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# Engaging Young Women Activists From the Grass Roots Up

Sheena Hanley

This is an excerpt of a presentation made by Sheena Hanley at the Women's Issues Symposium held in Toronto, February 10-11, 2009. The symposium was jointly sponsored by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF), Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF), and Ontario Teachers Insurance Plan (OTIP).

**M**any things have changed since my job for the union (as school representative for the Educational Institute of Scotland) was to open the mail at school and distribute it to the other teachers. Over those years we have had successes. Progress, yes. Equity, no. It can be discouraging to have to keep tackling the same issues over and over again.

As I reflected on what women were working to attain and why union membership was important for me early in my career, it surprised me that today's issues are so similar. Young women teachers starting out in their careers need professional support to help them do the quality of work they want to accomplish, and they need to be sure that the bread-and-butter issues of salaries, pensions and working conditions are being improved. They still need leaves of absence at certain periods of their lives and they can be helped by good mentors. We have made progress on some of the issues, but much remains to be done.

We take salary scales, pension plans and maternity leave for granted now, but these are still only partial success stories. There is still discrimination built into the system and as organizations with a majority of women members, we must question the more subtle ways in which gender discrimination continues in the education sector.

In education, our salaries are no longer determined by whether we are male or female. I recall being really annoyed because the men on staff were paid more than the women. Married men were paid most, followed by single men – largely because they taught the senior grades in school, or so we were told. Single women were paid more than married women. The rationale was unspoken

but obvious – single women did not have someone who would support them financially; in other words a husband. The grades women teachers taught did not seem to be taken into account when it came to their salary. Married women received less salary than single women since not all people agreed they should be working and they were not the primary bread winner. This despite the fact that only a decade and a half earlier they had kept the education system running while men were off at war.

I came to Canada in 1960 only to find myself involved in a campaign for equality in the teachers' pension plan. Male teachers could leave their pension to dependents – women could not. We were not supposed to have dependents; we were supposed to be dependents. That was the first time I wore a button with a message on my lapel. The campaign theme of PENSION ENVY was emblazoned on it. I was chastised by some of my colleagues who did not believe it appropriate for a teacher's association to display such sentiments.

I was required to resign in 1967 when I was pregnant with my first child. Resignation was required by the end of the first trimester. There was no maternity leave and it was obvious that pregnant women were not acceptable in the classroom. We did not have the right to paid leave or the right to return to work with seniority rights. We now have some maternity and paternity leave provisions in Canada, and the International Labour Organization (ILO) certainly encourages governments to provide paid maternity leave.

In the mid to late seventies I was active in the provincial union in Québec that negotiated paid maternity leave and I well remember the union ratification meetings. Rejection of the agreement was promoted by some of our colleagues – both men and women – because they believed that the money that would pay for maternity leave should be applied to salaries to benefit all members of the union. The argument was that a member was a member and that no-one should receive any benefit that did not apply to all. I heard the same arguments when funds were needed for

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programs for women in the union movement, and I ask how many of you continue to hear such arguments when it comes to equity issues?

We take salary scales, pension plans and maternity leave for granted now, but these are still only partial success stories. There is still discrimination built into the system and as organizations with a majority of women members, we must question the more subtle ways in which gender discrimination continues in the education sector. The gendered nature of our profession in itself makes us subject to discrimination.

In Canada the pay gap between male and female workers is calculated by Statistics Canada to be 29%. Most jurisdictions have pay equity legislation and in education we have negotiated salary scales and provisions for leaves of absence. So how can discrimination be possible, you ask? We have to look at how work is valued when it is done mainly by women and at how salary grids were developed, since their roots lie in tradition. There are those who believe that, as with the salaries of nurses, the salaries in education are depressed because of the gender balance in the profession. I hope we now all recognize that the work done at different levels of education is different, but that none of the work is of lesser value. I firmly believe that the gendered nature of the profession has kept and will keep salaries in teaching and in nursing lower than salaries in professions that are predominantly male. It would also be interesting to look at disaggregate data on salary levels that would show which women are where on salary grids. Who are the majority of people doing supply teaching work, trying to get permanent contracts? I think we would find young women and women from designated groups in the majority.

We cannot look to the current federal government for understanding of these issues, since they obviously don't understand the difference between the right to collective bargaining and legislation governing pay equity. When it comes to the current government, some of the casualties we have already seen as far as benefits for women are concerned include:

- a national child care plan;
- the closure of 12 of 16 Status of Women Canada offices;
- the removal of the very word "equality" from the mandate of Status of Women Canada;
- removal of the Court Challenges Program that helped women and other minorities fight for their rights;
- the end of funding for the National Association of Women and the Law – a research advocacy group.

