

THE 1996 JEAN EDMONDS LECTURE WOMEN AND WORK

THE ROAD TO GENDER EQUALITY: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES

Jocelyne Bourgon



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The Road to Gender Equality: Progress and Challenges

Jocelyne Bourgon
Clerk of the Privy Council and
Secretary of Cabinet

Friends, colleagues, honoured guests, I am pleased to be with you today during International Women's Week to deliver the third Annual Jean Edmonds Lecture.

Many of us in this room knew Jean Edmonds. We remember her as a wonderful person. As a public servant, she was a role model and a pathfinder for many of us. Her contributions to the Task Force on Barriers to Women in the Public Service are well known to all of us in this room. This address is in her honour.

Tonight, I would like to share with you some thoughts about the challenges ahead on the road to equality between men and women. But before I do, I would like to spend a few minutes in reminding us of the progress that has already been made because of the courage and determination of people like Jean Edmonds.

My speech will first of all address women in Canadian society, and I am sure it will come as no great surprise that I will then speak of women in the federal public service.

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WOMEN IN CANADIAN SOCIETY

In Canadian society, we have come a long way in our journey toward equality. This progress is a tribute to the men and women who, throughout the years, have made the personal contributions and personal sacrifices that have brought us closer to the goal of equality. They are the unsung heroes in this cause of equality — the fathers and mothers who encourage their daughters toward higher education, the colleagues and co-workers who truly believe in equality and act accordingly, the spouses and family members who in their daily lives shoulder their fair share of family responsibilities so that all members can achieve their full potential.

It is important to recognize and celebrate these small successes because over time they are the most durable. They also give us the energy and courage to go further.

PROGRESS TO DATE

Women and Employment

One of the most remarkable trends in Canadian society has been the growing participation of women in the paid labour force over the past 30 years. Not only have they increased their participation, they have also increased their range of occupations:

- they are in management;
- they are in decision-making positions;
- they are in traditionally male-dominated professions.

As these changes take place, women's earnings are also increasing. In 1991, women employed on a full-time, full-year basis earned 70 percent of the earnings of their male counterparts. A long way still to equality you would say - but also a long way from the mere 59 percent recorded 15 years earlier.

Women and Education

The progress accomplished in the labour force has been largely the result of the gains women have made in higher education. Education has always been the way up and it will continue to be in the future. In 1992-93, women accounted for 52 percent of all full-time undergraduate university students in Canada, 46 percent of master's students and 35 percent of full-time doctoral students. These gains will ensure further progress in the labour force in the years to come.

Women and Decision Making

Equality is not only better representation in the labour force and better education. It is also the achievement of women's full representation and participation in political and economic decision making at all levels of Canadian society. There too, women have achieved many significant "firsts" over the last 10 years. In 1993 alone, Canada had its first woman prime minister, its first woman deputy prime minister and its first woman government leader in the Senate. The same year saw the first Aboriginal woman appointed to the Cabinet, the first Black woman elected to the House of Commons, and the first woman elected provincial premier. Each one of these steps matters. After the first step, come a second and a third, until eventually they become part of our culture. That is how real progress takes place.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Overall, if we look at the advances made in terms of employment, education and political representation, Canadian society has changed immensely. In Canadian society as a whole, we have made good progress over the last 15 years, and we should be proud of it. But in our celebration, we must not lose sight of the very serious challenges ahead. I would like to highlight three of them.

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Two Jobs

Over the next 15 years, I believe that the most important challenge of all toward gender equality will have to do with rethinking our family values and responsibilities. Over the last 15 years, women's gains in education helped us achieve substantial progress. Changes in the labour market, including legislative changes, have also helped create a more favourable work environment. But over the next 15 years, our approach to parenthood and family responsibilities will be the determining factor in further progress toward gender equality. We all have a role to play.

Family means different things to each of us, but we can all agree that it is an institution in flux. Today, in most cases, both parents are working. In 1990, 71 percent of parents with children under 19 years of age worked outside the home. This is a significant increase from 20 years earlier when only 30 percent did so.

Society continues to take it for granted that women are the primary caregivers in the family, despite the fact that many are also part of the paid workforce. In reality, many women have two jobs, one outside the home and another in the home. It is estimated by Statistics Canada that women do two-thirds of the unpaid work in Canada.

