

Cheap at Half the Price: The History of the Fight for Equal Pay in BC

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Labour histories of British Columbia have ignored the participation of women in the paid labour force until after World War Two and have created the impression that their earlier role was limited to supporting the struggles of men. Before women could mobilize around the issue of equal pay for work of equal value, they first had to establish their right to be in the paid labour force at all, their right to a wage which would permit them, at minimum, to support themselves, and their right to both of the above without regard to their status as daughters, mothers or wives.

In spite of all our apparent progress, many of the problems faced by the women who worked outside their homes for wages in the factories and sweatshops which sprang up on the English landscape at the dawn of the industrial revolution are the same as those encountered by women paid workers today. "Experience has shown how difficult it is, at a time of chronic and growing unemployment and underemployment, to ensure women's right to work on a footing of equality."¹ The right of women to participate in paid labour, regardless of their personal status or the state of the economy, and the right to a wage which reflects the work done rather than an attribute of the worker are still far from certain, in spite of increased unionization and supportive legislation.

The development of the idea of equal pay for work of equal value with particular reference to the history of women paid workers in BC from 1900 to the present is outlined here. The underlying assumption used is that Western societies have a patriarchal tradition which has established the relationship of women to all social institutions including the workforce. To posit a patriarchal society does not mean to imply that men have in the past, or are now, actively conspiring to keep the reins of power out of the hands of women, but rather that such a society is one in which men have

Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro, Ed., *Not Just Pin Money*
Victoria: Camosun College, 1984

institutionalized access to power, while women do not. From this perspective, an explanation of women's inequality is based on social attitudes and structures and all women are grouped together vis-a-vis power regardless of individual circumstances or capabilities. This reflects the reality of the position of women in relation to access to power for all of recorded history. Grouping women together in this way allows an assessment of events in the province's history in terms of whether they have furthered the formal access of women to economic power, which is undoubtedly the goal of the fight for equal pay.

Other models, particularly those which divide women into sub-groups based on the material wealth of male relatives, obscure this central theme because they imply that women appended to powerful men have power themselves. *All* women share the fact of their own relationship to institutionalized power remaining essentially untouched by the power of the men around them.

The second subject of this essay is the position of the Trade Union Movement in BC on the equal pay issue. Unions have played a contradictory role. On the one hand they have supported equal pay for equal work as a means of removing women from competition with men, but, at the same time, they have kept the issue alive by including it in formal statements of principles and by publicizing the less than living wage which most women paid workers earned. It is evident that the Trade Union Movement has not yet made its greatest contribution to the equal pay issue and will not do so until women achieve positions of influence within their unions.

Women paid workers in British Columbia from 1900-1920 gained wider acceptance: "The right of the woman worker to earn a living wage under conditions conducive to good health and morals is receiving growing recognition in an ever-widening circle of communities."² In Canada in 1901, over sixty percent of all women paid workers were segregated into only three occupations: servant, dressmaker and teacher. By 1911, the situation in Vancouver was not much different. Here, forty-two percent of women paid workers were domestic servants, twenty-three percent were stenographers, teachers, nurses or other professionals, and a third group, seventeen percent, were saleswomen or office employees (See Table 1.) In the city of Vancouver, there were 7,868 women paid workers in 1911, almost a quarter of whom were immigrants - new arrivals to Canada.³ Rosenthal points out many of these women were "...imported specifically to be domestic servants by organizations such as the Salvation Army".⁴ An important consequence of this extreme job segregation was that it effectively barred women from union membership because it denied them access to the scarce skills which formed the basis of bargaining power at that time. For this reason, very few of the women who worked in Vancouver for wages in those early days were organized. Even when they were initially successful at organizing, their continued existence was often tenuous because unions were not yet recognized under the law. In fact, a generous estimate indicates that less than four and a half percent of them were union members.⁵

The choice of an occupation was narrowed still further for independent

women, since not all of the jobs open to them paid a living wage. William Christianson, manager of the Fifteen Cent Store in Victoria, testified before the Provincial Royal Commission on Labour that the women who worked in his store could not live on the wages they earned which were \$4.50 to \$6.00 per week.⁶ As women were expected either to marry, or to remain in their fathers' or brothers' households, there appeared to be no reason to consider paying them a decent wage. A number of unsubstantiated beliefs served to justify the low wages of women workers. These included the ideas that women were always taken care of by men, had a lower standard of comfort than men, ate less, and spent less on the luxuries such as alcohol and tobacco, and that women worked for pin money or supplementary wages.⁷ The existence of independent women, some of whom supported dependents, was not taken into account.

