

## FEMALE IN A FOREST TOWN:

### *The Marginalization of Women in Port Alberni's Economy*

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The increase in women entering the paid labour force has been one of the most dramatic changes in the British Columbia economy over the past half-century. In 1991, almost 60 per cent of women aged fifteen years or older in the province held paying jobs or were actively seeking paid work – up from 15 per cent in 1941.<sup>1</sup> In addition, during the post-Second World War period BC women have increasingly found employment in professional fields previously dominated by men. For example, in 1971 only 10 per cent of physicians and surgeons in the province were female; by 1991 this had increased to 24 per cent. The wage gap between men and women in the province has also decreased. In 1971, women employed full-time earned just 58 per cent of what full-time male workers earned; by 1991, this had narrowed to 65 per cent (Census Canada 1971, 1991).

Despite these gains, British Columbia's economy remains firmly divided by sex. In particular, the sexual division of occupations is still very marked. While women have made inroads into professional fields that were once the almost exclusive domain of men, these fields make up only a small portion of the labour force. Armstrong and Armstrong (1994, 15) have noted that, for Canada as a whole, women are still "overwhelmingly slotted into industries and occupations characterized by low pay, low recognized skill requirements, low productivity, and low prospects for advancement."<sup>2</sup> A review of data

<sup>1</sup> The figure of 15 per cent represents the percentage of women over fourteen years of age in 1941 who were "wage earners" (i.e., women paid wages, commissions, or piece rate). It does not include self-employed professional women, female employers, or women who were seeking work but had no income from employment during that year.

<sup>2</sup> In 1994, 86 per cent of all employed women in Canada held jobs in the service sector, and within this sector they tended to be concentrated in low-pay and less secure jobs. In contrast, only 14 per cent of women were employed in goods-producing industries such as car manufacturing or forestry, which pay higher wages (Statistics Canada 1995, 67). Women are still

from the 1991 Canadian census shows that occupations in British Columbia are similarly divided by sex. In 1991, one in every four men in British Columbia was (or had recently been) employed in goods-producing industries, whereas the comparable figure for women was one in nine. In addition, 80 per cent of workers in resource-based industries such as mining, logging, transportation, and fishing were male. In contrast, female workers predominated in the province's service sector; for example, more than 60 per cent of the labour force in the health, social service, finance, insurance, and education industries was female (British Columbia Statistics 1993). This high degree of occupational sex-typing contributed to the significant wage gap between the sexes in British Columbia. In 1991, the average income for full-time male workers in the province was \$40,200 compared to \$26,170 for their female counterparts.

While these statistics provide a general picture of the sexual divisions in the provincial economy, the focus of this article is on the economic position of women living and working in one of British Columbia's small, forest-dependent communities. Little attention has been focused on the economic status of women in British Columbia's forest-dependent communities; this is somewhat surprising given the central importance of forestry to British Columbia's economy and the major contributions made by feminist scholarship to the study of economics and labour over the past few decades both in Canada and beyond.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars have examined various aspects of women's experience in small, resource-dependent towns.<sup>4</sup> This research has revealed the fundamentally gendered nature of single-industry towns in British Columbia, which are characterized by imbalanced sex ratios (more males than females), an ideology that defines "men's jobs" (in resource extraction) in opposition to "women's jobs" (chiefly in service occupations either at home or in the public sector), and practices

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heavily concentrated in traditional female occupations: in 1994, 70 per cent of all employed women in Canada were working in teaching, clerical positions, sales and service jobs, and nursing or other health-related occupations (Armstrong and Armstrong 1994, 32).

<sup>3</sup> Feminists have been developing a comprehensive critique of androcentric theories of economics and labour since the 1970s, and the literature is vast. The collection *Gender and Economics* (1995) is an excellent starting point. In the Canadian context important examples of feminist scholarship on the sexual division of labour and women's work (past and present) include: Pat and Hugh Armstrong (1981, 1983, 1990, 1994), Patricia Connelly (1978, 1983, 1990, 1992), Joy Parr (1987, 1990), and Joan Sangster (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Much of the Canadian literature on women in resource communities focuses on eastern fishing communities. See, for example, Porter (1991; 1986), Nadel-Klein, and Davis (1988), and Antler (1977). On the subject of women in BC resource communities see Veit (1976); Bradbury (1977); the Northern Women's Task Force (1977); Marchak (1983); MacKenzie (1987); White, Duke, and Fong (1989); Gill (1990); Newell (1991); and Reed (1995).

that ensure continued sex segregation and women's economic marginalization. In general, sexual divisions have been more marked in these small towns than they are in the province as a whole.

Patricia Marchak's landmark study, *Green Gold* (1983), still stands as the most thorough empirical and coherent theoretical analysis of the economic status of women in forest-dependent towns in British Columbia. In the three forest-dependent towns included in her study (Campbell River, Mackenzie, and Terrace), Marchak observed that women and men formed two virtually distinct labour pools: men were largely employed in production, trades, and professional or managerial positions in the forest sector, while women worked as housewives or were concentrated in non-industrial occupations (mainly clerical and service work or lower-level management). Sex, Marchak concluded, was the *primary* division of labour in these three towns. Women's participation in the paid labour force was secondary to and determined by their responsibilities for domestic work and child care. Between 63 per cent and 87 per cent of the men in these communities were employed in the forest industry compared to only 3 per cent to 7 per cent of the women. Income levels were also highly skewed: full-time men workers in these communities earned twice as much as did full-time women workers. In addition, the rate of male participation in the labour force was more than double that of female participation. The work of Marchak and others shows that sex is a fundamental determining factor in the distribution of jobs, status, and income in single-industry towns in British Columbia.<sup>5</sup>

At this point, we believe it important to clarify usage of the terms "sex" and "gender." While sex refers to the biological categories of female and male and is based on physiological differences, we understand gender to be both a verb and a noun (Baron 1991, 36). It refers to a *process* that transforms a person's biological sex (female or male) into a reified social *identity* (woman or man). The gender process derives social meaning from the relatively minor physical differences between the sexes which, in turn, are utilized in the organization and buttressing of gender inequality. In Gisela Bock's (1989, 13) words, physical differences "are used to legitimate pre-existing social relations and, in particular, power relations." A social constructionist perspective (as opposed to a biological, essentialist one) holds that "women" and "men" (and the qualities and characteristics associated

<sup>5</sup> Studies of women in resource-dependent communities in other jurisdictions reveal a similar pattern. For example, see Gibson (1992) or Warren (1992).

with them) are made, not born. Put another way, gender is “a social category imposed on a sexed body” (Scott 1988, 32). Conceptions of gender are historically contingent and culturally specific: what qualifies as masculine or feminine varies over time and place and is continually subject to resistance, negotiation, and accommodation. For example, in Western culture the contemporary ideal of female beauty, the dangerously thin waif, is a recent phenomenon that can be traced back to the 1960s. Moreover, gender does more than constitute unequal sexes; ideas about differences between the sexes shape institutions, practices, and relationships. Invariably, concepts about gender “structure perception and the concrete and symbolic organizations of all social life” (45), including a society’s economic system.

An examination of the effects of the gender process on women’s economic status in any of British Columbia’s forest-dependent communities must be considered within the context of the process of economic restructuring that has gripped British Columbia’s forest industry over the past two decades. Some investigations have used a gender-sensitive approach to examine the impacts of restructuring on the province’s forest-dependent communities (see MacKenzie 1987; Grass and Hayter 1989; Stanton 1989; Hayter and Barnes 1992; Hay 1993). These studies take into account the ways in which restructuring has had gender-specific impacts on the forest-sector labour force as well as on the wider community. For example, Hayter and Barnes (1992, 338) point out that the conception of skill embedded in the process of reorganizing the forest-sector labour force is biased towards men; “that part-time jobs which constitute part of the [labour force] periphery are often taken by women who are expected to maintain a ‘double day, double bind’; [and] that because male-dominated unions attempt to provide security for their members, many women who are not unionised are left in a vulnerable position.” Stanton’s (1992) study of social and economic restructuring in Chemainus, a forest-dependent community on east Vancouver Island, indicates ways in which the process has generated an accommodation between patriarchal gender relations and capitalism. Under Fordism, women’s roles in forestry towns were reproducer, consumer, and reserve labour force.<sup>6</sup> In the new post-Fordist “flexible” regime in Chemainus, women’s role as a producer of surplus value has increased; however, “the persistence of patriarchal norms means that women are being doubly exploited in

<sup>6</sup> Under the Fordist regime, large numbers of workers were employed in the mass production of commodity forest products (e.g., market pulp, paperboard, newsprint, dimension lumber).

the flexible regime because they are called upon to undertake a double day of work, performing both domestic work and participating in the [paid] labour force" (157).