The concept of equal pay for work of equal value is in the sights of this government. The infamous economic update that almost brought the government down showed clearly what the government thinks of equal pay for work of equal value. Compare this with the first bill signed into law on January 29<sup>th</sup> by the new administration south of the border. A new law was enacted that makes it easier for women to sue employers for pay discrimination, and the President said he was proud to be upholding the first principle of the nation – that we are all created equal. We can dream or we can act, and I hope unions will continue to act on this issue in coalition with other groups. Please make sure we do not slide backwards.

Maternity leaves and leaves for elder care are still not fully paid. Women who take such leaves can finish up their careers with lower pensions, or they may have to work longer to be able to get the pension levels attained by those who did not need such a leave. Buying back years of service is not always possible at the time the leave is taken because of the impact on family income, and it becomes very expensive when it's done at a later date.

When men take a leave of absence it is often to pursue further academic qualifications that increase opportunities for promotion.

Single mothers in education also find themselves behind the eight ball since they are often unable to do much more than teach and raise their family. This is a growing segment of the population since we know the number of marriages that fall apart. There is nothing that exempts our members from this phenomenon and as the statistics increase, so do the numbers among our members. Training opportunities and furthering academic qualifications often have to be set aside by such women since there is not enough money available to allow for such choices and time is of the essence. This has an impact on their earning capacity.

More women than men continue to have part-time work and precarious work, and it takes young women with student loans longer to pay off their debt than it does young men. This means they pay more in interest costs. A recent initiative by the students at Memorial University to highlight this point saw male students being charged a dollar a cookie at a bake sale while women paid 68 cents. The gender bias in the pricing reflected the fact that female university graduates still earn significantly less than their male classmates.

Young women who are choosing teaching as a career are better educated than ever before and they enter a profession where subtle gender disparity in salary continues. While some of the stereotypes that used to exist have been put to rest the undervaluing of women's

work continues. Employment equity measures and human rights law help address the pay gap issue but much remains to be done to reconcile reproductive and care roles and the linkages to promotion opportunities and pensions for women. Over a lifetime, the pay gap between women and men has been evaluated by some studies to be between \$700,000 to \$2 million dollars, pay lost by women depending on their level of education and their responsibilities.

We must work to ensure that a pay equity strategy is an integral part of the economic strategy of the government. The fact that the recent federal budget's economic stimulus plan, intended to provide jobs, is completely silent on child care shows clearly that equity concerns are not a priority for the government. They are on its radar but in a way that should be of concern to young women who have the most to lose or to gain.

We need to ensure too that women are trained in economic matters. For too long we have left that part of the work to our male colleagues, along with the responsibility for collective bargaining. CTF statistics show this is still the case. We must also be pro-active in ensuring that women become involved in collective bargaining. Which issues stay on the bargaining table and which issues get dropped can have an impact on women, yet these decisions are most often made by the men responsible for most of the

bargaining. The inclusion of women on bargaining teams and at all levels of the process is essential. While this is often written in policy, it is often not played out in practice. Training programs for collective bargaining are usually conducted by men since they are the bargainers. How do you involve young women in a process that has a culture and a way of operating that do not always make women feel welcome?

When time is of the essence, young women will not take on such work or training. They will opt for areas where the contribution they make is valued. I suggest we look closely at the cultures of bargaining and of professional development to see why women would opt for one over the other.

I am sure you have all heard of the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland, where the economic movers and shakers meet to discuss economic policy. This forum brings together world leaders to examine what should be done as far as economic policy is concerned. This year, in the face of the current economic crisis, the Forum deliberated on how to jump start the economy – and few women were present. I would also have to say that the representation from teacher unions to Davos has also been male. Some women who were refused the opportunity to attend Davos established a Women's Forum for the Economy and Society in 2005 which brought together

1200 women from around the world. I hope this forum will raise issues like child care and pay equity that should be central to the agenda of the Davos Forum and other meetings where government leaders are present. We can mobilize young women on these issues if we show them the interconnections that exist and make them aware that women around the world are in the same boat. Too often we focus so narrowly on our own local or provincial issues that we lose sight of the big picture. The slogan "Think Globally, Act Locally" should be applied to our work.



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This year the ILO Conference will highlight the central role of gender equity in its work. Teachers are represented at this meeting through Education International or through the Canadian Labour Congress. I hope you have been active in the campaign that examines twelve themes through a gender lens. Among the themes being dealt with are:

- migrant workers;
- technology and the gender gap;
- youth employment – breaking the gender barriers for young women;
- Protect the Future – Maternity, paternity and work;
- Decent Childhoods – Educate both boys and girls.

Campaign materials address all themes to help promote discussion. Young women need to be aware of these issues and how they can have an impact on them. So often

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when we undertake work at the national and international level it is only senior leaders who are involved. Our mentoring should help make it possible to introduce young women to these events.