Table 1: WOMEN PAID WORKERS, VANCOUVER, 1911

Industry	# Workers		% of Total
Domestic Service	2,720		42%
Professional			
-Stenographers	604		
-Teachers	357		
-Nurses	242		
-Others	281		
	1,484	1,484	23%
Trade & Merchandising			
-Saleswomen	548		
-Office Employees	292		
-Others	235		
	1,075	1,075	17%
TOTAL		6,452	82% ¹

Source:

Calculated from Rosenthal, 1979: 41.

¹100% of women paid workers in Vancouver in 1911 = 7,868.

Many women worked as domestics, to keep at least a roof over their heads. Many others, however, worked as prostitutes on a full or part-time basis. Alderman Dodd of New Westminster, speaking at Commission hearings on behalf of the Trades and Labour Council stated that his business sometimes took him into "the restricted district" of the city. He said:

On several occasions I asked [the women] what caused them to descend to that life, and almost without

exception, the answer has been that they could not make enough money in the stores where they were employed to live respectably. I believe that [this] is the chief cause of women leading a life of prostitution.⁸

This link between low wages and prostitution was later to strike a responsive chord in a society extremely concerned with the moral purity of its female members, but incidents such as the Cigar Stands Controversy demonstrate that moral concerns were often completely insensitive to the economic and social needs of the women. The Cigar Stands Controversy began in early February 1914, when a man was convicted in Vancouver Police Court for showing an "indecent" photograph to a young women employed in a downtown Cigar Stand. It was ignited by an editorial in *The Sun* which pronounced his one year jail sentence as "too severe".⁹ A more appropriate action, the editor suggested would be to ban women from further employment in cigar stands. Three days later, the Board of Licence Commissioners for the city passed an order to this effect, and *The Sun* voiced its approval by noting that it was "...contrary to the moral good of the public that girls should fill these positions."¹⁰ Women thrown out of work by the Board's ruling appeared before Commissioners at a special meeting to appeal the decision. A shocking revelation was that many of them not only worked in the cigar stands, but also owned them. They created a stir by threatening to publicly horsewhip the editor unless their jobs and businesses were restored. Although the Board did not appear anxious to pursue the matter, *The Sun* continued its public outcry.¹¹ By mid-March a compromise had been hammered out, and cigar stand proprietors were advised that they could "...hire only male help should one of the girls voluntarily resign".¹²

Women were fighting not only for the right to a living wage and the right to own a business, but also for the right to work outside the home. When their lives did not correspond to the approved pattern of husband, home and family, they had no choice but to challenge an ideal of womanhood which portrayed them as too frail and vulnerable to participate in the dirty worlds of paid work and politics, and too difficult to protect when they ventured away from home.

Women paid workers did not have a collective base from which to articulate their concerns. At the hearings of the Royal Commission on Labour, it was trade union men, as well as middle class women's groups, who decided that a minimum wage law would solve the low wage problems of women paid workers and who accordingly petitioned for it. In spite of the fact that the majority of women paid workers at the time received less than the three dollars per day wage that the Commission considered necessary for human existence, the recommendation of a minimum wage law for women was rejected. The commissioners believed that such a law would have "...a ruinous effect upon the industrial activities of the province".¹³ They said that, if the public felt strongly that women and girls were underpaid, they should boycott offending establishments.

Lobbying continued. The spectre of women turning to lives of prostitution and crime because they could not live on the wages paid in more respectable occupations proved far too real for British Columbians to

continue to ignore. The reformist provincial Liberals, elected with the help of vigorous organizing by women, enacted the first women's minimum wage legislation only three years later in 1918. Following its passage in the House, a Vancouver newspaper commented:

The most interesting feature of the measure is the calm way in which it ignores what was until very recently an axiom - the right of the employer to run his business as suited himself.