However, the bulk of recent research on the restructuring of the BC forest industry neglects gender as a central category of analysis (e.g., Drushka 1985; Ettlinger 1990; Hayter, Barnes, and Grass 1993; Drushka, Nixon, and Travers 1993; Barnes and Hayter 1994; Hayter and Barnes 1997). Much of this work overlooks the marginalized position of women in the paid labour force and forest-sector unions and, moreover, ignores the broader issue of the sexual division of paid and unpaid labour in forest-dependent communities. Furthermore, it ignores the gender-specific repercussions of the restructuring process – an oversight that has ominous material implications for women. By eliding gender from the definition of the problem, researchers neglect to include it in proposed solutions.

To demonstrate the crucial importance of closing the "gender gap" in research on BC forest-dependent communities we reveal the economic subordination of women living in Port Alberni, a small community of 20,000 inhabitants on Vancouver Island. We examine the town's formal market economy, including the forest industry (the community's dominant economic sector). To demonstrate the need for a gender analysis of the economic restructuring of the BC coastal forest sector, we highlight how the restructuring process has negatively affected women in Port Alberni. Finally, we discuss the future economic prospects of women in this community. We argue that women today face particular problems of discrimination and marginalization in the Port Alberni economy and that, therefore, they require a gender-sensitive response to economic restructuring on the part of employers, unions, and provincial government agencies – a response that takes into account their specific obstacles and difficulties. We suspect that the dilemma in which these women find themselves is in no way unique to Port Alberni but, rather, is indicative of the situation faced at present by thousands of women in the 100 resource-based communities across British Columbia.<sup>7</sup>

This article is based on research conducted for the Port Alberni Women and Work Project between May and November 1996.<sup>8</sup> Data

<sup>7</sup> Bradbury (1977, 430) reported that there were 100 single-industry communities in British Columbia (many of which were dependent on forestry) and that these comprised one-third of the non-metropolitan population. Cited in Stanton (1989, 88).

<sup>8</sup> This project was funded by Forest Renewal BC (copies of the final report are available from the Science Council of British Columbia).

were derived from a variety of sources, including interviews with over fifty key informants (including representatives from relevant local, provincial, and federal government agencies; the forest industry; academia; unions; First Nations organizations; and agencies providing services to women) and a questionnaire survey of 109 women in Port Alberni.<sup>9</sup> We also drew on interviews with women who worked at the Port Alberni plywood mill between 1942 and 1991.

#### WOMEN'S WORK AND INCOME IN PORT ALBERNI

Port Alberni lies within the Alberni Valley, at the head of Alberni Inlet on west-central Vancouver Island. The history of the European settlement of Port Alberni is intimately linked with the development of British Columbia's coastal forest industry. Indeed, the Alberni Valley was the site of one of the province's first commercial logging operations: in 1860, a British firm, Thomson and Company, established a logging and milling operation at the present-day site of Port Alberni. Over the past half-century, Port Alberni's economy has been highly dependent on one employer, MacMillan Bloedel Limited (MB), the province's largest forest products company. Formed in the 1950s by the merger of several smaller companies, by the late 1970s MB operated a pulp and paper mill (Alberni Pulp and Paper), two sawmills (Somass and Alberni Pacific Division), and a plywood mill (Alberni Plywoods) in Port Alberni. The company also controlled almost 900,000 acres of forest land on central Vancouver Island from which to supply its processing operations.<sup>10</sup>

The ideological and material ill-effects of the gender process is indisputable in the case of Port Alberni, where we found the systematic subordination of women to be manifest at many sites: in the formal market economy, where women are streamed into typically low-paid "female occupations" (teaching, nursing, service, sales) and earn far less than men; in the household, where women continue to be responsible for the bulk of domestic duties and child care – for

<sup>9</sup> A total of 230 questionnaires were distributed to women of working age (15-65 years old) living in Port Alberni; 109 were completed and returned. Survey respondents are anonymous. For a full description of the results of the questionnaire and the general results of the Port Alberni Women and Work Project, see Egan and Klausen (1996).

<sup>10</sup> Most of this forest was (and is) on Crown (public) land; the company was given the right to cut trees on this land through Tree Farm Licence (TFL) agreements. In the late 1970s, MacMillan Bloedel's forest holdings close to Port Alberni included 355,000 acres in TFL 20, located in the Clayoquot Sound area, and 539,000 acres in TFL 21, located in the Alberni area. These were later merged with some of the company's private lands to form TFL 44, which the company still controls.

which they receive no remuneration; and in a dominant patriarchal ideology, which normalizes the sexual division of labour and the marginalization of women in the community as a whole.

Census data for 1981 indicate that sexual divisions have long been deeply embedded in the Port Alberni formal market economy. In 1981, less than half of all females of working age were involved in the paid labour force (5 per cent lower than the provincial average for women). In contrast, 83.3 per cent of all males of working age were in the paid labour force (5 per cent higher than the provincial average). By 1991, the percentage of women in the paid labour force had risen to 50.4 per cent, but this was 9.5 per cent lower than the provincial average for women and still 24 per cent below the rate of male participation in the Port Alberni labour force (Table 1). As is true for the provincial economy as a whole, women in Port Alberni earn much less than do men. In 1981 the average woman in the community earned less than 40 per cent of what the average man earned. By 1991 this gap had narrowed somewhat, although it was still less than half of the average male income (Table 2). Part of this income gap was due to the low rate of participation of women in the paid labour force, and part was due to the fact that women were more likely than men

TABLE 1

*Male and Female Labour Force Participation Rates for Port Alberni and British Columbia, 1981, 1986, and 1991*

	1981		1986		1991	
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
Port Alberni	83.3	47.8	74.2	41.5	74.5	50.4
British Columbia	78.3	52.7	76.2	55.5	75.6	59.9

Source: Census Canada (1981, 1986, 1991).

TABLE 2

*Average Income for Men and Women in Port Alberni, 1981, 1986, 1991, and 1993*

	AVERAGE INCOME			
	1981	1986	1991	1993
Women	\$7,653	\$10,064	\$14,971	\$16,166
Men	\$20,116	\$26,005	\$32,636	\$33,620

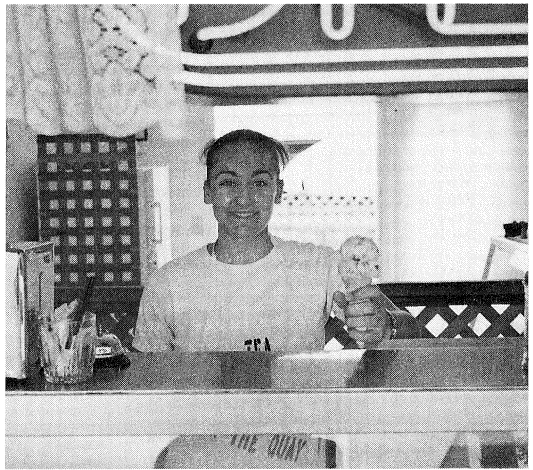
Source: Census Canada (1981, 1986, 1991); BC Statistics Alberni-Clayoquot Regional Statistical Index.

to be employed on a part-time or casual basis: in 1990, just over half of all male workers in Port Alberni worked full-time all year, compared to one-third of all female workers. This statistic also points to the fact that domestic labour relations between the sexes have yet to be fundamentally altered. Women still perform the majority of household maintenance and child care and, thus, have less time to pursue paid work. However, even accounting for the discrepancy between full-time and part-time workers, women still earned far less than men: in 1990, women in Port Alberni who worked full-time

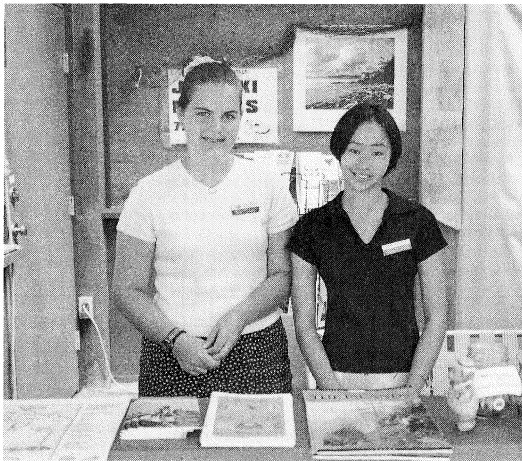
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*A Typical Day at Work in Port Alberni:*

In early July, 1998, photographer Don Gill collected these images of women at work in Port Alberni. All show women employed in the town's service sector, a reflection of the fact that more women find paid work in this sector than any other part of the economy. Stephanie, Emily, and Phuoi Linh work in Port Alberni's emerging tourist industry.



Stephanie is a service clerk at The Ice Cream Vendor at the Quay, Port Alberni.



Emily and Phuoi Linh work at the Tourist Information Booth at the Quay, Port Alberni.

Although tourism is often cited as the town's economic salvation in the face of a declining forest industry, most jobs in this sector are low paid and seasonal. Deb Jackson and Mary Howarth work in the public sector, in institutions dedicated to building and maintaining a sense of community. In



earned only 56 per cent of what full-time male workers earned. Women in Port Alberni lagged well behind the provincial average: for British Columbia as a whole in 1991, women working full-time earned 65 per cent of what men earned.