Young women entering teaching face a heavy workload. It is an awesome responsibility to make sure that some thirty or so children progress academically and socially while in your care, and to do the same for your own family in many instances. Individual education plans are increasingly common and classroom assistants are still mostly a pipe dream. If we expect even more from young women by having them take on work for the union, then we must help them with their job in the classroom.

Mentoring can be an invaluable asset for a young teacher however too often they are left to sink or swim. Training is needed for both mentors and mentorees, if I can coin a word, to help get mentoring on the right track. Mentorship is not a simple matter because those involved may have different value systems. Mentors need to understand that young women have their own ideas of what they want to do but that it is good to have someone to talk things through with – someone who will not be judgmental or

evaluative. I was interested to note an Alberta initiative intended to encourage girls to choose careers in science and technology. The Alberta Women's Science Network has set up a Cybermentor program in conjunction with the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta. Could this be a model we might consider to help teachers mentor teachers?

Governments are very good about issuing edicts that bring new curricula and programs into schools, adding to the workload of teachers since they must then develop new materials for use in the classroom. There is not a mountain of material to be drawn on that is easily adapted for use in the classroom when it comes to issues of social justice, and yet these are the issues that are in new areas of curriculum and that have to be integrated throughout the curriculum. Having teachers help prepare such materials for use in the classroom, and then providing professional development in the use of the materials, helps teachers gain insight and knowledge of issues. It also raises awareness among members and helps make life a little easier, particularly for young members, when they do not have to develop everything from scratch. I realize funding is an issue but negotiating funds to allow this to be done is a possibility. By addressing a variety of issues we can bring young people into areas of union work they may not have considered. We must recognize that our members are not a monolithic group but rather individuals who bring differing philosophies, interests, experiences and capacities to their work. Unions need to be working on all fronts to attract the participation of young women.

There are also new issues that have appeared on the agenda of unions in some other countries and that will confront you as you go forward. These will largely be issues of social justice that many will argue are not within the purview of unions. But teachers have been brought in to the debate whether they want to or not.

So far in Canada, the very divisive debates that have centred on education in some parts of the world, have not surfaced in the same way. Girls and women in education are at the vortex of such debates. At the UN when the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was being debated, education was the hottest topic and the last to be resolved. Some of these concerns deal with challenges to the right of girls or women to wear a hijab, for example. The issue of female genital mutilation has had to be addressed in some unions since girls were being taken out of school and sent back to their country of origin to have this done or the practice was being done illegally, often with dire consequences. Teachers were being asked to report instances where they suspected girls were being subjected to this illegal procedure.

The trafficking of girls and women is another matter that is right with us in our country. The girls are often young and should be in school. I was shocked recently to read that young girls were being held for the purpose of trafficking and prostitution in a house that is about eight kilometers from my home. The woman who held the girls worked in the Ottawa Court House. She had taken the girls, one by one, to her workplace to show them how friendly she was with the police. The girls were teenagers. They had been beaten and abused and were working as prostitutes. These matters will find their way onto union agendas and I hope that the struggle we had to get other issues of social justice on the agenda will not be necessary again. These are issues teachers usually know little about but our integrating world is bringing them to our doorsteps and we need to know about them. You have to be prepared to help your members if they face any of these issues.

Our personal and professional experiences have a great influence on our ability to question what has been accepted to be equitable practice. We have to understand how our assumptions, and our institutional structures and practices support or hinder participation. We must think about who we are in relation to the members we represent and to the students they teach. We have to reflect on the policies we develop, since no policy is neutral. We need to be aware of how every policy impacts different groups differently. Such reflection will help us identify those whose voices are listened to and those who are ignored so that we can bring them in.

Our everyday assumptions inform how we interpret the world around us so we must examine closely what we take to be the norm. Young women entering education bring with them their assumptions and interpret the world through their experiences. Homogenous communities have not been the norm for decades, but when I speak to young women I am told we still tend to operate as though we all have the same background, experience and culture. We must address these matters.

People with power in organizations either challenge or reinforce inequity through their actions. I urge you to use both a gender and an equity lens to examine everything that is done by the organization. The lens I like to use has access, agency, empathy and solidarity as criteria. Unions have always been able to change and I have confidence we will again meet the challenges to bring young people on board.

As leaders who have done well under the current system you have to make room for others and be sure you hear the voices of the young. It requires active listening and hearing what they believe is needed. It will mean bringing more chairs to the table.

As Margaret Mead stated, “Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. In fact, it’s the only thing that ever has”. So to the young women who seek change so that they can participate, we need you to add your voices to the debate. I look forward to hearing from you during this symposium.

Sheena Hanley is a distinguished teacher, teacher leader and trade unionist who has served as President of the Canadian Teachers’ Federation and as Deputy General Secretary of Education International. Her strong personal beliefs in human rights, social justice and equity have been a driving and pivotal force throughout her career.

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