

Barriers to women's education

By Anne McDonagh

“I always wanted to get an education, but in my family and culture, a woman doesn't need an education. The only thing that matters is that she marries and has sons. It didn't matter that I was smarter than my brothers. To my father I was less valuable than the cow.” These words were spoken by a young New Canadian woman from a poor and uneducated family in Asia.

In Canada we value education highly and the democratic right of all people, women included, to have access to education up to the best of their ability and according to their own free, mature choice.

Yet for some women, barriers to education still exist: their family and traditional culture, their poverty, their children and husband. Their free choice may be limited by the kind of background they have, both in and out of school in their early years. The daily struggle a woman goes through to improve her life through education is as personal and individual as her name.

Girls and women are often discouraged from continuing their education by the cultural group they grow up in. Even in Canada some families have negative attitudes towards educating girls because they expect them not to join the permanent work force but to get married and do the domestic work needed at home.

In the past, when most work was manual, it required physical strength or “masculine” characteristics that traditionally excluded women. Of course that is not true of today's work force, though some people still seem to think so. Also, labour-saving devices in the home and the financial demands of supporting the home make it possible and necessary for women to be employed.

In other countries and ethnic groups the barriers may be as strong as taboos or worse. Then a girl educates herself at her peril and must be strong in support of her own human rights. Immigrants to Canada who come from societies and cultures very different from Canada's may continue the legacy of the past, and, reinforced by religion, may have firm convictions about the roles of men and women,

especially women. Canadian law guarantees the education of girls, but women may have to fight for their own higher education.

In Canada we have a legacy of devaluing the contributions women make to society and that legacy lives on. For instance, some believe that women are emotionally unstable (they have PMS, they cry, etc.) and are therefore unable to work as efficiently as men. Some believe that women are generally not as capable as men. Some believe women are more suited to domestic chores. Women do not necessarily believe these myths, but some are so indoctrinated that they lack the confidence to challenge them.

If women internalize these negative views, they may not even imagine great things for themselves, let alone go after them and better themselves through education. Because of the image they were raised with, certain women in Canadian society do not value themselves and their potential. It is not just their loss. Society loses too because it needs the human potential of all its citizens. To prevent or discourage women from developing and contributing their talents deprives their society of 50% of its human resources.

The devaluation of women still shows up in the pay cheque. Even including the best educated, women on average make only 74% of the wages men make. Tuition fees have increased everywhere, some as much as fifty percent. How can women support their ongoing education? Yet a slightly higher number of women than men take continuing education and training courses. To improve their lives in this way, women often face financial hardship, frantic time restrictions and little support from the broader community.

Women with children, who want to participate in continuing education courses, are faced with a mind-boggling schedule of rising before dawn; preparing their children and themselves for the day; getting the children to daycare; putting in a full day's work; picking up the children; preparing dinner; once or twice a week arranging babysitting; and going to a course to improve their skills. On the weekends, it is shopping, cooking, cleaning and studying. If they have husbands, they usually get some help. Statistically, however, women still spend twice as much time as men on housework and childcare. (Many women would argue that the chief reason for marriage breakdown is the unfair distribution of housework!) Some men still

expect their wives to wait on them and keep them company while they watch television! It's very discouraging for a woman to continue her education when her husband is unsupportive or even hostile.

If women are divorced and have children, their incomes are much lower than men's, since child support payments, when they are paid, usually do not begin to cover the expense of raising children. The average child support payments are \$3,000 per year. If women want to participate in lifelong learning programs, or go back to school to learn new marketable skills, they have to pay fees that are *proportionately* a greater percentage of their incomes than men pay.

The Canadian community as a whole does not support women's lifelong learning. Daycare spaces are not nearly adequate, nor are they affordable unless you are wealthy or qualify for a subsidy. Besides, daycare is not usually available in the evenings when many continuing education courses are offered.

If our governments are serious about reducing the welfare rolls by getting single mothers out to work, they should provide post-secondary education free of charge, not just stopgap, short term training courses. Only mothers who are able to make a living wage are going to stay out of poverty and off welfare. As we all know, the surest route out of poverty is education.

As it stands now, it is nearly physically and emotionally impossible for single mothers to improve their lot in life! Yet they do it! They go to school. They maintain this stressful lifestyle. They make major changes in their lives. But only they know at what cost to their own health and family life.

Since The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, most governments in the world have been making efforts to create more equal opportunities for women, beginning with eradicating illiteracy. In rhetoric at least! These efforts are, of course, hampered by poverty, wars, drought, famine and cultural and ethnic beliefs about the roles of men and women—all of which affect women disproportionately.

Since the 1970's, Canadian society has continued to make progress in fashioning a just society for both men and women. For

instance, in 1999, 89% of women in Canada had high school or higher education, 28% held a post-secondary diploma and 14% held a university degree. Women's share of all male-dominated fields increased from 21% in 1981 to 34% in 1994. Women increased their ranks in engineering and applied sciences in degrees granted from 16% in 1993 to 21% in 1997.

Despite these gains, there are still unknown numbers of women in our society who, for many reasons, but often having to do with their gender, do not explore, let alone use, their God-given potential. It's a loss to them and to us.

For further information about women and education or human rights in Canada and around the world look up the following websites.

Ontario Women's Directorate: www.gov.on.ca/citizenship/owd

Status of Women Canada: www.swc-cfc.gc.ca

Center for Women Policy Studies: www.centerwomenpolicy.org

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