The gendering of occupations (often referred to as occupational sex-typing) is another reason for the gross discrepancy in incomes between women and men. As is true for British Columbia as a whole (and for other forest-dependent communities in the province), women in Port Alberni are concentrated in traditional female occupations,

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Port Alberni, the public sector offers women the best chance for well-paid, stable employment.

Each woman was informed about this study, its impending publication, and the authors's desire to accompany the essay with images of the working women of Port Alberni. They willingly participated on this



Mary Howarth is Branch Head at the Port Alberni Public Library located at the Echo Community Centre.

Deb Jackson is an Outreach Worker at the Port Alberni Native Friendship Centre. She is joined by Edward and an unknown friend.

basis. Regretfully, we are missing images of countless women at work caring for the pre-school age children of the community and other women outside of the formal economy.

most of which are low-paid. In 1991, almost two-thirds of experienced female workers in the community were employed in one of three occupation types: clerical, service, or sales. The two other common female occupations in Port Alberni were in teaching and health services. In 1991, four of every five female workers in Port Alberni were employed in one of these five occupational categories. Women have been particularly concentrated in clerical and service occupations; Census Canada statistics show that, in 1991, 84 per cent of clerical workers in Port Alberni were female and 68 per cent of service-sector jobs were held by women.

As the average income figures would indicate, women in Port Alberni are much more likely than men to be living on a low income. In 1993, over 70 per cent of all women of working age in the community made less than \$20,000, and less than 7 per cent earned more than \$40,000. In comparison, 38 per cent of Port Alberni men made more than \$40,000 in that same year, and only one-third made less than \$20,000. To a lesser extent, this concentration of women in low-income categories is repeated for the province as a whole: during 1990, just under two-thirds of all women earned less than \$20,000. While it is not possible to calculate the number of women living in poverty in Port Alberni, it is possible to identify those social groups most susceptible to poverty. For example, single mothers and their children have the highest incidence of poverty of any group in the province.<sup>11</sup> Port Alberni has a high rate of single-parent families: in 1991, there were 735 single-parent families in the community, 86 per cent of these headed by a woman (British Columbia Statistics 1992). Poverty is also especially common among elderly and First Nations women. Of course, the unemployed are also more likely to be living on low incomes, as are families headed by casual or part-time workers (Cabinet Planning Secretariat 1994).

Sex-specific patterns of unemployment and dependence on the social safety net (federal or provincial support payments) are also evident in Port Alberni. Although the federal government does not calculate the unemployment rate for Port Alberni on an annual basis,<sup>12</sup> it does collect information on the numbers of people receiving

<sup>11</sup> In 1991, 515 out of every 10,000 adults in Port Alberni were single parents, compared to 410 out of every 10,000 adults across the province. Many single-parent families rely on the social safety net: in June 1992, one-third of the 1,182 people on income assistance in Port Alberni were single parents.

<sup>12</sup> Unemployment rates for the community are available only for census years (i.e., 1981, 1986, 1991, and 1996 being the most recent census years). However, as of April 1998, the unemployment rate calculated from the 1996 census data was not yet available.

unemployment insurance (now euphemistically called “employment insurance”) benefits each month. By April 1992, over 3,800 people in Port Alberni were receiving employment insurance (EI) benefits, and 70 per cent of these people were men. Men’s higher rate of “official” unemployment is due to the downsizing of the forest industry: because the forestry labour force historically has been dominated by men, job loss in this sector has affected a greater number of men than women.<sup>13</sup> Since April 1992, the number of people on EI in Port Alberni has declined steadily, partly due to economic recovery but also likely due to increasingly strict qualification criteria and the fact that many people’s benefits simply ran out. During the period from April 1992 to April 1996, the number of women receiving EI never fell below 736. The largest number of women to be on EI during this period appeared in February 1993, when 1,323 were registered as EI clients in Port Alberni. By April 1996, there were 946 women in Port Alberni on EI, representing one-third of all EI clients in the community (Human Resources Development Canada 1996).

However, the number of people on EI does not give a full picture of those out of work. After their EI benefits expire, those who cannot find work may apply to receive income assistance (i.e., welfare) benefits from the province. In October 1990, there were slightly more than 1,500 people in Port Alberni receiving income assistance (IA) benefits. This number rose steadily through the first half of the 1990s, reaching a peak of 2,446 people by January 1995 (about 13 per cent of Port Alberni’s working-age population). Although this number decreased slightly over the next year, by May 1996 almost 2,200 people in the community were still dependent on IA. While there are more men receiving EI than women, the opposite is true for IA: by May 1996, over half of the people on IA in Port Alberni were women.<sup>14</sup> Combining the numbers of people on EI and IA gives an indication of the number of people who are dependent on the social safety net. In December 1995, there were over 4,500 people in Port Alberni dependent on either EI or IA, representing almost 18 per cent of the working-age people in the community: 45 per cent of these were female (see Table 3). For British Columbia as a whole during that

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that these are “official” unemployment rates, as reported by the federal government, and do not include “discouraged workers” — those who are unemployed but who have stopped looking for work because they despaired of ever finding any.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the proportion of men on IA has increased rapidly over the past five years in Port Alberni. In October 1990, almost 60 per cent of those receiving IA in Port Alberni were women; by May 1996, this number had dropped to 53 per cent.

TABLE 3

*Dependence on the Social Safety Net – Number of Men and Women Receiving Employment Insurance and Income Assistance in Port Alberni, April 1996*

NUMBER RECEIVING UI		NUMBER RECEIVING IA		TOTAL NO. DEPENDENT ON SOCIAL SAFETY NET	
WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN	MEN
946	1,805	1,165	1,066	2,111	2,871

Source: BC Ministry of Social Services; Human Resources Development Canada.

month, just under 14 per cent of the working-age population was dependent on one of these forms of support.

A gender-sensitive analysis of the economy expands upon androcentric economic models that conventionally focus exclusively on the wage relation and production activities that occur in the formal market economy (for profit), and it includes “all those activities that contribute to the societal production and reproduction of goods, services and people” (Jaggar 1983). This broader definition encompasses paid as well as unpaid labour, a theoretical advance that enables us to see the mechanisms by which the forest-sector labouring class is reproduced and accumulation under capitalism is sustained. More specific to this study, it exposes women’s thoroughly subordinate position within capitalist society. When unpaid labour is included in economic analyses, as, for example, in Marchak’s study, the fundamental sexual division of labour in forest-dependent communities becomes strikingly evident. Women bear the brunt of unpaid household duties such as child-rearing, cooking, cleaning, and other forms of housework that reproduce labour on a daily and generational basis.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as Marchak also points out, many women are involved in unpaid community work (i.e., volunteering). This unpaid domestic and community work has been critical to the survival and success of these towns because it binds inhabitants into a community and increases men’s capacity to earn wages in the formal market economy. It also benefits major forest-sector corporations, for without women’s labour “the forest company employers could not maintain company towns and the overall cost of obtaining a male labour force would sharply

<sup>15</sup> A Canada-wide survey revealed that, on average, women do twice as much domestic work as do men and almost three times as much child care (Ornstein and Haddad 1991, 30). For this survey, domestic work was defined to include activities such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry; child care was considered a separate task.

increase" (Marchak 1983, 213). However, relegating responsibility for domestic and child-care duties and community-building to women prevents them from fully and continuously participating in the paid labour force and/or from pursuing higher education/training. And the absence of state support for working mothers (e.g., the lack of affordable daycare) reinforces this barrier.

Ideology is key to reproducing the sex segregation of labour in both the home and the formal market economy. Dominant ideology holds that women in forest-dependent communities are responsible for work in the home and for taking care of pre-school-age children, while men are responsible for the economic maintenance of the family. This bifurcated perception also follows women (as well as men) out of the home and into the market economy, where once again occupations are designated as "women's work" or "men's work." As a result, women predominate in occupations that reflect their supposedly "natural" role as domestic labourer (e.g., waitress, nurse, child-care provider). Certainly, most forest-sector employers and male-dominated unions have difficulty accepting the idea of a female forest production worker. As one woman reported, "At first when I tried to find work in Alberni Specialties [paper mill] there was a great deal of resentment from male co-workers. After twenty-two years, some male co-workers still think I should be at home."<sup>16</sup>

Many women in Port Alberni also have difficulty imagining themselves as wood-production workers. Given the pervasiveness of the dominant gender ideology, it is not surprising that many women subscribe to traditional notions about work. Certainly there are women in Port Alberni who are aware that, as a group, women are marginalized in the community. However, feminism is a relatively weak and marginalized social movement (or political ideology) in Port Alberni.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, forest-sector jobs are seen as male in nature, and

<sup>16</sup> Survey respondent.