The principle, if it can be called a principle, is one of the many things being tossed into the discard by social advancement.¹⁴

Between 1918, when it was first appointed, and 1923, the Minimum Wage Board held conferences to establish minimum wages in a variety of industries within its jurisdiction. The Act defined the minimum wage as one which should be "adequate to supply the necessary cost of living". It covered only female employees eighteen years and over, and empowered the Board to set a lower minimum wage for those who were under eighteen years, for apprentices, and for women who were "physically defective" or inexperienced. Many women paid workers were not covered by the Act because it did not apply to domestic workers, fruit pickers, farm labourers, bank workers or federal employees. Another flaw was its underlying assumption in the determination of the minimum wage, that an independent woman had only herself to support. The Act was far from ideal. Nevertheless, within its own limited sphere, it raised the wages of most of the women paid workers it covered, and established in legislation their right to a living wage.

A criticism of the legislation has been that unionization would in the long term, have been more effective. This criticism assumes that increased unionization was a realistic option at the time. But, in view of the tiny number of organized women workers and their marginal position within the labour movement, the choice of legislation rather than unionization was logical because the entire social order had to be altered through a change in the existing balance of power between the sexes. Considered in this way, the achievement of minimum wage legislation by women, for some among those who worked for wages outside their homes, was a victory. Its effect reached beyond the right to a living wage and paved the way for the expansion of the idea of equal pay for equal work.

The concept of equal pay for equal work has long been recognized within the Trade Union Movement. In the USA, the first constitution of the Knights of Labour espoused the principle of equal pay for equal work in 1878. In Canada, a similar endorsement of the principle came from the Toronto Trades and Labour Council in 1882, and the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress in 1915 (See Figure 1).

Within the male-based Trade Union Movement, there was a fundamental belief that employers would never hire women if they were compelled to pay them the same wages as men, so certain were they that women could never deliver "equal work". Rathbone suggested that "equal pay for equal work" was exploited by trade unionists as an effective way of excluding women from the paid workforce "...while appearing as the

champions of equality between the sexes.”¹⁵

Unions wanted women out of the paid labour force because they were taking jobs away from men. Yet the segregation of women into low wage job ghettos, the original means of maintaining male dominance in a wage economy, was producing an unforeseen consequence. It created a large reserve of cheap, efficient labour which capitalists/employers could not resist using to increase their profits, or to cut the costs involved in expansion. White says: “Not only were the employers’ profits increased by cheap female labour, they often depended upon it.”¹⁶

Figure 1

A PARTIAL CHRONOLOGY OF THE EQUAL PAY CONCEPT

1878	Knights of Labour, USA. First Constitution espouses principle of equal pay for equal work.
1882	Toronto Trades & Labour Council. First platform of principles includes equal pay for equal work.
1915	Canadian Trades & Labour Congress. Platform of principles amended to include equal pay for equal work for men and women.
1919	International Labour Organization, Treaty of Peace. Statement of principles includes equal remuneration for work of equal value.
1951	ILO Convention 100. Statement of principles includes equal remuneration for work of equal value for men and women.
1953	Equal Pay Act, British Columbia (SBC 1953, c.6). Provides for equal pay for men and women doing the same work in the same establishment.
1969	Human Rights Act, British Columbia (SBC 1969, c.10). Provides for equal pay for men and women “...for the same work or substantially the same work done in the same establishment.”
1973	Human Rights Act, British Columbia (SBC 1973, 2nd. Session, c.199). Provides that it is discriminatory to maintain different wages between men and women employed by the same employer for similar or substantially similar work.
1976-77	Canadian Human Rights Act, (SC 1976-77, c.33). Provides that it is discriminatory to maintain different wages between men and women in the same establishment who are performing work of equal value.
1983	Bill 27, Human Rights Act, British Columbia. Provides for equal pay for men and women employed by the same employer for similar or substantially similar work as did the Act it replaces. However, the power discretion and independence of the new council to administer the Act and investigate complaints under the Act is severely reduced. ¹

¹Negating legislation by giving the administering body inadequate staff is a common technique in British Columbia. Much of the early legislation affecting labour (in particular, the Factories Act) was plagued with this deficiency.

