

**Herself/Elle-Même Report of the
Nova Scotia Task Force on the
Status of Women** Halifax, 1976.
Pp. 91.

A Task Force on the status of women was established by the Nova Scotia government in April 1975. Chaired by Dr. Mairi St. John Macdonald, this seven member group set itself the very laudable task of reporting to the government within a year. Consequently, their report, entitled Herself/Elle-Même, was made available to the government and the people of Nova Scotia this April.

In its terms of reference, the Task Force was to report on the status of women in Nova Scotia and to make recommendations for improving that status where necessary. The Task Force was also instructed to study the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (1970) in order to suggest to the provincial government which recommendations were specifically within its jurisdiction and should be implemented. Indeed, the list of such recommendations in Appendix B of the report shows that the Nova Scotia government has not implemented or only partially implemented most of the forty-six recommendations made by the Royal Commission which do come within its jurisdiction. If one needed any evidence to convince people of the necessity of the Task Force, the documentation in Appendix B should be sufficient to demon-

strate to even the most sceptical that the status of women has not been of high priority to this provincial government.

The report of the Task Force is divided into eight areas of concern and puts forward ninety-five major recommendations. Thus there are recommendations for women who work in the home and for those who work outside; there are recommendations about child care and about opportunities for learning and further recommendations which deal with support services, health care, the law and the participation of women in the community. Taken together, the recommendations cover a very large area of our lives, are very varied and differ greatly with regard to their scope and the impact they are likely to have if implemented. For example, in the chapter entitled "Well-Being", recommendations deal specifically with the training of medical personnel at Dalhousie Medical School and with a call for research in particular areas such as male contraceptives and patterns of mental illness. Recommendations are also made about access for all women to adequate gynecological care, about the establishment of Well Women's Clinics and the necessity of eliminating sex-biased advertising by drug companies. The Task Force also recommends that the provincial government "urge the federal government to repeal those sections of the Criminal Code relating to abortion",¹ suggests that the provincial Departments of Education ensure that there are adequate sports and recreational facilities for women and that "the cost of yearly com-

plete physical examinations be covered by M.S.I. (medicare)".² (This last recommendation is undoubtedly a shock to most Nova Scotians as they were happily ignorant of the fact that such examinations are not covered by M.S.I.) These examples are an indication of the sorts of recommendations made by the Task Force, of their complexity and scope and of the fact that if the recommendations are to be implemented virtually every area of government will have to be involved. One might argue that writing the report was the easy part and that the real work will be to get it implemented.

The job of any Task Force is in many ways an unenviable one. While the possibility of making important suggestions to the government must be a challenging and exciting prospect, one must also be constantly aware of the likelihood that particular recommendations will not be acceptable to a government for either ideological or financial reasons. Should one strive for the utopian ideal in very short order or should the recommendations be directed towards a more gradual evolution of the society in the hope that the government and the public will support such measures? In so far as the report will be seen by some people as too radical and by others as too conservative and not sufficiently far reaching, one would suspect that the Task Force has made a good assessment of where Nova Scotians stand on these issues. For instance, the recommendations on the co-ownership of matrimonial property will be unsettling and threatening to some

who see such issues as being a male prerogative, while for others the suggestion that the legal changes (with the exception of the co-ownership of the family home) should not be retroactive but only apply to marriages taking place after the passage of law, will be seen as an unnecessarily weak position.

The Task Force undertook no new research except in relation to the Nova Scotia statutes which should be altered so that they apply equally to all people regardless of sex and the fact that the people of the province were invited to make their view known to the Task Force. To this end 49 public and private meetings were held throughout the province, 60 work sessions were organized and approximately 300 submissions were received. Given the limited time and resources of the Task Force, the decision to seek the opinions of the people in the province was correct in that the one thing about which nothing was known was what a broad range of Nova Scotians thought about the status of women. Nevertheless, in reading the report one is constantly reminded that there are issues about which we know very little. The report, therefore, has to act as an impetus to further research because overwhelmingly the questions are how and why did women get into such disadvantaged positions, how are these circumstances going to be changed and what will be the consequences? Those of us engaged in academic pursuits are only too well aware that we do not have the answers to these questions and yet they are basic to any fundamental and lasting improvement in

women's status.

Although we are a long way from answering such problems, the attention and research that has been directed to the status of women in recent years has affected our views and ideas. This report, for instance, does show a significant advance over the assumptions which were implicit in the Royal Commission's Report. While both see the present position of women as a consequence of the social and cultural traditions of the society in which we live, the Nova Scotia report does not share the assumption "that the present activities of and rewards for men are more interesting, more valuable, and more desirable than the present activities of and rewards for women. The unstated objective is to bring women up to the level of men and not--though now and again the possibility is skirted--to create equivalence in status and rewards for different styles and talents".³ In the Working Principles listed by the Task Force members and in the recommendations to the government it is very clear that the concern is to recognize a diversity of life styles and abilities and not to implicitly suggest that the only viable alternative for women is to enter the paid labour force. The guiding principle is that people should be able to choose their life styles but that those decisions have to involve real choices and are not to be decided by default because there are inadequate support services, lack of opportunities, prejudice or discriminatory legal arrangements. It is these short-comings that the Task Force set

out to rectify in order that women may truly be able to choose between attainable alternatives. Given this orientation the very diversified recommendations are sensible. Changes in family law would recognize the contributions made by homemakers, whilst changes in fringe benefits, equal pay legislation and affirmative action plans would take away some of the disadvantages which women in the labour force face. Opportunities for education and training, care of young children, access to medical care and the like are essential if women are to make a full contribution to Nova Scotia irrespective of the life style they choose.

I think that most people will be impressed by the report's fair and reasonable recommendations; the immediate question is whether the government will be favourably inclined towards implementing them. Perhaps because of this question, one of the most significant recommendations of the report is Recommendation 95 which states: "The Task Force recommends the establishment in Nova Scotia of a Ministry of State for the Status of Women, to give women a strong voice at the highest level of decision making in our province".⁴ Such a recommendation arises, in part, from bitter experience. Governments are too prone to ignore the recommendations of their commissions and task forces. The feeling all too frequently seems to be that in having called for a report a government thinks that "the problem has been dealt with." (A prime example of this in Nova Scotia is the Royal Commission on Education, Public Services and Provincial-

Municipal Relations, which after 3 years of study produced a 4 volume report in 1974 with over 1,400 recommendations, none of which have as yet been fully implemented.) The implementation of the report and the need for continuous improvements and changes are too readily ignored. Creating a special ministry would mean that there would be a representative in the cabinet whose prime responsibility is the status of women, rather than women being tacked on to some existing ministry as a secondary concern. One can already anticipate some of the counter arguments, particularly those relating to fiscal restraint. But perhaps the government could look long and hard at the Task Force's report before deciding that women's issues can again be assigned to, at best, a secondary position. What government can really say that issues which directly affect 50% of the population and indirectly the other 50% are not of top priority?

Read the report. It is interesting and challenging and constantly reminds us of how much remains to be done in understanding and promoting changes beneficial to women.

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NOTES

1. Herself/Elle-Même, Report of the Nova Scotia Task Force on the Status of Women, Halifax, 1976, p. 45.
2. ibid., p. 43.
3. Patricia Marchak, "A Critical Review of the Status of Women Report", Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, Vol. 9, Feb. 1972, p. 73.
4. Herself/Elle-Même, op. cit., p. 63.



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