<sup>17</sup> In Port Alberni there is a women's centre (Port Alberni Women's Resources Society) and a women's shelter for victims of wife battering, both of which were established and continue to be maintained by self-described feminists struggling to meet women's particular needs in the community. Klausen and Egan's questionnaire survey of women in the community also uncovered the existence of a critical analysis of women's economic subordination in Port Alberni. When asked what kind of barriers women believe they face in finding well-paid work, respondents reported: "Macho environment," "Sexist and uneducated employers," "Higher paid jobs at MB are usually for men," "The mills usually ask for heavy labourers and don't give women a chance," "Old Boys' Club," "It seems like a lot of places don't think women can handle the job," "Too many heavy labour jobs and lots of places not willing to let a woman apply," "Discrimination against women on the basis of physical limitation" (Egan and Klausen 1996).

this perception is normalized to the point that it is rarely questioned (e.g., Carroll 1995; Dunk 1994; Byron 1978).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, industrial forestry has always been commonly perceived as a male domain, as perhaps the quintessential male occupation:<sup>19</sup> the word “logger” brings forth images of rugged men, axes (or chainsaws) in hand, standing poised on top of massive tree stumps somewhere in the great outdoors. Millworkers are also imagined to be men only. Both types of work require muscle, grit, the ability to handle complex machinery, and courage in the face of danger – characteristics popularly associated with men. Yet, as proven by the example of female forest-production workers at the Alberni Plywoods mill from 1942 to 1991 (described below), women have proven they are capable of performing mill work as well as (and sometimes better than) their male counterparts. Despite this history, women in Port Alberni continue to encounter gender discrimination when applying for work in forestry; and for some women who are employed in forest-production work, gender harassment on the job is a reality.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, women who do have the capacity to see themselves as forest workers perceive the industry to be hostile towards them and, as a result, tend to seek employment in other sectors. In one woman’s words, “Men in Port Alberni seem to think women can’t do men’s work even if they’re qualified.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Dunk (1994) does report that all but one of the forest workers in his sample were men, which acknowledges that forest workers are gendered beings. But in a study about forest workers’ culture and identity, it is remarkable that gender was not considered a key factor in his analysis. A notable exception to the conventional acceptance of male domination of the forest industry is Priscilla Boucher (1993; forthcoming), who has written about the “masculinist” nature of “scientific” forest management, the forest industry, and the labour force.

<sup>19</sup> This observation applies to blue-collar production labour in the forest sector. At the professional level, the predominance of men in forestry has been the subject of recent critique (e.g., Burres-Bammel 1990). In addition, since 1994 the BC Ministry of Forests has taken steps to identify barriers to women’s (and other designated groups’) participation in public-sector forestry, which includes professional and technical, not production-related, occupations (interview with Blanche Congdon, Equity Officer, MOF, 15 April 1998). This is discussed further in the final section of this article.

<sup>20</sup> Women reported that during the 1980s, when forest-production workers were losing their jobs at an alarming rate, some male workers expressed resentment towards female co-workers who would not quit their jobs for the sake of men “who had families to feed.” This sexist attitude overlooked the fact that most female workers also had families to support. See Egan and Klausen (1996, 85–86). Dale Marcellus, President of the Communication, Energy, and Paperworkers Union (CEPU Local 1686), reported in 1996 that two decades after women began working at the MB pulp and paper mill in the mid-1970s, some male workers still resented the presence of women in the mill. These men are especially hostile to women obtaining the higher status, higher-paying assembly-line production jobs that involve the control of machinery (78).

<sup>21</sup> Survey respondent.

## WOMEN AND FORESTRY IN PORT ALBERNI

In British Columbia, forestry has been an overwhelmingly male-dominated industry. Marchak's study shows that, in the late 1970s, most of the well-paying production jobs (logging, milling) in the forest sector were held by men; women employed in this sector were found mainly in clerical or administrative support. A recent study commissioned by the BC Ministry of Employment and Investment shows that, across the province, women continue to play only a minor role in the forest sector (CS/RESORS Consulting Limited 1997). The study reviewed the 1981 and 1991 census data for the province as a whole and for four prominent forest-dependent towns – Campbell River, Cranbrook, Terrace, and Williams Lake – and found that the direct participation of women in the forest sector was still very limited. The CS/RESORS study found that women represented 11.9 per cent of the province's forest-sector labour force in 1981 and that this had increased marginally to 13.1 per cent by 1991. While there are more female professional foresters and silvicultural workers and more women employed in the marketing and public relations divisions of forest companies, most female workers are still concentrated in administrative support (e.g., clerical). The authors of the study concluded that “most of the jobs in the industry including those involving harvesting and primary manufacturing of wood products have largely remained the realm of male workers” (CS/RESORS Consulting 1997).

Similar to other forest towns in the province, Port Alberni offers relatively few women work in its forest sector; in 1991, only 3 per cent of those employed in forestry and logging operations in Port Alberni were female (Census Canada 1991). A 1996 survey of women employees in Port Alberni's major forest employers indicates that most of them worked in clerical or other forms of administrative support. Table 4 shows the number of female employees in MB's woodlands (logging) and processing divisions in the Port Alberni area in 1996. Very few women work in the company's woodlands operations. As of September 1996, of the 220 employees in MB's Sproat Lake Division, only three were female – two were employed as secretaries and the other as a cost accountant. In the Kennedy Lake Division, there were 5 female employees out of a total workforce of 99. Their job descriptions showed that these women worked in the following areas: reception, time keeping, and administration. The Franklin River Division had 17 female employees out of a total of 506 workers. Close to half of these women worked in clerical or other

TABLE 4  
*Percentage of Female Employees at MacMillan Bloedel's  
 Forestry Operations in Port Alberni, 1996*

	TOTAL NO. EMPLOYEES	NO. FEMALE EMPLOYEES	PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE EMPLOYEES
Woodlands Operations			
Sproat Lake	220	3	1.4
Kennedy Lake	99	5	5.0
Franklin River	506	17	3.4
Processing Plants			
Alberni Pacific	541	26	4.8
Alberni Specialties	958	53	5.5
Somass	450	13	2.9
Total (all divisions)	2,774	117	4.2

Source: MacMillan Bloedel; Darlene Donaldson (personal interview, 1996).

office positions. Nine of the female employees in this division held jobs that could possibly be considered as non-traditional occupations for women: 3 worked in the warehouse, 2 were swampers, 2 were scalers, 1 worked in camp security, and 1 was a powder-person (interview with Darlene Donaldson, Human Resources Department, MB, Nanaimo, September 1996).

Women were slightly better represented in MB's Port Alberni processing facilities. As of September 1996, 26 women were employed at the Alberni Pacific Division Sawmill out of a total of 541 employees. Six of these worked in the office (clerical, administration, and related positions), the rest worked in the mill itself. At the Somass Sawmill, out of a total workforce of 450, there were 13 female employees: this included 7 office workers and 6 mill-floor workers (telephone interview with Jack McLumen, Somass Sawmill employee and IWA representative, October 1996). At Alberni Specialties (MB's pulp and paper operation in Port Alberni) as of September 1996 there were 53 female employees out of a total of 958 workers (Donaldson, interview). Fifteen of these held clerical positions, two were employed as technicians, and the remainder either worked on the mill floor or were employed in a management or professional capacity (telephone interview with Tannis Benisky, Port Alberni representative for Office and Technical Employees Union, October 1996).

Similar to MB, other important forest-sector employers in Port Alberni employed few women. As of late 1996, Coulson Forest Products Limited had 20 female employees out of a total workforce

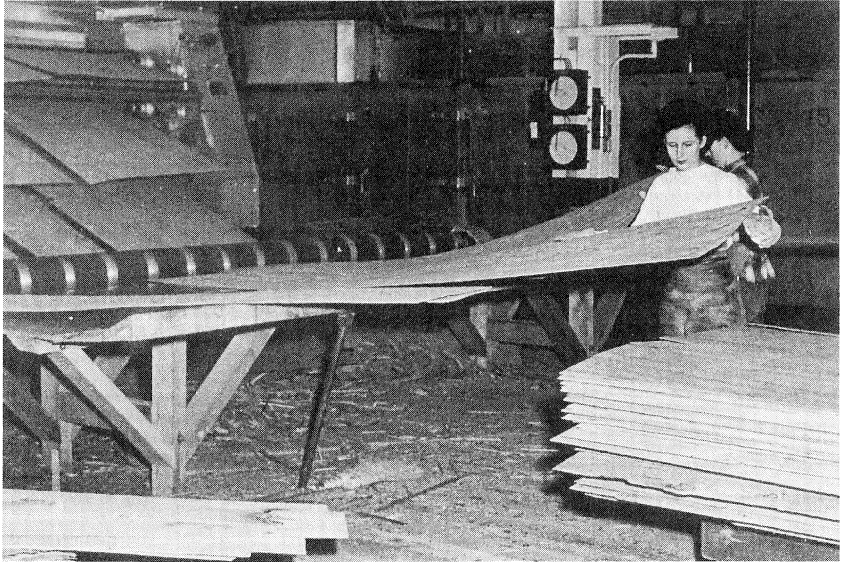


of approximately 300. Of these, 2 worked in the mill, 2 worked in management, and the remainder performed clerical and other types of office work (interview with Darlene Coulson, owner/manager of Coulson Forest Products Limited, September 1996). At Sarita Furniture Limited, a small company manufacturing outdoor furniture, 3 of the approximately 20 employees were women (telephone interview with Bernadette Whytton, owner/manager of Sarita Furniture Limited, October 1996). The rate of female employment in public-sector forestry was no better than that in private-sector forestry. In October 1996 the Port Alberni office of the BC Ministry of Forests provided 72 public sector jobs within forestry (this does not include contractors). Fourteen of these jobs were held by women, 8 of whom worked in clerical or related positions, 3 of whom worked in professional positions, and 1 of whom was employed as a technician (telephone interview with Emma Neill, Ministry of Forests employee, October 1996).