In the years between the wars, 1920-1939, "Merely to mention the topic of married women earning their living in the business world [was] certain to provoke a lively argument. So many people resent[ed] the right of such persons to draw salaries."¹⁷ Yet during the 1920s, both private industry and government in Canada modernized and expanded rapidly. As the right of young single women to paid employment gained wider acceptance, they left their fathers' households in increasing numbers to seek jobs and husbands in the growing urban centres. In 1921, women comprised fifteen and a half percent of the labour force over the age of ten across the country and, by 1931, it was seventeen percent.¹⁸ Although the increase seems small, the total number of women paid workers grew by thirty-six percent during the Twenties, a greater increase than that of either the preceding decade or the decade to follow.¹⁹ In the province of British Columbia there were 9,722 women paid workers of all ages in 1921; by 1929 this figure had grown to 20,766 and, by 1939, to 27,489 (See Table 2).

Table 2: WOMEN PAID WORKERS IN ALL INDUSTRIES,¹
BRITISH COLUMBIA, 1921 - 1955

Year	Under 18	18 & Over	Total
1921	1,130	8,592	9,722
1925	1,718	12,181	13,899
1929	2,376	18,390	20,766
1931	1,075	17,079	18,154
1935	1,199	18,735	19,934
1939	1,496	25,993	27,489
1941	2,292	31,912	34,204
1945	2,471	56,705	59,176
1949	- ²	-	61,874
1951	-	-	65,069
1955	-	-	70,776

Source: Minimum Wage Board/Industrial Relations Board *Reports*, 1921-1955.

¹These figures do not include domestic workers, fruit pickers, farm labourers, bank workers or federal employees, many of whom were women.

²After 1946 the breakdown by age was no longer reported.

If, as Ostry suggested, "...a group which participates more in the early years of working life, participates more at every subsequent age",²⁰ the increased rate of participation of married women in paid labour is accounted for. This participation grew from under four percent prior to 1941 to over eleven percent by 1951 and to more than twenty-two percent by 1961. "This is a far more dramatic increase than that exhibited by women as a whole."²¹ Although the Second World War stimulated women's labour force activity

for a short period, the above figures indicate that the two-phase working life cycle of women had its roots in this earlier period.

Through the Great Depression of the Thirties, the dilemma of married women paid workers became more than ever a focal point for social conflict. In the years of high unemployment, they were resented for occupying jobs unnecessarily, for women were supported by men. This social attitude had direct consequences; since their wages were considered to be supplementary, they were often the first workers to be laid off. The right of women to paid employment without regard to marital status was non-existent. The Report of the Minimum Wage Board of BC for 1933 observed that "most employers [were] alive to this oft-times unjust criticism of their policy of employing married women, and if the matter were probed it would be found that in almost every case valid reasons exist[ed] for their being on the pay-roll."²² Husbands and sons out of work or earning wages too small to support the family were cited by the Board as valid reasons for the paid employment of married women.

The issues of paid employment and equal pay were largely ignored by the Trade Union Movement during the 1920s and 1930s. Because the Trade Union Movement was comprised almost entirely of male workers, its stand on issues of concern to women workers was that which best served the issues of men. Although the number of women paid workers increased substantially during the period under consideration, the number of unionized women paid workers did not. The Minimum Wage Board summed up the attitudes which augured against the organization of women paid workers in the province:

As wage security is the basis of all security for workers, minimum wage legislation provides women and girls with this much-to-be-desired factor in their wage earning lives. As a class they have less experience in collective bargaining than men, and their mode of life is customarily unfavourable to co-ordinated protection.²³

With the number of women union members remaining small, the unions were largely unaware of and unresponsive to their needs. Hard economic times saw the unions attacked by antagonistic governments and employers, so they had little time and fewer resources to devote to a group of workers whom they had historically ignored. From the late 1930s on, the membership of women paid workers in unions gradually increased, as unions began organizing along industrial, rather than craft, lines.

The experience, that many of the women who entered paid employment in the Twenties had, was important. Its importance derived from the fact that these women were the first to experience economic independence in the climate of personal equality which prevailed in the years immediately following the winning of the right to vote. This heightened sense of personal equality, which resulted from political enfranchisement and economic independence shaped a generation's ideas about the place of women and led them back into paid employment as soon as their duties to their families were discharged. Single women and older married women's participation in paid labour did not threaten the patriarchal social order since family

responsibilities were not being interrupted. "The rationale for women's peculiar position in society has always been that their function as mothers is essential to the survival of the group and that the home is the essential nucleus of society as we know it."²⁴ Neither single women nor older married women were central to such a belief.

