

## **Women in the Profession: Universities and Beyond**

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I would like first to present some anecdotes about my early experiences as a statistician, then talk about some of the changes in working conditions over the years that affect many women, not just demographers, and finally describe what I see as some of the challenges that remain.

My first inkling that women might really be treated differently came when I was a graduate student in 1971 and was pregnant with my second child. Much to the surprise of the faculty, I refused a teaching assistantship for the fall term (the baby was due in early November). My refusal was seen as a sign that I was not seriously committed to learning, and I was threatened with the loss of my scholarship for the following year. In the end, the scholarship was not an issue as I left university to work after completing only one year of doctoral studies.

There is an interesting postscript to this. During my first year of work, I returned to the university to visit. A former professor asked when I was going to stay home and raise my family — this, after spending six years at university, missing two weeks of classes when my first child was born and ten days with the second. I was so surprised by the question I don't even remember my response.

Another incident had occurred earlier, when I was working as a summer student at a steel company. My job was to chart production processes. I asked on several occasions if I could tour the mill so that I could understand what I was doing (my husband was working in another area as a summer student, and he had been shown around more than once.) My requests were always put off. Finally, at the end of the summer, my supervisor explained I couldn't see the plant, because men weren't ready for women on the shop floor!

The last anecdote I want to recount occurred early in my career at Statistics Canada. In 1975, a colleague and I carried out a study comparing university salaries of men and women. We were able to control for qualifications, experience, rank and field of study. While the overall gap

between men and women declined when such factors were controlled for, the major finding was that women in all groups earned less than men.

For those of you working in universities, this may not be a revelation. However, at the time, management considered the study too controversial, and it was not published. The decision not to publish likely reflected the conservative position of Statistics Canada at the time with respect to analytical studies in general, rather than a particular bias against women. Nevertheless, the experience was both frustrating and disappointing for a young analyst.

I would now like to turn to some more positive thoughts, namely, some of the structural changes that have occurred in the workplace during the past 20 years that enable women to participate more fully in the wage economy.

The first area where there have been changes is the hiring process. On leaving university twenty years ago, I was asked the question "Can you type?" when being interviewed for a job. Even though I had spent six years at university and earned two degrees in mathematics, employers assumed I was a candidate for a clerical position! I firmly believe that the world is different for women now, and that those hiring assume that women university graduates are interested in professional positions. There are other changes too. For example, in my department, it is now policy that a woman must sit on every selection board.

There have been enormous changes in working conditions in the federal government in the past two decades, making it easier for women (and men) to combine family and work responsibilities. These changes include flexible hours, part-time work, leave for family-related responsibilities and child-rearing leave. There are now child-care centres in some government workplaces. However, the extent to which individuals are able to avail themselves of these benefits and opportunities depends on the individual corporate culture. Further, women who choose to work part-time for family reasons may be seen as unprofessional.

Finally, there is increased awareness in the workplace that sexist remarks and behaviour are not acceptable. This may in part be the result of more women being in positions of responsibility. However, knowing that sexist comments are not acceptable without understanding why they are not appropriate may have the effect of driving sexist behaviour underground.

It may then emerge in more subtle forms of discrimination. While there have been changes, the battle is not yet won.

What then can women in demography contribute? I have three observations that are relevant for those working outside universities.

First, there is the challenge of balancing high-quality professional work with a feminist perspective. These should not be incompatible, but interesting situations can occur. For example, Margrit Eichler mentioned Marilyn Waring's work *If Women Counted*. I appreciate the need to measure the unpaid contribution of women to society. However, we need to do so in such a way that existing statistical series are not jeopardized. The measurement and data collection problems are real and present a complex and worthy challenge.

Second, women demographers can bring a different perspective to both the selection and interpretation of topics for analysis. Questions of demography (fertility, family formation and dissolution) are issues that touch women directly. Sessions such as the joint session on Demographic Change: Implications for Feminist Issues are encouraging. Too often I have listened to male demographers speculate about why women aren't having babies. By drawing on their different — and broader-based — life experience, women can contribute to a more complete understanding of issues. One example of such a challenge occurred in the discussion of social networks. The standard assumption is that larger networks are better than smaller ones. This assumption does not take into account the quality of the network or individual differences in need for support.

Finally, an area that will always need close scrutiny is the use of language. This is true for communication both with others in the field and with non-researchers. I became particularly sensitive to this issue while working on *Canadian Social Trends*. In many cases, terms used in the field (e.g. positive fertility or advanced childbirth) have attached to them other, perhaps unintentional, nuances. These nuances can unfortunately convey inappropriate messages, and these messages often have to do with women's role in society.

In sum, in all their research endeavours, women demographers face exciting and important opportunities. These opportunities encompass the entire research process from selecting topics to challenging underlying

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assumptions to presenting results to reviewing the work of others. I trust we are all up to the challenge!

*References*

Waring, M. 1988. *If Women Counted*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row.

Received October, 1991; revised July, 1992.