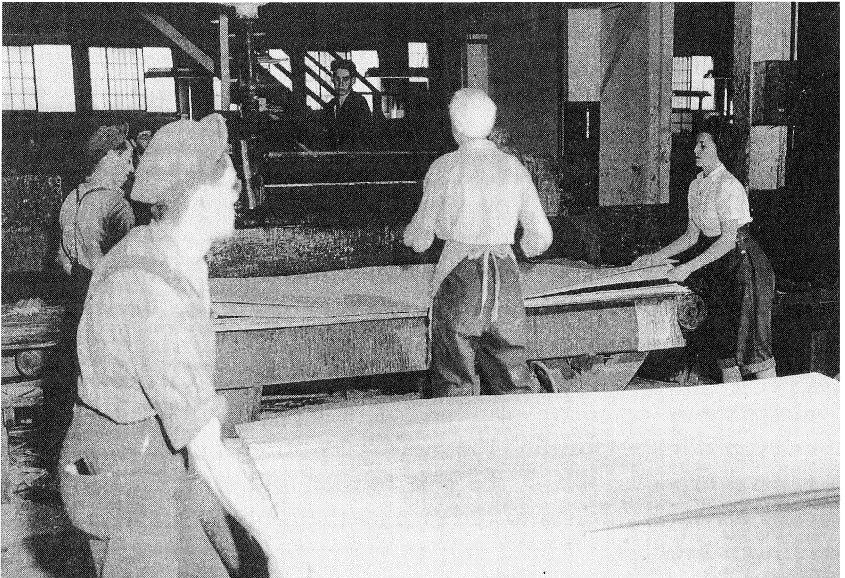
As Marchak (1983) reported, the only section of the provincial forest industry where women have been employed in significant numbers in occupations other than clerical has been plywood mills. This observation also holds true for Port Alberni. MB's plywood mill, Alberni Plywoods, was opened in 1942 to produce material for the war effort. Since local male labour was in short supply (many men were away at war), women were encouraged to apply for work at the plant. By late 1942, women made up 80 per cent of the 350 workers at Alberni Plywoods and were affectionately known as the "Plywood Girls."<sup>22</sup> Female plywood workers proved themselves adept at performing tasks previously considered "men's work." However, the employment of women did not fundamentally challenge the sexual division of labour; instead, as another example of the tenacity of the dominant gender ideology, the practice of segregating (and devaluing) women's labour prevailed in Alberni Plywoods. Occupations were designated as either "women's jobs" or "men's jobs," and women were paid less than were men even when performing the same tasks. After the war there arose a general expectation (on the part of men and most women) that female plywood workers would give up their jobs to make room for returning soldiers.<sup>23</sup> Many quit to marry or have children, but a precedent had been established and women continued to work in the mill, albeit in reduced numbers. By the late 1950s, women still

<sup>22</sup> What follows is based upon research on the history of women workers – the Plywood Girls – at the Alberni Plywood mill from 1942 to 1991. For further information, see Klausen (1998).

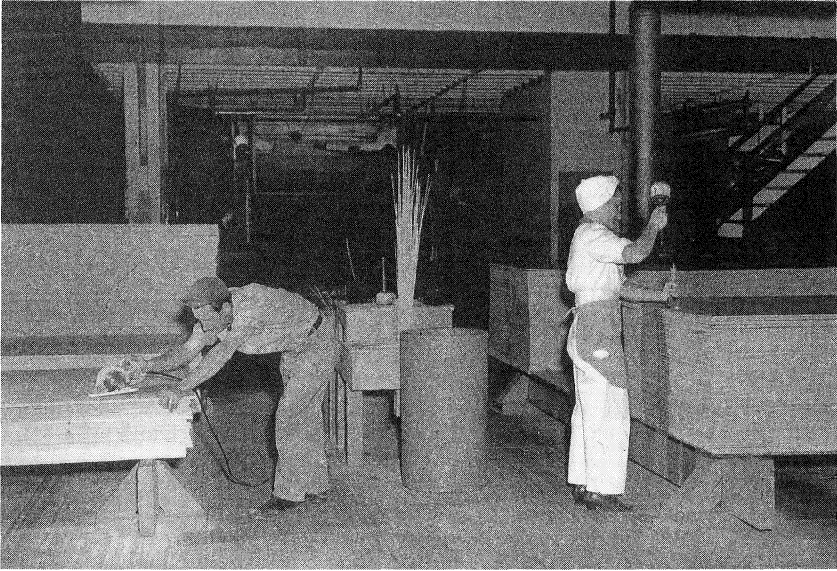
<sup>23</sup> Some women gave up their jobs willingly, believing it to be their duty, while others were less sanguine but quit just the same due to community expectations.



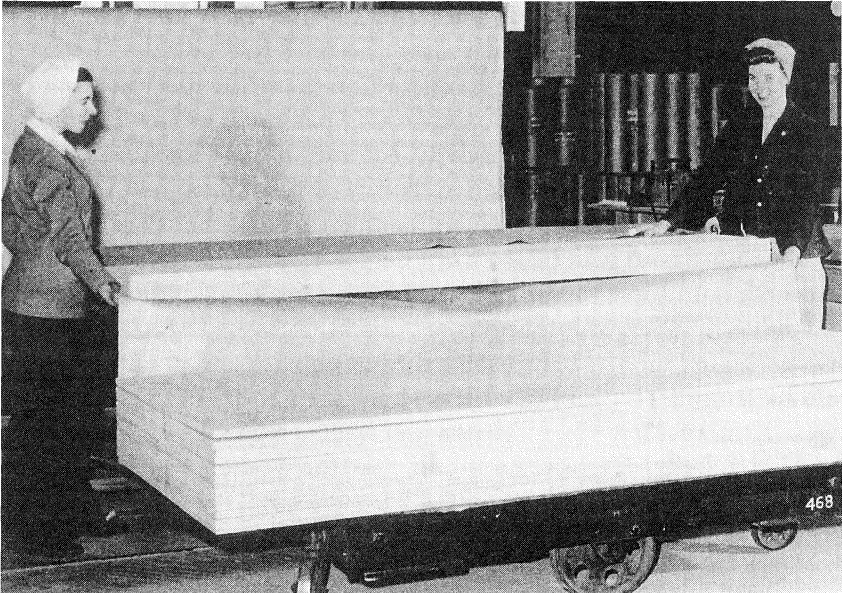
A Plywood Girl takes freshly dried veneer out of the dryer and stacks it onto dollies which will be rolled to the next step in the plywood assembly line. c. 1945.\*



Ruth Gilfillan, a female core-layer (figure in the centre wearing a white kerchief in her hair), is waiting for the male co-worker across from her to push a core piece through the “gluer.” Gilfillan will grab the freshly-glued core and place it down onto the veneer in front of her. After the veneer is covered in glued core, another sheet of veneer will be placed on top. The layers will be pressed together in a hot press. Plywood consisted of three, five, or seven layers of veneer and core. c. 1944.\*



A Plywood Girl and her coworker putting the finishing touches onto plywood in the "finishing end," the last stage of plywood production. C. 1944.\*



Two Plywood Girls wrap plywood in paper in preparation for loading it into an E & N railway box car. The E & N railway line was extended directly into ALPLY property during the Second World War. C. 1945.\*

\* All four photographs from the MacMillan Bloedel collection of ALPLY photographs, by permission of George McKnight.

made up approximately 30 per cent of the plywood mill workforce. The percentage of female employees in the mill declined further after 1959 due to MB's informal but effective policy to stop hiring women – a practice that went unchallenged for years by the male-dominated International Woodworkers of America (IWA) Local I-85. This female hiring freeze lasted until 1972 when, facing a labour shortage (as it did at the outbreak of the Second World War), MB again sought to employ women in assembly production jobs.<sup>24</sup> The closure of Alberni Plywoods in April 1991 was a serious blow to the community, especially to female forest workers. The mill had been one of the few places in town to provide well-paid and steady work (with benefits) for women with relatively low levels of education and/or training. When the mill closed, 53 of the 382 workers who lost their jobs were female (interview with Dave Steinhauer, Second Vice-President, IWA Local I-85, September 1996).