A 1995 Université du Québec à Montréal study entitled *Famille et travail: double statut...double enjeu pour les mères en emploi* has shown that women work an average of 70 hours a week in paid and unpaid jobs. They feel they do not have enough time for their children or themselves, or even for sleeping. Colleagues, let us be clear — women cannot be as successful in the labour market, they cannot achieve the same career opportunities and the same economic successes as their male counterparts under these conditions. True equality must start at home.

Aging Parents

There is a second trend which I find very worrisome for the future, and that is the responsibility for older or sick parents.

Based on Statistics Canada estimates, in addition to holding down jobs and, in many cases, raising children, one in four employed women also provides some care for elderly parents. The responsibility for elderly parents can be even more demanding and stressful than the care of young children.

As a society, we are restructuring our health care services. We are trying to ensure that senior citizens remain in their homes as long as possible. We are also reducing the length of stay of patients in hospitals in order to return them as quickly as possible to the comfort of their homes. But, as a society, we have yet to address the tough issues: Who will provide these services to our aging population and to the members of our families who require special care? Who will be home to look after older or sick parents when both spouses are at work and children are at school? What is the role of government, of the community, of the family and, more specifically, of women?

If women are expected to carry most of these responsibilities, equality will continue to be an impossible dream. Of necessity, women will find themselves in positions of lower responsibility and therefore lower pay. They will have access only to part-time, higher-risk and short-term jobs and, therefore, in the long term, will have less economic security.

As a society, our true commitment to gender equality will be seriously tested over the coming years.

Economic Dependence

According to Statistics Canada, the number of single-parent families has doubled in the last 20 years. Eighty-two percent of these families are headed by a single-parent mother who, more often than not, lives in poverty.

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In Canada, poverty is often a woman's lot. It can be seen when:

- a woman head of a household has neither the education nor the work experience to give her the economic independence she needs;
- a woman who, after having devoted years to support her family, finds herself alone and without an income — unpaid work having little value in the marketplace following the break-up of a family;
- a woman who, because of family commitments, only has access to low paying and part-time work.

The majority of all part-time jobs in Canada are held by women, 69 percent in 1994, a percentage that has changed little over the past two decades. More than half of these women would prefer full-time jobs if they could find one and if they had the time.

In summary, in the years to come the most important challenges to inequality will not only be fought in the workplace, but also in every household. This will be the next stage in the equality revolution and it will involve all of us — men and women.

WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Now let us turn to the Public Service. If Jean Edmonds were here with us today, she would have all kinds of stories to share about what it was like to work as a woman in the Public Service in years gone by. She would remind us that it was not very long ago — the 1950s — when women were forced out of government jobs when they got married. This was done to make room for men who had returned from the war.

She may have also added that in the 1970s, women entering the Public Service were still being told not to expect too much in the way of advancement. Of course their contributions would be valued, but they could not expect to hold the most senior positions in the Public Service. After all, the issues discussed at that level were of critical importance and the decisions affected all

Canadians. These attitudes were an impetus for women like Jean Edmonds to work even harder to remove barriers.

It was also in this period that more and more women, well-educated and well-trained professionals, began to progress through the ranks of the Public Service. These women transformed the workplace by expressing their personal styles as women and as women managers.

PROGRESS SINCE 1990

In 1990, *The Report of the Task Force on Barriers to Women in the Public Service* helped us focus on achieving further progress. The task force gave us four basic recommendations:

- take gender balance seriously;
- treat the lack of gender balance as a management problem, not a women's issue;
- take action on system improvements; and
- tackle the attitudes and the corporate culture.

So how have we done? As in Canadian society, we have seen steady improvement in the representation of women at the senior levels of the Public Service since the task force report was released in 1990. Some examples:

- Then, 17 percent of all deputy ministers of federal government departments were women. It's now 30 percent.
- Then, 11 percent of all heads of agencies appointed by the Governor in Council (including Crown corporations) were women. It's now 22 percent.
- Then, 9 percent of all assistant deputy ministers were women. It's now 15 percent.
- Then, 14 percent of the whole of the executive group were women. It's now 19 percent.

