

FORUM FOR WORKER'S VOICE

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“What’s a ‘little lady’ like you doing with a man’s job?”

By Linda Ross

While on a flight from Toronto about six months ago, a petite young woman sitting next to me and I began to chat. The conversation turned to the subject of work and I asked what she did. She hemmed and hawed a bit, then said she was a welder. Before I had a chance to say anything, the fellow to my left who had been eavesdropping on the conversation, suddenly leaned across me and said, “No s - - t! You’re a welder! You don’t look like a welder. What’s a little lady like you doing with a man’s job?” After she enlightened him on the salary and benefits differentials between her former job in a jewelry store and her present job as a welder, she went on to inform him that she earned three times that of her husband. Furthermore not only was she a welder, she was the ‘foreman’ at the factory and preferred not to be called ‘little lady’!

Women in non traditional occupations frequently face similar reactions, as it is still ‘a man’s world’. Speaking with a group of women in their first and second year of training at the Carpenters and Millwrights College in Paradise, they say they are still an ‘oddity’ but fortunately, the acceptance of women as competent, capable, hard working welders, carpenters, millwrights, heavy equipment operators ... etc. is much more common. The stares, they say, are more about how they do the work, rather than the ogling because they are women. They are the first to admit that there are still challenges and barriers to women in non traditional occupations, but the benefits and opportunities outweigh the challenges.

The signing of the Hebron Agreement, Vale Inco’s smelter at Long Harbour, Churchill Falls, investments in infrastructure, all bring with them the promise of good jobs in the skilled trades. Fortunately for women in Newfoundland and Labrador, that promise is not only for men. When the government negotiated the terms of the Hebron Agreement, within it was a requirement that the operator commit to comprehensive gender equity and diversity program, complete with women’s employment plan and business access strategy.

In 2008, 14.5% of those employed in the forestry, fishing, mining, oil and gas industry were women versus 85.5% men. The starting non-union hourly wage for jobs such as a machinist is \$12.80, a welder - \$17.40, a millwright - \$16.60. Unionized hourly wages are greater and are accompanied by benefits. Compare this to the service producing sector for which the average starting hourly wage is minimum wage -- \$8.50 and the majority of those employed, 57.3% are women and 42.7% men.

As the women at the College will tell you, wages are a big factor, but it isn’t only about the money. These jobs mean greater self confidence, a sense of accomplishment, an opportunity to push your own limits, a chance to stay healthier and most importantly really work at something you want to do.

The doors are open. The jobs opportunities exist. Training is available. Industry is bound to women's employment plans. Why aren't we seeing women entering the skilled trades en masse? Hasn't the way been paved for women to take full advantage of what's available to them? It's true, there are more women entering the program, but major barriers still exist.

Childcare and EI remain major obstacles for women contemplating a career in the skilled trades, as they do for women in almost all fields. Lack of a quality, affordable national childcare program leaves women struggling to cobble together daycare arrangements. Fortunately, during the school year, a single parent can avail of a subsidy for a child in formal daycare, but no such subsidy exists for summer camp programs for children. The abysmally low EI rate of 55% is an impediment for women on a number of fronts, from inadequate funds to cover basic expenses, to the penalty of a two week waiting period. Once trained and employed in the trades, women better not entertain getting pregnant as the vast majority of working women are penalized for doing so, thanks to EI.

Do we want more women in the skilled trades? Without a doubt! What do we need to do? Lobby for a national childcare program and changes to EI legislation!