The low number of female workers in Port Alberni's forest sector is also indicated by the poor representation of women in local forest-sector unions. IWA Local I-85 represents the bulk of the forest workers in the area, including most of those working in the woods and the local sawmills. Because of restructuring, the membership of IWA Local I-85 has dropped significantly over the past few decades: between 1979 and 1996 it decreased from over 6,300 members to approximately 3,200. In 1996, just over 100 members (3 per cent) of IWA Local I-85 were female (Steinhauer interview). Interviews conducted in late 1996 with members of the all-male executive of IWA Local I-85 indicated that the small percentage of female membership and the sexual divisions in the industry in general were not perceived to be a serious problem. According to First Vice-President Larry Rewakowski, the union had no plans, policies, or intentions to address the issue (telephone interview, August 1996). He himself believed policies and practices aimed at challenging conventional ideas about the gender of forest workers were unnecessary, since all IWA members, regardless of sex, were treated equally. There is no doubt that for women who manage to

<sup>24</sup> The 1970s was a period of economic expansion in the forest industry in Port Alberni, and MB was faced with a labour shortage and an unstable male workforce. Because of the easy availability of work there was a high turnover of male employees in the plywood plant. Many men would work for only a few months, quitting either for a more lucrative job or for leisure (jobs were so plentiful at that time that they always could find another job when their savings were exhausted). Also, out of necessity the plywood plant's labour force included a significant number of young male employees who engaged in dangerous "horse play" on the factory floor. The company began rehiring female former (experienced) millworkers because they were more stable and productive workers. See Klausen (1998).

capture and retain unionized forest-production jobs, union practices such as ensuring workers have bumping rights based on seniority are of great benefit. However, Rewakowski's overly positive assessment, which was also shared by Dave Haggard, then president of Local 1-85, demonstrates a total lack of awareness of the historic barriers to equitable access to forest-sector jobs.<sup>25</sup> The fact that Local 1-85 has not taken steps to redress the male domination of forest-production jobs demonstrates that the most important forest-sector union in Port Alberni is itself an obstacle to women achieving equal access to unionized, well-paid work and status in the Port Alberni economy. By ignoring the sexual division of labour in forestry, Local 1-85 reinforces and perpetuates women's economic marginalization.

The other major forest-sector union is the Communication, Energy, and Paperworkers Union (CEPU Locals 592 and 686), which represents workers in the pulp and paper mill. As of late 1996, CEPU Local 686, representing workers in the paper-making section of the mill, had 6 female members out of a total membership of 210. Of all union locals examined for this study, Local 686 was by far the most enlightened and effective of forest-sector union locals with regard to redressing gender discrimination in the workplace. Dale Marcellus, President of CEPU Local 686, acknowledged the lack of female membership as a problem and noted that the union had been attempting to address issues of sexual harassment on the job.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the IWA and CEPU locals in Port Alberni, the local of the Office and Technical Employees Union (OTEU) is predominately female. The OTEU represents office workers at Alberni Specialties. As of late 1996, there

<sup>25</sup> As described throughout this article, these barriers include: women's responsibility for housework and child care; sex-typing of forestry jobs; the male culture that dominates in the forest industry and unions; the pressure put upon women to quit forest-production jobs in periods of downsizing; and the union's focus on protection for its members, which neglects the plight of non-unionized workers, many of whom are women. Elsewhere, Klausen (1998) discusses the hiring boycott against women in Alberni Plywoods from 1959 to 1972. Historically, the struggle for the "family wage" – the idea that the male wage-earner should earn enough to provide for his wife and children – provided the IWA with an incentive to organize in British Columbia during the 1930s and 1940s (Diamond, cited in Stanton 1989, 89). As Connelly and MacDonald (1983, 47) note, the new era of industrial manufacturing led to "a greater economic dependence of women on men and an almost total dependence of the family on the wage" for survival. As a result of the "family wage" men were able to ensure that women maintained responsibility for child care and housework and that they refrained from competing with men for well-paid, unionized jobs.

<sup>26</sup> For example, when women first joined the labour force at the pulp and paper mill in the mid-1970s, the workers' lunchroom walls displayed pornography. Women asked that it be removed, and the union, along with management, ensured that it was. Also, training for Local 686 shop stewards regularly includes a component that deals with equity issues (interview with Dale Marcellus, President of Local 686, Communication, Energy, and Paperworkers Union, September 1996).

were only 27 members in the Port Alberni local. Of the 17 female members, 15 were clerical workers and 2 were technicians.

While the information presented here does not provide a complete description of Port Alberni's forest sector – for example, contractors and a few small employers were not analyzed – it does provide a general picture of the low percentage of women employed in the sector. With the exception of Alberni Plywoods, production jobs in forestry have been, and continue to be, overwhelmingly held by men. Port Alberni is certainly not unique in this regard. Other forest-dependent towns in British Columbia show a similar pattern: in Williams Lake women make up 12 per cent of the total forest-sector labour force, in Cranbrook they make up 14 per cent of forest workers, in Terrace 6 per cent, and in Campbell River 10 per cent (CS/RESORS Consulting 1997). Across the province women represent 12 per cent of the total forest-sector labour force. Even in Alberni Plywoods jobs were (informally but effectively) designated male and female. It is also clear that in Port Alberni most women who do work in the forest sector are employed in traditional female occupations, such as clerical or administrative support and other forms of office work, although there are an increasing number of women employed in professional positions within both the public and private sector (many of these in human resources departments).

#### GENDER AND ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING IN PORT ALBERNI

Throughout the post-war period and up to the late 1970s, Port Alberni experienced steady economic growth, largely due to a booming forest sector. The production workforce was strongly unionized and, despite relatively low levels of education and training, enjoyed high wages. Both capital and labour benefited from this model; productivity and profit increased while workers enjoyed high wages.<sup>27</sup> During the long post-war boom, Port Alberni forest workers earned some of the highest incomes in Canada. For example, in 1975 Port Alberni had the third highest average income in the country. In 1978, the town ranked fourth in Canada for average income (this ranking included only cities that had a population of 12,700 or more tax filers).

In 1980, the community's economic fortunes took a turn for the worse. In Canada and elsewhere, this year marked the beginning of a

<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that workers and management had a cozy relationship; labour disputes were common and often bitter throughout this period. Indeed, because of the economic boom and high demand for labour, workers enjoyed a relatively strong bargaining position.

long period of economic crisis and stagnation. British Columbia's forest industry was deeply affected – forest-product firms began to lose money, production levels were cut, and lay-offs followed. Hayter and Barnes (1997, 7) have described the restructuring of British Columbia's coastal forest sector during the 1980s and 1990s as a process of moving from "a regime of mass production or Fordist style manufacturing to a regime emphasizing some form of economic flexibility." As they note, this restructuring was part of a general transformation driven by powerful economic forces such as technological change, differentiating markets, and increasing global competition. The shift to economic "flexibility" was a strategy on the part of large firms to maintain profitability, and it was exacted at a heavy cost to workers, their families, and forest-dependent communities. Particularly significant in the shift to flexible production was the reorganization of the workforce: to minimize labour costs, companies discarded large numbers of forest workers and replaced them with part-time and casual workers. Between 1979 and 1982, over 21,000 jobs were lost in the province's forest industry. By 1982, unemployment in the forest sector was 19.2 per cent compared to just 6.4 per cent three years earlier (Grass and Hayter 1989, 244).

In Port Alberni as elsewhere, MB began to transform its forestry operations. At Alberni Pulp and Paper the production of paperboard was phased out as the company began the shift to the production of higher-value papers. Later, in 1993, the production of market pulp, another low-value commodity, was also discontinued. A similar process began in the company's sawmills: in 1980, MB's Alberni Pacific Division became the first sawmill on the BC coast to shift away from the mass production of commodity lumber and towards the production of higher-quality, value-added products. This represented the move towards flexible modes of production; mills were modernized to produce higher-value products, and productivity was increased by replacing workers with computer-controlled machines.<sup>28</sup>

Port Alberni's forest-sector labour force suffered dramatically: during 1982 and 1983, approximately 2,000 MB employees in the area lost their jobs. In 1985, just as the provincial economy and the forest sector were beginning to emerge from the recession, Port Alberni's unemployment rate remained high, at 17.1 per cent (Census Canada 1986). While the town's residents were accustomed to "boom-and-bust" economic cycles associated with a forest sector dependent on

<sup>28</sup> See Hayter and Barnes (1997) for a full description of the forest sector restructuring process.

international markets, in the past the downturns were relatively mild and short-lived, and once they passed jobs that had been lost were regained. However, the recession of the 1980s proved to be different: it was more severe, and once the economy began to recover it did so only very slowly. Many forest-sector jobs were lost permanently.

