





## *Women: Servants No More*

**H**istorians tend to ignore the accomplishments made by women, and trade union studies are equally weak on the contributions and problems of working women. Women have constituted an important part of government service in Saskatchewan since its inception in 1905. When the Saskatchewan Civil Service Association was first formed in 1913, women were being denied the right to vote in provincial or federal elections, so it is not surprising that their role in the civil service would be any less restricted.

In the early years of the public service, the government hired only young single women, often fresh out of high school, for the lower paid clerical positions, performing tasks in male-dominated departments. They often received less pay than men doing the same work and the government insisted that women quit their job upon marriage (of course men weren't expected to quit, being the "breadwinners").

This state of affairs was a reflection of the prevailing Victorian notions regarding women's role in society. "Victorian ideology defined women as inferior to men, fragile, emotional, and in need of protection. This ideology was as prevalent in Canada as an import



as it was in Britain. The ideal of womanhood combined religious piety, moral purity, and first and foremost a complete commitment to domesticity. A woman's primary role, her natural contribution, was as a wife and mother." (Julie White, *Women and Unions*, 1980, p. 2)

Before the 1940s, working women in all occupations in Saskatchewan, from service workers to government workers, were an anomaly, accepted only because of their value as a source of cheap labour and relegated to areas traditionally considered "women's work."

Since the SGEU was a social club and not a union before 1944, the activities it engaged in were considered appropriate for women, and women were thus active in making the association an effective social club. The very first executive had Dorothy Hall as the first treasurer and Mrs. Leitch as a vice president, and two other women were on a steering committee representing the various departments in the civil service. Throughout the 1920s and '30s there would be occasional women vice presidents, but never women presidents of the SCSA.

The association was definitely not an organization which fought for the rights of their female members. The SCSA, for the most part dominated by men from the upper echelons of the civil service, accepted and promoted an inferior role for women. They even sometimes complained to the government that married women were still working when a man could have her job. While the association may have favoured equal treatment among male employees, equal rights for women was a different matter.

The SCSA delegated women's concerns to a "Girls' Section" in *The Dome* during the 1920s, followed by "The Feminine Slant" in the 1930s and '40s. "Dome Dillies" consistently carried jokes suggesting that women couldn't think and that working husbands were being hen-pecked by nagging, suspicious wives. It is not surprising that women were not encouraged to step beyond their assigned roles in the Association.



*Another fact which is brought out by a study of the returns is that there is a large class of female workers who do not support themselves entirely upon their earnings. Living with their parents or relatives they are willing to take less pay than would be absolutely necessary for them to live upon, if they were differently situated. As long as employers continue to be able on this account to obtain this cheap help, there is little chance of any marked increase of wages. These remarks apply especially to girls under sixteen years of age, and to a great extent also to those between sixteen and twenty-one. In many cases the difference between the wages received and the necessary cost of maintenance is made up from the surplus incomes of other members of the family. To make more probable this result, many managers of department stores make a point of employing girls who live at home.*  
Saskatchewan Bureau of  
Labour Report, 1914.

*"The matter was introduced of a certain lady in the employment of the Telephone Department who has been recently married and is still retaining her position, and it was felt that in view of the fact that several members had previously been asked to resign their position in order to provide for the employment of more deserving cases.*

*It was moved by Messrs. Milne and Cram that this matter be brought to the attention of the Joint Council for their attention. Carried."*

Provincial Executive Minutes  
December 28, 1922.

*"Aurore Lacoursiere of Prince Albert went to bat for her sex by demanding equal pay for equal work and not a male dared engage her in argument."*

Convention Highlights  
*The Dome*, January, 1945.

*"Miss German stated that in a recent panel for a Tax Auditor 1 position that the panel had ruled out applications from females. Reasons given by the panel members were (1) Public opinion - undesirable gossip in small towns. (2) Jealous wives of male employees. (3) Vendors sometimes get abusive and threatening."*

Provincial Executive Minutes,  
October 28, 1957.

By the time the SCSA became a union in 1944, women were entering the work force in increasing numbers. By assuming male jobs during the Second World War, women had shown their ability to perform "men's work." The very first agreement signed between the SCSA and the government in 1945 contained a clause stating that "The Government agrees to recognize the principle of equal pay for equal work, regardless of sex of an employee." But having equality in principle was different from having it in practice.

One of the early fighters for women's rights in the new union was Aurore Lacoursiere from the women's jail in Prince Albert. Ms. Lacoursiere put in the first grievance regarding equal pay in 1945, since women were receiving less pay than the male guards performing the same work. She would also become an active delegate to Association conventions where she fought for the rights of women in the association. Unfortunately, she was one of the few voices promoting women's concerns in the union.

The SCSA often acceded too easily to government requests to advertise for "male only" positions for many years, and the union itself advertised union representative openings as "male positions" even into the 1960s.

Not until the late '60s and early '70s were women to demand their rights in large numbers. Women entering the public service had continued to increase over the years to become nearly half its work force. The resurgence of the women's movement helped to break down a few of the social restraints preventing women from fuller more important roles in unions. Working class women began to organize and define their special needs and concerns, and to push for them at union conventions, in contract negotiations, and in government legislation.

In SGEU, women first organized themselves into a women's caucus in the mid-'70s, and in 1976 an official women's committee of the Provincial Executive was established.



"Some members may feel our committee was formed as a 'ladies auxiliary' to keep the four women on the Provincial Executive pacified. These people will be in for an awful shock."  
*(The Dome, September-October, 1976)*

Issues such as daycare, equal pay for work of equal value, affirmative action, sexual harassment, discrimination in benefit plans and the effect of technology on workers finally began to be addressed in the union, but not without a lot of resistance from the more

conservative and reluctant membership who preferred the more traditional concerns of a male-dominated association.

Even though equal pay for equal work was included in the first collective agreement, thirty years later women were still fighting for it. In 1978, women housekeeping aides at Wascana Hospital won a four-year struggle for equal pay. Their complaint, launched in 1974, sought to remedy discriminatory pay levels between themselves and male caretakers performing similar work. Government inaction and reluctance to



enforce their own legislation dragged the issue on for years until the women's determination and persistence, along with support from their male counterparts, achieved a retroactive settlement providing \$134,000 in back pay.

New organizing by the union in the 1970s brought many new women into the SGEU and many of these new smaller agreement groups were composed mostly of women. They found that they often had to fight for recognition from management and had no use

for the myths that women were weak and submissive, unable to stand up in the face of management stubbornness. They found that united, collective action by working women could bring results.

The Public Service/Government Employment strikes of 1974 to 1979 saw women taking a lead in picket duty and strike organizing, determined to end their position in the union as a group slotted into low, often poverty-level wages, and not prepared to defend their rights. Women in SGEU were fighting for equality in their wages, in their union and in their society.



A new awareness also grew about how attacks by governments and employers on the labour movement affected women the most. Wage controls ensure that women and unions would not fight their way to equal pay and reinforced existing wage discrimination. Cutbacks and layoffs in the public service also affected women who are traditionally those "last hired, first fired," as government policy encourages working women to return to the home.

Women in SGEU have accomplished significant gains in improving their standard of living, in enforcing equal pay legislation, educating the membership of their concerns, and it wasn't until the 1970s that women were hired by the union for other than clerical positions. At the 1983 Annual Convention a Constitutional resolution was passed, setting up a permanent Women's Committee within the union, a reflection of the importance of this issue and the growth of members' attitudes.

There is still a lot to be done before women achieve equal status with men, both as government employees and union members. But women in SGEU continue to fight for their rights; confident that the goal of equality is not only achievable, but necessary for an effective union.