Women were accepted in the labour force in World War Two because "the attitude of government and the general public ...was that women had worked during the war because it was their patriotic duty, not because they had a right to work. Certainly not a right to the better wages of men's occupations."²⁵ The war years are often seen as a time of great change for women's participation in paid employment. Yet, despite an increase in their participation rate, particularly among those who were married, attitudes about women paid workers did not alter significantly during this wartime period.

Women were encouraged to enter the work force through an intense publicity campaign by the government which sought to convince them that it was their patriotic duty to take jobs outside their homes in order to help the war effort. The campaign notwithstanding, the real motivation for women workers did not correspond to the official emphasis on patriotism. Many women indicated that they were working out of a desire to supplement family income or from economic necessity. In one survey of married women, only nine percent of them reported that they were motivated to work by patriotic considerations.²⁶

The mobilization and recruitment of women conducted by the National Selective Service (NSS) and the Federal Department of Labour reflected a view of women as a large labour reserve "...to be dipped into more and more deeply as the labour pool dried up".²⁷ After the NSS was established in 1942, it first held a compulsory registration of females aged twenty to twenty-four, the main aim being to determine the number of single women available for work in order to ensure that women with children did not seek employment and could meet their family responsibilities. It is clear that officials still felt that a woman's place was in the home. The next phase of recruitment called upon childless married women to enter the full-time labour force. It was found that many women originally employed in lower paying service jobs were leaving them for higher paying employment in the war industries, necessitating the recruitment of previously unemployed females. By mid-1943, the NSS found that the labour pool of single women and childless married women had been exhausted and the traditionally lower paying sectors of the economy were crying out for help. It was only at this point that the NSS launched a campaign to recruit family women and, then, primarily for part-time employment.

This massive government intervention into the labour market in pursuit of wartime goals was accompanied by specific measures designed to encourage women to enter the workforce. These concessions were granted, however, only within the context of the war effort and were to remain in effect only for the duration of the war. The two most important measures were the establishment of government-supported child care facilities (in Ontario and

Quebec only), and an amendment to the Income War Tax Act in 1942 allowing a working woman's husband to claim the full married status exemption regardless of how much money his wife might earn. Both these incentives were withdrawn after the war to restrict married women's continued participation in the labour force.

As had happened during the First World War, the issue of equal pay for equal work surfaced as women began entering previously exclusive male occupations. Therefore, in 1941 the National War Labour Board was established and one of its responsibilities was the administration of the Orders-in-Council affecting wages and salaries.²⁸ The Wartime Wages Control Order of 1941 provided for continuation of the same basic wage rates as those in effect on November 15, 1941, and wages were to be determined on the basis of the job performed rather than on the sex of the individual worker. However, subsequent revisions to this particular order allowed for the establishment of new and lower paid occupational classifications for unskilled beginners, i.e. the newly hired women. Wartime regulations regarding equal pay were, unfortunately, not reinforced following the war by appropriate legislation.

As the end of the war approached, hostility towards female workers re-emerged. Fears were expressed within the trade unions that returning servicemen would not be able to reclaim their jobs. It became evident that women, (especially those who were married), had not yet established their right to work let alone a right to equal pay for equal work. As early as 1943, one delegate to the Trades & Labour Congress Convention stated that "...women have no business in industry, except in wartime. After the war women are going to be in competition with their fathers, sons and future husbands."²⁹ Women's war effort laid the basis for a more general acceptance of equal pay for equal work; nevertheless, the predominant view was that women should give way to the returning servicemen.

Such attitudes were not, however, shared by an increasing number of women whose real-life job experiences had led them to question their acceptance of beliefs about women and work. Because they had experienced new levels of personal and economic potential many were not willing to return to their pre-war activities. This growing reluctance to leave the workforce is reflected in the appearance of articles in popular publications, such as *Maclean's*.³⁰ They suggested that women deserved a fair share of the jobs, discussed women's fears that men would get preference after the war and argued the lack of any economic justification for such a policy. One survey³¹ found that women were divided about equally on whether or not they would want to keep working after the war ended, even if they married.