By the late 1980s Port Alberni's economy had recovered somewhat, and a few years of relative stability ensued. However, this stability was short-lived, as the early 1990s brought a new round of restructuring. In 1991 and 1992, another 1,000 workers were laid off in MB's Port Alberni operations.<sup>29</sup> The first major blow came with the closure of the Alberni Plywoods plant in April 1991, which put 382 production workers out of work, including 53 women. The closure of the Somass A sawmill in August 1991 caused the loss of a further 110 jobs. In March 1992, another 100 workers were laid off when the company closed down the Kraft Mill. During the 1991-2 period, MB also laid off many employees in its local (Alberni) Woodlands Logging Division (British Columbia Job Protection Commission 1991). Although most of the lay-offs occurred in 1991 and 1992, MB continued to reduce its Port Alberni workforce in the following years. In 1993, the company cut a total of 53 workers from its forestry crew and another 130 employees from its manufacturing operations. Table 5 illustrates the reduction of MB's Port Alberni workforce between 1980 and 1996.<sup>30</sup>

The restructuring had a devastating psychological impact on Port Alberni residents. After years of steady employment and high wages, many long-time residents recall with great clarity the feelings of anxiety, powerlessness, frustration, and anger generated by layoffs and economic insecurity during the recession of the early 1980s (Hay 1993). Forest-sector workers, most of whom had little formal education and had worked as loggers or millworkers all their lives,

<sup>29</sup> According to a list provided by the British Columbia Job Protection Commission, 1,038 MB employees were laid off during 1991-2. This figure was related to the authors by Karen Cooke of McDaniels Research Limited (telephone interview, October 1996).

<sup>30</sup> The restructuring and layoffs reverberated throughout the community. Previously a preferred destination for people seeking work, by the mid-1980s Port Alberni had become a place people were leaving to search for work elsewhere. Between 1976 and 1986, there was a net outmigration of 2,000 people. Statistics on outward migration show that people of all ages were leaving Port Alberni during the period between 1981 and 1987 (British Columbia Statistics 1996). However, outward migration was greatest for those under forty-five years of age, an indication of the large number of young workers in Port Alberni who were laid off during the early 1980s. Even as late as 1995 Port Alberni's population was still below what it had been two decades earlier. A British Columbia Statistics study from 1994 cited the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District as one of the slowest growing regions in British Columbia during the early 1990s (British Columbia Statistics 1994).



TABLE 5  
*Employment Levels at MacMillan Bloedel's Port Alberni  
 Forestry Divisions, 1980, 1986, 1991, and 1996*

	NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES			
	1980	1986	1991	1996
Woodlands	1700*	1090	1060	815
Somass Sawmill	1064	588	509	450
Alberni Pacific Sawmill	650	533	476	541
Alberni Pulp & Paper	1522	1316	1340	958
Alberni Plywoods	450	377	0**	—

Source: Figures for 1980, 1986, and 1991 from Barnes and Hayter (1994); Figures for 1996 from Darlene Donaldson (personal interview 1996).

\* Estimate.

\*\* Plywood Mill closed in April 1991.

were faced with the prospect of searching for another line of work – something for which most of them were very ill-prepared. One woman who lost her job at Alberni Plywoods in 1991, after three decades of employment, compared the experience of losing her job to one of exile: “It was kind of like losing your country. That was your livelihood, your way of life, your routine. When that last sheet of plywood went through the green chain, in fact, I couldn’t go to work ... I just wouldn’t let them see me in tears. It was awful ... I was 53, I think. Too young to retire but too bloody old to work anywhere else.”<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that the recession of the early 1980s forced many women out of the province’s forest-sector labour force. Indeed, as Hayter and Barnes (1992, 342) reported, women forest workers were very severely affected. In their survey of manufacturing plants, these authors found that between 1981 and 1986 the overall decrease in forest-production workers was 18.6 per cent. However, in relative terms, the restructuring process of the early 1980s affected women more severely than it did men: 32.3 per cent of female wood-production workers lost their jobs, compared to 18 per cent of male wood-production workers. In addition, a study by Grass and Hayter (1989) of layoffs in sixty-three different forest-products plants across British Columbia in the early 1980s showed that, proportionally, women were more severely affected by layoffs than were men, and this was especially true for the Coast. The authors observed that “an important result of the recession was to weaken further the already

<sup>31</sup> An interview by Klausen with a former Plywood Girl in 1995.

marginal position of female employment in the processing plants of the forest products industry" (245). This impact was likely related to the historically marginal position of women in the forest labour force; being low on the seniority list, women were often among the first to be laid off.

An analysis of census data from 1981, 1986, and 1991 provides some clues as to how women were affected by economic restructuring in Port Alberni during the 1980s. In 1981, 47.8 per cent of all females of working age were involved in the paid labour force (5 per cent lower than the provincial average for women). In contrast, 83.3 per cent of all males of working age were in the paid labour force (5 per cent higher than the provincial average). By 1986, the female participation rate had dropped to 41.5 per cent, 14 per cent below the provincial average. The male participation rate also fell significantly to 74.2 per cent by 1986, virtually the same as the provincial average for males. By 1991, the female participation rate had increased to 50.4 per cent, still almost 10 per cent below the provincial average. While the percentage of Port Alberni women back in the paid workforce (or looking for work) increased between 1986 and 1991, the same was not true for men in the town. In 1991, 74.5 per cent of working-age males in Port Alberni were in the paid labour force, slightly lower than the provincial average for that year and virtually unchanged from 1986 (see Table 1). These figures show that, despite a drop in the female participation rate between 1981 and 1986, over the period between 1981 and 1991 women came to represent a greater percentage of the labour force in Port Alberni, mostly due to the large decrease of men involved in the paid labour force and the need for women to compensate for men's lost wages.

While statistics for male and female unemployment in Port Alberni's forest sector have not been documented for this period, it is clear that the overall unemployment rate for women in the town rose dramatically between 1981 and 1986. In 1981, the overall unemployment rate for women in Port Alberni was 13.7 per cent. By 1986 it had risen to 21.5 percent, much higher than the unemployment rate for men in Port Alberni (14.8 per cent in 1986). This was also much higher than the overall provincial unemployment rate for women (13.4 per cent in 1986). By 1991, the female unemployment rate in Port Alberni had dropped to 15.6 per cent, still far higher than the provincial rate for women and the male unemployment rate in Port Alberni (Table 6). Further research is needed to uncover the

TABLE 6  
*Official Unemployment Rate for Men and Women in  
 Port Alberni and British Columbia, 1981, 1986, and 1991*

	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE					
	1981		1986		1991	
	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN	MEN
Port Alberni	13.7	7.3	21.5	14.8	15.6	13.5
British Columbia	7.7	5.6	13.4	12.9	10.5	10.1

Source: Census Canada (1981, 1986, 1991).

extent of the impact of restructuring on women not only in Port Alberni, but also in forest-dependent communities across British Columbia. While it is clear that the restructuring process has affected both male and female forest workers in Port Alberni, for women this process further reduced their (already poor) chances of finding well-paid work in the forest sector.

#### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: WOMEN IN PORT ALBERNI'S CHANGING ECONOMY

Sexual divisions have long been apparent in the BC economy. Women who have entered the paid labour force have been likely to earn much less than men and have tended to be concentrated in typical female occupations; few women have found work in industrial or goods-producing industries. In resource-dependent communities such as Port Alberni, these divisions have been even more pronounced. Forestry has always been seen as a male preserve (as have mining, fishing, and other resource industries), and the examples of female forest-production workers are few and far between. Given the central importance of this sector to the Port Alberni economy, this has meant that women's participation in the town's formal economy has almost always been marginal. One female Port Alberni resident put it simply, noting that "Port Alberni is a male-oriented town; women are mere tokens in men's traditional workplace."<sup>32</sup>

During the process of economic restructuring in Port Alberni, these sexual divisions were emphasized and reinforced. Many of the women who did hold jobs in the forest sector either lost their jobs due to mill closures (e.g., Alberni Plywoods) or were laid off at a relatively

<sup>32</sup> Survey respondent.

higher rate than were men because of their relatively low level of seniority. These experiences show that the shift to flexibility has had a negative impact on women in Port Alberni: pre-existing sexual divisions have simply been reproduced in a transformed labour market, and women's subordination continues. Our conclusion confirms Stanton's (1989, 157) observation that "the persistence of ... patriarchal gender divisions in resource towns ... indicates that the economic realities of the flexible regime have in no way undermined gender inequality." As Henry and Franzway (1993, 127) conclude more generally: "The extent to which the social relations of work have been or can be transformed in the new labor market remains problematic and particularly so [...] for women."

