



UNIONS: Coming on board with progressive initiatives

– By Ashley Turner

When mentioning “gender equity” around the CEO of a natural resource company, often he or she will exclaim, “I don’t need to worry about that. There are lots of women working for our company, including in management!” When asked which departments and positions these women tend to be employed in, however, the answer is generally consistent with traditionally female-dominated occupations.

Women in Newfoundland and Labrador represent 99 per cent of secretaries and 75 per cent of clerical staff. Moreover, in terms of management, they tend to face glass ceilings in rising above middle management positions, and are most often found in human resources (HR) management roles.

The issue with the concentration of women in a narrow range of female-dominated fields is that 36 per cent of all employed women in the province are working in low-paying traditional occupations, while only two per cent of them are working in high-paying non-traditional occupations. In comparison to their high representation in administrative and HR positions, women represent only three per cent of those working in

construction trades, while approximately six per cent of contractors and supervisors in trades and transportation are women.

These numbers alone are often not alarming to those who believe that this distribution is beginning to change with increased female enrollment in university and college programs. However, although women represent about 60 per cent of the province’s university population, they tend to account for only around 20 per cent of those in applied science and engineering programs. While this statistic may cause some eyes to widen, the more jaw-dropping fact is that women represent approximately 47 per cent of those enrolled in college programs, but are only three per cent of students in skilled trades programs, three per cent of apprentices in non-traditional trades, and less than one per cent of journeymen in industrial trades.

The alarmingly low representation of women in non-traditional training programs and occupations has negative implications both for their economic stability and for the stability of the province’s workforce, which is facing forecasted skilled labour shortages. Because of this, gover-

ment, industry, educational institutions, community organizations and several unions have developed positive initiatives aimed at increasing women’s representation in these fields. However, many unions appear to be a little slower than other stakeholders to come on board with such initiatives.

Progressive Initiatives

For many years, several community organizations have been pushing for the presence of gender equity plans for large-scale natural resource industry projects. In 2001, Women in Resource Development Corporation (WRDC) intervened in the White Rose Project approval process, outlining its concerns about earlier projects – such as Hibernia, in which women represented less than five per cent of those employed during the construction and production phases. WRDC insisted that the commissioner and the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board (CNLOPB) intervene to address the under-representation of women in the province’s petroleum industry. Among their recommendations, WRDC suggested that the CNLOPB require all major proponents in the project to

submit a benefits plan outlining training and employment outcomes for the women of the province. The committee recommended that the proponents should be required to include gender equity outcomes with measurable milestones in their human resources plan, while also including this commitment to gender equity as a criterion for achieving bids put forth to tenders.

In response to such recommendations, the White Rose Project Decision Report, released by the CNLOPB in 2001, included a requirement that Husky Energy submit a report of their gender equity initiatives for approval by the Board. In 2003, Husky Energy prepared and submitted the White Rose Project Diversity Plan. Since then, Husky Energy has become a leader in diversity through their implementation of progressive initiatives. Now, with upcoming major projects such as Hebron and Hibernia South, other industry companies are developing similar initiatives.

The benefits agreement signed between the provincial government and the proponents of the Hebron Project signified a new era in employment equity in the province. A gender equity and diversity program will be developed and implemented for all phases of this project. This is progressive on the part of the companies involved, as well as on the part of the provincial government, which, in its Energy Plan, states a requirement that all large-scale project proponents within its jurisdiction include employment plans for women that address employment equity.

Coming on Board

In addition to their agreements with industry, the provincial government has collaborated with several unions on initiatives to increase female participation in non-traditional occupations. In 2006, they signed a \$200,000 contract with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) to increase the number of women in electrical trades. Through the development of a mentorship program and the pairing of female students in their first year of



apprenticeship with employers, the IBEW has been successful in creating some positive employment equity initiatives.

Similarly, the provincial government signed a \$100,000 contract with the Regional Council of Carpenters, Millwrights and Allied Workers to

establish the Office to Advance Women Apprentices. As Gail Hickey, the Executive Director of the Office explains, “The Office was established to address the need to create a dedicated and focused effort to work with unions, employers and government to reduce barriers that women face when

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they enter the non-traditional trades.” In relation to the recent collective agreement between the building trade unions and the operator of the Long Harbour Nickel Processing Facility to establish a Diversity Committee, Hickey says, it “demonstrates a real commitment by the unions and Vale Inco to provide meaningful opportunities to under-represented people in the construction sector.”

Slower Than Others

Despite the progressive employment equity initiatives that several unions have implemented, many unions appear to be slower than others to come on board. This is in part because of the history of many trade unions, which are often longstanding and were established at a time when the traditional roles of men and women were quite pronounced and rigid. These traditional ideals often became embedded in the systemic policies and procedures of unions, whose deep-rooted nature render change a slow and gradual process. The traditional beliefs and attitudes associated with these ideals often act as a barrier for women attempting to become a member of trades unions. This is exemplified in a recent case of a woman who graduated at the top of

her class and was denied union membership by a particular union, while her male classmate was accepted into the same union. Similarly, the emphasis placed on seniority in unions also acts as a barrier for women who are seeking union membership – particularly since women are new to the sector.

As an employment assistance service (EAS) coordinator with WRDC, Christine Gill works closely with women who have completed their training in non-traditional skilled trades programs and are aiming to become members of unions, with the ultimate goal of finding employment.

“Most of the women that I see are just out of school and have contacted unions. Some of their experiences have been good, some not so good,” Gill explains. “For example, one of my clients approached a union and was told that it would be best if she would not join right now because they have so many members who would get employment before her due to seniority; she was discouraged by this. Females are often way down at the bottom of the seniority list.”

Elva Harris, another EAS coordinator with WRDC says that in addition to seniority, “it appears as though industry and unions need to

have more communication with each other because industry has gender equity goals that they are seeking to fulfill, and in order to do that unions need to be on board.” She says many of the recent graduate clients that she sees are not aware of who their union is or how to contact them. Therefore, she suggests, “Perhaps there also needs to be more communication between post-secondary institutions and unions to raise awareness and properly educate students about union processes.”

It’s clear that in order to keep up with other stakeholders, many unions need to speed up the wheels of change and come on board with progressive employment equity initiatives. In order to be properly and fully implemented, these initiatives require collaboration between unions, government, industry, educational institutions and community organizations.



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