practice. If you can, please provide the name(s) of individuals who could tell the success story.
- **Tell me about a key contact person.** Let me know the name(s) of any people who might play an important role in the longer term regarding employment equity. This could be a role model or mentor, a school counsellor, training provider, community leader or other motivated and supportive person in a key position to influence employment equity.
- **Share your vision of employment equity.** Practical concrete ideas, energy and enthusiasm are always welcome. This could be in the form of volunteering or simply by spreading the word. Personal contact is what changes attitudes.

What is the employment equity situation like currently?

It is the dawn of the 21st century and women still earn about 61% of what men earn in the West Kootenays. Also, occupational segregation is still the norm. There are high percentages of women in nursing, sales, services and secretarial positions compared with about 2-4% in trades, transportation and manufacturing employment. This situation is virtually never raised in economic or employment consultations or workshops. It is simply accepted as part of the current situation.

Even at the national level, equity is a big issue. Women earn an average of 73% of what men earn. Canada is rated as one of the top countries for human development according to the United Nations Development Program's index but drops about 10 or more places when gender is considered. If being at the top of the list is a source of national pride, shouldn't the drop be considered a national disgrace?

What are the impacts of workforce inequity?

Without equality in the workforce, women and other equity groups face systemic disadvantages that may take the form of lower paying jobs, difficulty accessing certain occupations, higher unemployment, lower decision-making authority, less training and so on. The fact that inequality has existed for so long and is seen as part of reality sends a negative message to girls and young women in terms of their own career expectations. What does equality of opportunity mean if there isn't equal ability for women to realize those opportunities?

What has the WKWA project done so far?

The early phase of the project has focused on equity hiring policies at the Keenleyside Powerplant Project. In case you didn't see the July Newsletter, here's what has happened to date.

The employment equity project shifted quickly into high gear last month by co-ordinating a Women's Information Meeting for the Columbia Basin Hydro Projects. This involved advertising and holding a one-day meeting, June 25, as well as collecting resumes of interested women to pass on to the Columbia Hydro Constructors. They are the "employer" on the Keenleyside Powerplant project. I was joined in the organizing effort by Marcia Braundy of Kootenay WITT and Lana Grant, the First Nations Coordinator for Keenleyside.

You are probably aware that people of the region have worked long and hard to let the Columbia Basin Trust and others know that employment on the hydro projects should provide go to local people in a mix that fairly represents population demographics and an acknowledgement of area First Nations. To put employment equity into practice, equity language was incorporated into the Collective Agreement between the Columbia Hydro Constructors and the Allied Hydro Council (a grouping of 17 construction trade unions). The Collective Agreement governs all hiring for on-site work at the Keenleyside project. However, as we have been finding out, equity language doesn't translate to equity hire unless action is taken to ensure compliance.

Last year, some construction work at the Brilliant Dam achieved equity participation of 8%, which was above the targets set but which is still a low rate of participation. Staff at the Columbia Power Corporation did a lot of work to get women out on the project. The process is different at Keenleyside - it's up to the Columbia Hydro Constructors and the unions. When we arrived on the scene, there were 4 or 5 women on site out of 140, or about 3%.

In just over 2 weeks, we identified over 120 interested women and, for 40 of the most qualified women, provided them with an opportunity for a site tour, an introduction to WITT and a face-to-face meeting with representatives of Peter Kiewit Sons Co. Ltd. (Keenleyside's design-build contractor) and the unions. What emerged in the meeting is that the route a qualified woman should take to get employment at Keenleyside is about as clear as mud. It's better in some occupational areas than others, but it's complex and equity is getting lost in the mix.

What is clear is that the organizing effort needs to continue by getting an Equity Integration Committee set up, just as there was on the Island Highway construction project. That committee needs to set equity targets and monitor compliance. It will also need to look at what kind of Orientation to Trades and Technology training is needed and might be made available locally.

Since then, Janice Logan of the ministry of women's equality has been working with representatives of the Columbia Power Corporation to ask for the following things:

- "tangible results" in terms of employment equity in the next round of hiring at Keenleyside (should be happening in early August)
- action to get equity targets set
- funding for a women's employment equity position similar to the First Nations Coordinator, who could be on-site and able to develop specific strategies to get more women hired and bring parties together to get some WITT training happening
- long term funding for an employment equity position in the region that would assist with the longer term training and employment issues related to all of the major construction projects taking place.

Drop off your ideas & suggestions to the Nelson Women's Centre, attention: Ruth Beck, Coordinator, EE. Thanks to Marcia Braundy