Another indication of the erosion of the traditional patriarchal ideology can be seen in the positions articulated by the National Council of Women (NCW). The Council had played an integral part in the running of the NSS and in the mobilization of women. They believed that women would prove their capabilities through action, if they were given the opportunity. They had espoused "equal pay for work of equal value in quantity and quality" for women since 1920,³² and felt that equal pay for women would

quickly follow if equal work were performed. As the war progressed, they became increasingly vocal in their support for equal pay for work of equal value for women in the armed forces and in industry. They campaigned for equal representation for women on post-war government committees.

The significance of the attitude articulated by the NCW is that it echoes not only the desire, but also the determination many women felt to gain control over their lives. The 1943 presidential address to the National Council of Women said: "We hear often, generally from men, the remark 'after the war women will go back to the kitchen'. Probably the reason for our aroused indignation is that we are in effect being told what we are to do, before we have been given the chance to express what we intend to do."³³

Although the seeds of discontent had been planted during World War Two, immediate post-war developments, such as the measures adopted within the federal civil service, reflected the still widely-held view that a woman's place was in the home. For example, job advertisements were posted which included the statement that "preference will be given to a qualified male applicant!"³⁴ The position of married women was especially precarious. The restriction that those who worked for the civil service were obliged to resign unless they were self-supporting, originally imposed in 1921, was lifted during World War Two, but it was reinstated near the war's close in 1944. Between 5,000 and 7,000 women were laid off.³⁵ The outcome of all these reversals in policy was that by 1946 women made up only 22.7% of the labour force, down from 31.4% in 1945.³⁶ In summary, the official policy reflected a widespread assumption "...that women are a reserve army which can be called up when the supply of men is short and which will retreat without question when they are no longer needed".³⁷

At the close of World War Two women had not yet established their right to work regardless of their economic situation or personal status. The right to equal pay for equal work had been established only within a very narrow scope, and support for even its limited application dwindled in the post-war period. However, there was a growing conviction among women that their capacity to perform equal work, given the opportunity, entitled them to an equitable wage, providing the foundation for the movement for equal pay for work of equal value.

"...[F]or Canadian women wage earners seeking pay equity, the theme of their story is 'Waiting for Godot'."³⁸ In the years immediately following World War Two, equal pay continued to elude women workers. The NCW *Annual Report* for 1947 reflected its disillusionment that no progress on this issue was forthcoming. "The male world," it said, "shows a marked solidarity against women's attempts to enter a domain where men at present enjoy a monopoly position."³⁹

After the war and through the early 1950s, union membership in Canada, and particularly in British Columbia, grew steadily. In British Columbia, in 1956 and 1957 alone, union membership increased by 20.9%. Just over fifty-five percent of the total number of paid workers in the province were members of unions at the close of 1957, an all time high.⁴⁰

The quest for equal pay received formal recognition in 1951 when the

International Labour Organization adopted the Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100). More than thirty years later, Convention 100 is still a landmark in the equal pay struggle. It reads as follows:

This Convention promotes the application of the principle of equal remuneration regardless of sex for work of equal value. In order to devise the means for assessing the value of work, it is proposed that measures be taken to promote the appraisal of jobs on the basis of work to be performed. The principle of equal pay for work of equal value may be applied either by national laws, legally established or recognized machinery for fixing wages, collective agreements, or by a combination of these methods.⁴¹

Canada did not ratify this convention until November 16, 1972 (See Figure 1). Convention 100 is a major milestone in the equal pay struggle because it has raised many questions about the nature and determination of value. It advocated the appraisal of jobs on the basis of work performed as the measure of value. This assumed that such a measure of value can be objectively applied to any job.

A more complex dimension of 'equal value' has emerged following the development and application of specific job evaluation tools. The meaning of value has historically been related to the market value of an individual's labour, and the determination of a 'fair' wage has been predicated on inter-occupational comparisons. The utility of the 'skill, effort and responsibility' model is that it theoretically permitted cross-occupational comparisons like the comparison of duties of 'inside' clerical workers with those of 'outside' maintenance workers.

