

FREE TRADE MAY HURT WOMEN MOST

by Eleanor Brown and Michelle Lalonde

HALIFAX (CUP) - A free trade deal will leave thousands of Canadian women jobless and could allow American companies to dictate the future of day-care services in this country according to a Toronto-based economist.

"Women will be disproportionately affected by free trade, and it has to do with the areas in which they work. In the manufacturing sector they work in industries which are extremely vulnerable. And most women are concentrated in just a few industries, like textiles and clothing. These industries are going to take a real beating with free trade," said Marjorie Cohen, a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE).

Canadian and American negotiators came to an agreement last week which would lift many tariff and non-tariff barriers between the two countries. The pact must be accepted by legislatures in both countries and would come into effect January 1, 1989.

Cohen said the October 3 deal was "worse than anybody expected in their wildest imaginations. The



disputes settlement mechanism is just absurd."

Cohen added that there have been no convincing signs that the Mulroney government will introduce adequate job adjustment programmes to address the retraining needs of displaced workers.

Women make up 75 per cent of the labour force in the already-ailing textiles industry, Cohen said. Many of the workers are female immigrants, have less education than the Canadian average, or are older women with children.

"Women are not at all well-served by the training programmes which exist. They are designed for male-type jobs. Most women who will lose their jobs will not have the education or the experience they will need to get into retraining programmes. Immigrant women and poor women cannot be retrained easily for these high tech jobs which (free-trade advocates) say will become available. It just won't happen."

Cohen said an agreement between the two countries will jeopardize the delivery of social services. Even decisions on day care will be taken out of Canadian hands, she charged.

American firms, including large, private day-care companies, are eager to set up shop in this country, Cohen said. But they are upset over what they perceive to be unfair subsidies to Canadian

businesses. Since Canadian non-profit child care centres are given government subsidies, the American firms will want money too.

"So this whole issue," said Cohen, "which is a great debate now in Canada - over whether you should have profit or non-profit day care - will be completely out of our hands. It will be decided by trade law."

And a free-trade deal could have a devastating impact on jobs in the service sector, which has provided the majority of new employment prospects for women in this century, Cohen said.

The service sector employs nearly 83 per cent of all women in the labour force, so changes resulting from free trade will have a stronger impact on women than on men. That includes jobs in banks, insurance companies, in the data processing field, and clerical jobs.

"These are very important jobs for women - and they are very seriously under threat," said Cohen.

Cohen and three other women were commissioned by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women to produce three working papers on Free Trade and its effect on women. While Cohen's paper points to the dangers and disadvantages for women, economist Katie MacMillan says that a free

trade deal would be beneficial to women as workers and consumers.

MacMillan's report concludes, "the most important accomplishment of a free trade agreement would be to give Canadian women the opportunity to leave poor jobs in industries already seriously threatened by world competitive pressures and find new employment and better prospects in growing industries elsewhere in the economy."

"The jobs that these women have and that they don't want to lose seem to be the most horrible jobs....," said MacMillan.

MacMillan refutes claims by Cohen and others that women face greater barriers than men in relocation and retraining.

"Recent studies of displaced workers show that women adjust better than men to shifts in the job market," said MacMillan. "They are unemployed for shorter periods of time between jobs and they tend to move into higher paying jobs than their previous jobs, whereas men tend to get jobs that pay the same or less."

But MacMillan added that since women usually have such lower paying jobs in the first place, "they have nowhere to go but up."

MacMillan also said that the removal of tariffs on basic necessities (food, shelter and clothing) which

account for a greater proportion of women's expenditures (than men's), would improve economic prospects for Canadian women.

Cohen disagreed.

"There is no evidence to support the claim that free trade will help consumers at all," she argued. "When tariffs and quotas on children's and men's shoes were lifted, not only were 1500 jobs lost in that industry but the price of children's shoes increased by 26 per cent."

"When the domestic market is gone, importers can charge whatever prices they like. People are pretty sophisticated; they know that prices don't fall," said Cohen.

Sylvia Gold, president of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW) said that the government-appointed Council does not take an official stand for or against free trade.

"One point that draws them (Cohen and MacMillan) together is the need for gradual labour adjustment programmes," said Gold, adding that the CACSW will continue to lobby for a ten year phase-out period of trade barriers for the least competitive and most labour-intensive trade areas which tend to employ a disproportionate number of women.

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