As indicated earlier, women are entering the paid labour force in ever greater numbers: this is no less true for Port Alberni than it is for British Columbia in general. While job prospects are bleak for many in Port Alberni, they are particularly poor for women. Given continued downsizing in forestry, it is unlikely that there will be many opportunities for women in Port Alberni's traditional forest sector (i.e., existing logging and milling operations). Marchak (1983) noted that, in the late 1970s, the public sector provided the best employment opportunities for women in forest-dependent communities. While employment prospects for women in the Port Alberni public sector may still be better than those in the local private sector, national and provincial concerns about debt and deficit have restricted the entry of new recruits, female or male, into government jobs.

In Port Alberni, unions have a key role to play in challenging gender discrimination in the forest industry, and, while one union has promoted gender equality, the stark fact is that most forest-sector unions in Port Alberni have not. The record of Port Alberni's major forest-sector employer has been equally poor: apart from the case of Alberni Plywoods, and to a limited extent in its other operations, MB has not made it a priority to hire women as production workers. The record of the provincial government in promoting gender equity in the economy has been mixed. In British Columbia, the Employment Equity Program (EEP) has resulted in positive, if incremental, government-wide change for women in areas such as upper-level management where, historically, they have been under-represented (Public Service Employee Relations Commission 1997).<sup>33</sup> More specific to the forest sector, the Ministry of Forests (MOF) has implemented the EEP by identifying systems and practices that are

barriers to women entering the ministry and that make it difficult to retain female employees. Until now, efforts to create a "level playing field" for women in public-sector forestry have not achieved a great deal in numerical terms.<sup>34</sup> However, according to the MOF equity officer, important gains are being made in the corporate culture of the ministry, which is shifting from being a discriminatory to a more accepting workplace for women and other designated groups (interview with Blanche Congdon, Equity Officer, MOF, 15 April 1998). Change will be slow in an era of corporate budget restrictions, but at least now the ministry's commitment to employment equity has been institutionalized. Forest-sector employers and unions should follow the example of the EEP and identify and remove barriers that prevent women (and other designated groups) from obtaining training and employment. While the EEP within the BC public service has opened up new opportunities for women, other state policies have hindered women's full participation in the economy. The failure of either the federal or the provincial government to develop and fund a comprehensive daycare program clearly restricts women's ability to enter the paid workforce or to seek training. Many women in Port Alberni identify the lack of affordable daycare as a major barrier to their finding employment; when asked what could be done to assist women in finding work, one woman summed up the frustration of many by replying, "Child care, child care, child-care options."<sup>35</sup>

The BC Crown corporation Forest Renewal BC potentially has a key role to play in providing employment opportunities for women in forest-dependent communities. Forest Renewal BC was established by the provincial government in 1994 to renew British Columbia's forests and the forest sector. Key aspects of its mandate are creating jobs and "strengthening local communities that depend on the forest industry" (Forest Renewal BC 1996a, 1). One of the principles guiding the Forest Renewal BC funding process is that projects "should help

<sup>33</sup> The Employment Equity Program was established by the Public Service Employee Relations Commission's (PSERC) Equity and Diversity Division.

<sup>34</sup> In July 1994, women constituted 12.7 per cent of licensed science officers, 14.5 per cent of forest technicians, and 14.7 per cent of scientific technical officers in the MOF. In July 1997, women constituted 16.1 per cent of licensed science officers, 11.9 per cent of forest technicians, and 17.1 per cent of scientific technical officers in the MOF. In 1997, many forest technicians were reclassified as scientific technical officers. Source: British Columbia Statistics: Labour and Social Statistics Section. Targets and outreach efforts in MOF have focused to date on northern locations and professional occupations (interview with Blanche Congdon, Equity Officer, MOF, 15 April 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Survey respondent. See Egan and Klausen (1996) for the number of responses relating to women's need for child-care services.

enhance long-term community stability and emphasize local employment" (4). To achieve this, Forest Renewal BC has been investing large amounts of public money in retraining and in projects that provide employment in forest-dependent communities. To date, Forest Renewal BC has targeted this spending towards displaced forest workers, the majority of whom are male. In addition, it is committed to ensuring that the First Nations are given "full access to all community economic development activities and investments" (Forest Renewal BC 1996b, 1). The economic welfare of both designated groups – displaced forest workers and First Nations – is rightfully identified as a priority by Forest Renewal BC. However, women deserve equal concern and attention. Because of their past marginal position within the forest sector, relatively few women find themselves eligible for retraining or employment in Forest Renewal BC's programs.

That the marginalization of women's economic status in forestry towns can be addressed through equitable hiring practices has been demonstrated by the approach taken by the BC Transportation Financing Authority (TFA), another Crown corporation, in achieving its hiring objectives for the Vancouver Island Highway Project (VIHP). The TFA's wholly owned subsidiary, Highway Constructors Limited (HCL), was established to be the employer of construction labour for all provincially funded highway projects valued at more than \$50 million, including VIHP. HCL's mandate is to ensure that communities gain maximum benefits from nearby highway construction, and it is committed to training and hiring local workers, including members of "traditionally disadvantaged groups" – people with disabilities, people from visible minority groups, First Nations people, and women. Beginning in 1994, HCL supplied the VIHP with construction labour and has achieved impressive results with regard to employment equity: 93 per cent of the work on the VIHP has gone to Vancouver Island residents, and in 1997, 17.7 per cent of the workers were from designated equity groups (a much higher proportion than the average 1 per cent to 3 per cent hired in the road construction industry across Canada). In 1997, as many as 8.7 per cent of VIHP workers were female (telephone interview with Brian Simmons, Communications Manager, Highway Constructors Limited, Nanaimo, 1998).<sup>36</sup>

HCL's recognition of the importance of hiring people from designated equity groups offers a positive model and is based on the belief

<sup>36</sup> Job classifications included in the statistics cited were: bricklayer, carpenter, cement mason, ironworker, labourer, operating engineer, painter, piledriver, plumber and pipefitter, technical/clerical, and teamster (Simmons 1997).

that everyone deserves the right to compete equally for jobs and that the workplace should reflect the diversity of a community. Forest Renewal BC has adopted a similar model for hiring workers for its projects. The Crown corporation recently signed a collective agreement with the IWA to form New Forest Opportunities Limited, a company to be responsible for the hiring of workers for Forest Renewal BC-funded projects. Workers will be hired from a labour pool made up of people from three designated groups: displaced forest workers, First Nations, and "other local unemployed" people. While this is similar to the TFA/HCL model, it differs in at least one important respect: women are not included as a separate designated group. This oversight is indicative of the lack of attention paid to gender issues in the forest sector, by employers, governments, and the major forestry unions. Without the recognition that women are marginalized in forestry towns and a commitment that women will play an equitable part in the future of these communities, Forest Renewal BC runs the risk of reinforcing existing gender inequality.

What, then, are the prospects for women's equitable involvement in Port Alberni's economy? We have shown that the trend towards a flexible labour market in coastal forestry, including Port Alberni, has already had a negative impact on women's position in the local forest industry and the formal economy in general. Yet, heeding the injunction to "avoid an overly deterministic approach which sees the gender division of labour as unassailable" (Henry and Franzway 1993, 141), we suggest that the current structural changes in forestry may also provide opportunities to end the male-domination of this industry. The disintegration of the labour-capital compact in forestry can potentially disrupt the mutually beneficial arrangement between them that, until now, has generally excluded women from forestry's labour force. In particular, emerging fields within forestry, such as watershed restoration, enhanced silviculture, environmental clean-up, inventory, and value-added processing, may offer significant employment opportunities to women in Port Alberni and other forest-dependent communities. However, unless it becomes a priority to train and hire women in these fields (as in the TFA/HCL model), new occupations will likely be captured by male workers who already have some experience in forestry and more union seniority. Our view of the history of women's gains and losses in the struggle for equality in paid and unpaid labour has made us realize that any improvement to women's economic position in the restructuring forest industry, and forest-

dependent community economies as a whole, will only be brought about through intense mobilization. Women and the men who support them will have to join together and confront (in some cases continue to confront) unions, employers, and governments and demand that they create an equitable role for women in the economy.

Whether in the home, workplace, unions, or political arena, women in Port Alberni encounter dichotomized and discriminatory ideas about what constitutes “women’s work” and “men’s work.” However, with a material shift in the economy, these ideas may become more susceptible to transformation. Women in the community indicate the need to challenge traditional attitudes towards work: One woman suggested that an important step in that direction is to “encourage women that they can do anything, that they can try male-dominated professions.”<sup>37</sup> Port Alberni’s future lies not in a return to some golden era of forestry, as some would hope, for those days are gone forever; rather, the community’s economic future lies in making the successful transition from a “company town” to a community with a more diverse economic base that creatively utilizes available labour resources, including women. As the community struggles to adapt to a rapidly changing economy, the marginal position of women in the formal economy will have to be addressed.

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<sup>37</sup> Survey respondent.



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