Critiques of existing job evaluation systems suggest that both the items selected for evaluation and the rating attached to them reflect the same biases they were intended to eradicate. This means that job duties performed mainly by women would be undervalued by a system which is considered by its users to be objective.⁴² This new dimension is fundamentally radical because it has the potential to alter the understanding of the meaning and value of an individual's labour.

Now, unions are beginning to play a major role in the struggle for equal pay. The 1960s saw the rapid unionization of public sector employees, many of whom were women. As of January 1, 1982, there were an estimated 457,000 women paid workers in the British Columbia labour force, 34.9% of whom were union members.⁴³ On a nationwide basis, at least half of all women paid workers are single, divorced, widowed or the sole supporter of their families. Many of these female-led families live below the poverty line because the wages of women workers are substantially lower than those of men. In 1981, full-time female paid workers on the average earned sixty percent of what their male counterparts earned (See Table 3).

Equalization of base wage rates as a first step toward equal pay for work of equal value represents a new approach by trade unions in BC to this issue. During 1981 'equal base rates' was a successful strike issue for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Vancouver Municipal &

Regional Employees Union (VMREU) in several areas of the province. Major breakthroughs on equal base rates were achieved by Steelworkers at Cominco in Trail and Office & Technical Employees Union (OTEU) members at BC Hydro during the same year.⁴⁴

**Table 3: COMPARISON OF AVERAGE WEEKLY WAGES OF WOMEN
& MEN IN BRITISH COLUMBIA FROM 1918-1955**

Year	Women ¹	Men ²	Women's Wages As a Percent of Men's
1918	\$13.88	27.97	49.62%
1920	17.36	31.51	55.09
1925	17.38	27.82	62.47
1930	17.37	28.64	60.65
1935	14.96	24.09	62.10
1940	15.55	28.11	55.32
1945	20.24	38.50	52.57
1950	28.98	51.88	55.86
1955	38.04	70.47	53.98

¹ Average weekly earnings of women over 18 were collected from Reports of the Minimum Wage Board of BC for the appropriate years. Excluded are the wages of domestic workers, farm labourers, fruit pickers, bank workers and federal employees.

² Average weekly earnings of male industrial workers from 1918 to 1947 are found in the Annual Report of the Department of Labour (BC) for 1947, p.12. Remaining figures were collected from the Department's Annual Reports for the appropriate years.

A sociological model of patriarchy or gender-based stratification is a useful way of viewing the historical development of a politically active women's labour movement. Perhaps this will aid in the development of a specifically women's history by focusing on women's struggles against capitalism, patriarchy, and the intersection of the two, within women's own experience.

While this is not an alternative to a class analysis, specific gender oppression is articulated by an overlying class grid, and there remains an historical reality which is specifically female.⁴⁵ Lerner says: "The ongoing and continuing contribution of women to the development of human culture cannot be found by treating them only as victims of oppression."⁴⁶

In rediscovering women's history, the struggles and actions of women are the central focus. If, as Rowbotham says, feminism is by definition the experience of one sex,⁴⁷ so then must feminist history represent the historical truth of women's struggle against their oppression, both capitalist and

patriarchal. Women's involvement in the workforce is an ongoing struggle for equality. That struggle, of course, has taken various forms at different times before it evolved into the contemporary issue of equal value. The right even to have employment, and the struggles for a wage which did not enforce a heterosexual/patriarchal dependence, are not all in the past but they were and are the necessary prior conditions for an equal and equitable wage for women today.

Footnotes

1. Shirley Carr, "Women's Year - Union Role" *Canadian Labour*, Vol. 20, no. 2 (1975): 6 & 34.
2. *Annual Report of the British Columbia Department of Labour* (1921): 57.
3. Star Rosenthal, "Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver 1900-1915" *BC Studies*, no. 41, (1979): 40.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*: 41-45. This figure was calculated from Rosenthal's discussion.
6. *Proceedings of the British Columbia Royal Commission on Labour, 1912-1914*: 427-441, Public Archives of British Columbia (hereafter PABC).
7. Eleanor F. Rathbone, "The Remuneration of Women's Services" *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 27 (1917): 60.
8. *Proceedings, op. cit.*: 201.
9. *The Vancouver Sun*, February 9, 1914: 6.
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11. *Ibid.*, February 19, 1914: 4 & February 24, 1914: 6.
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