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Furthermore, women are being represented in non-traditional positions. In the Public Service, as in the political system, we also have our list of “firsts”:

- Louise Fréchette, the first woman deputy minister of the Department of National Defence.
- Jean McCloskey, the first woman to be appointed Deputy Minister of Natural Resources.
- Janet Smith, the first woman principal of the Canadian Centre for Management Development and our chairperson today.
- Mary Simon, the first Inuit woman to hold an ambassadorial position.
- Agnes Bishop, the first woman president of the Atomic Energy Control Board.

And 1 could go on...

Beyond achieving better representation, we have also improved our practices and our systems. For instance:

- The “Khaki Parachute” clause in the *Public Service Employment Act* has been repealed.
- Pension reform has benefited employees in part-time positions, most of whom are women.
- The non-harassment policy was recently revised to make it more effective.

There has been some tremendous progress made by individual departments and agencies. For example:

- The Canadian Centre for Management Development has a program to prepare members of employment equity groups for executive leadership at the highest levels of the Public Service.
- Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has helped 27 women make the transition from the support category to officer-level positions.

- Natural Resources Canada has established a project to increase the representation of women in technical and professional jobs.
- The Department of National Defence has an initiative to hire women for machine shop “helper” positions, designed to qualify them as machine shop operators within two years.

So we have made progress since 1990. We should not forget that these gains have been made during a time of restraint and cut-backs to the public service. We have done well. But, as is the case in society at large, more must be done. Once again, let me mention three challenges that lie ahead.

THE FUTURE CHALLENGES

Representing Canadian Society

First, the Public Service is an institution unlike any other because it serves all Canadians. Affirmative action for us is not simply a program or a policy, it is a necessity. To serve Canadians well, the Public Service must represent Canadian society as a whole. It must be composed of men and women from across the country — men and women of different ethnic origins, with different backgrounds and different experiences.

We have achieved much progress without using crude instruments such as hiring quotas, even in a period of downsizing. Our way has been to create an environment that provides opportunities for all — this must continue to be our way.

In the coming years, we will see the end of downsizing and, at the same time, we will be actively recruiting to replenish our ranks at all levels as large groups of employees are preparing to retire. This will give us an unprecedented opportunity to change the demographic profile of the Public Service of Canada and to progress toward our goal of better representing the Canadian population. We cannot miss such an opportunity to make further progress.

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Transforming the Work Environment

Second, we must continue to transform our work environment to make it more open to women. In spite of the progress I have described, many women in the Public Service continue to find that they are facing a hostile environment that is insensitive to their needs.

We have made many changes to systems and legislation. Women are moving forward. But the whole area of attitudes and values is one that needs our attention.

Parental Responsibilities

Third, I would like to address public servants and their parental responsibilities.

The pressures on Canadian families which I mentioned previously are equally important for our employees. We must assist our employees to fulfil their parental responsibilities in a more equitable manner.

Our work environment expects women to use their parental leave to care for their family's needs. I am surprised that many men are concerned about the reaction that a similar request for family-related leave would incite in their work environment. Equality requires a change of attitude vis-à-vis both men and women, particularly when it comes to family responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

As I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, this is International Women's Week and Friday, March 8, is International Women's Day. It is a time to celebrate women's accomplishments and progress made toward equality. It is also a time to focus on future actions. Much remains to be done.

The theme selected by the Government of Canada for, this year's International Women's Day is *Strategies for Equality: Managing Change*. It reflects the situation facing Canadians in these times of globalization, restructuring and technological change.

Maintaining the momentum towards the equality of women in the face of deep and ongoing societal change will be an important goal in the years ahead. There can be no going back. The progress that we have made must be protected. Further progress is up to us.

Note biographique

Mme Jocelyne **Bourgon** a été nommée Greffier du Conseil privé et Secrétaire du Cabinet en mars 1994.

De 1975 à 1989, elle a occupé divers postes d'importance croissante au ministères des Pêches et Océans et de l'Expansion industrielle régionale, au Bureau des relations fédérales-provinciales et au ministère de l'Énergie, des Mines et des Ressources.

Mme **Bourgon** a été nommée sous-ministre de la Consommation et **des Affaires** commerciales en 1989. Par la suite, elle a occupé les postes de secrétaire associée et de secrétaire du Cabinet pour les relations fédérales-provinciales. Plus récemment, elle a été présidente de l'Agence canadienne de développement international et sous-ministre des Transports.

Mme **Bourgon** a fait ses études à l'Université de Montréal et à l'Université d'Ottawa.

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