

# *Apprenticeship Training Models for "Women's Work": The Norwegian Experience*

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by **Karl Dehli**

*Can a change in training programs and training requirements enhance the status, pay, and working conditions of women's work?*

**W**hen we discuss training and education for women, a focus is often to imagine how women can obtain qualifications for access to non-traditional, professional or managerial occupations. A lot of effort has gone into changing the conditions that exclude women from such jobs, or that make it almost impossible for women to do non-traditional work with integrity and dignity.

The Norwegian Union of Municipal Employees (NKF) has tried for the past ten years to incorporate apprenticeship training models and apprenticeship regulations as a way of improving the working conditions, wages and opportunities for women at the lowest levels of public sector employment. The union's double agenda is to improve the wages and working conditions of women, and to make traditionally female occupations more attractive to young women. The union argues that the terms and conditions of employment must change to recognize jobs in health, education and social services as skilled work. Such recognition would require women to go through a more extensive and organized training and education program, which will so the union predicts provide them with a broader base of skills and knowledge's, and hence greater security and portability in the labor market.

The union's initiatives have met with mixed responses and varying successes among women who work in these sectors, among different unions and professional organizations that organize women workers, and among employers, most of whom are municipal or federal government agencies.

For those interested in the conditions, organization, and recognition of women's paid and unpaid work in Canada, the Norwegian apprenticeship proposals raise some provocative questions. Can a change in training programs and training requirements enhance the status, pay, and working conditions of a group confined to a segregated area of employment? What are the implications for the social relations among workers in these sectors as a whole, especially with regard to professional and occupational boundaries? Is an apprenticeship model suitable as training and education for so-called feminine occupations? And finally, what is a skill, what should count as skilled labour?

## **Des modèles de formation dans le cadre du travail des femmes**

par **Kari Dehli**

Le Syndicat des employés municipaux de Norvège essaye depuis dix ans d'intégrer au travail traditionnel des femmes des modèles de formation et des règlements en matière d'apprentissage. Le programme vise à améliorer les conditions de travail et la rémunération des femmes fonctionnaires qui occupent les postes subalternes et à faire en sorte que les métiers traditionnellement féminins soient plus attirants pour les jeunes femmes. La stratégie principale: rendre les conditions d'emploi des femmes comparables à celles des hommes, c'est-à-dire leur offrir des contrats à plein temps et réguliers, reconnaître leur statut professionnel, leur formation et leurs

références. Comme la tentative de faire occuper aux femmes des postes traditionnellement masculins s'est soldée par un succès mitigé, les propositions norvégiennes auraient l'avantage de présenter aux femmes des modèles d'apprentissage masculins au lieu de forcer ces dernières à exercer des métiers "masculins".

Le syndicat a essayé par le biais de cette initiative de tourner la discussion portant sur les compétences, les aptitudes, la formation et la souplesse à l'avantage des femmes. Il espère mettre au grand jour les connaissances, les compétences et l'expérience nécessaires dans les métiers "féminins" pour pouvoir dire que le travail accompli par ces femmes exige tout autant de compétence que celui des hommes ou des femmes professionnels.

***In female dominated "caring" occupations, wages are low, work is part-time and categorized as unskilled.***

In Canada, researchers contracted by the Ontario Women's Directorate and policy analysts in the Ontario Ministry of Health have confirmed that women in health care and social service occupations receive low pay, work part-time and/or irregular shifts, and complain about stress and burnout. There may be a great deal for us to learn from the Norwegian initiative and experience, although it is important to keep in mind that the Norwegian context is a much more comprehensive welfare state, where there are very few private health care or social services agencies.

Many women who would be affected by the NKF proposals work in home-care and visiting home-making, others in municipal homes for the elderly or childcare centers. Their wages are low, their work is often part-time, and it is categorized as low-skilled or unskilled. Feminists and union activists in Norway have spent much time debating gendered ideologies of care, and how these do or don't coincide with cuts to state services, privatization and changes in the conditions of women's paid and unpaid labour (1). Though issues have included gender and class divisions of public and private "caring" labour, struggles for the six-hour work day, pay equity, pension reforms for part-time workers and gender quotas in public sector hiring and promotion practices, it would be an overstatement to characterize recent Norwegian health, education and welfare policies as feminist.

Norway is a small country with about four million inhabitants, most of whom are ethnic, white Norwegians. There is a small, but growing immigrant population in the large southern cities while a few thousand indigenous Same inhabit the north. Their history of colonization and domination by white Norwegians (as well as Finns and Swedes) closely resembles the treatment of native peoples in North America. It is important to note that Norwegian employers and the Norwegian state have not used immigration as a significant tool in post-war labour market policy. While a large number of workers in low-paid caring occupations in Canada are immigrant women, their counterparts in Norway are almost exclusively ethnic Norwegians.

The NKF represents 180,000 municipal workers in hospitals, homes for the aged, day-care centers, public transit, libraries, and various home-care programs. Since the mid-1970s the union has pursued several strategies to improve the conditions of female dominated occupations in the health care and social service sectors. But after years of centralized bargaining to effect a fairer wage distribution and ten years of equal pay legislation, large numbers of women in the health care, education and welfare system

continue to work part-time for low wages, and have few opportunities for mobility or advancement.

In the early 1980s the NKF began to argue that recruitment to the female dominated "caring" occupations would become more difficult while the need for health and social services would grow with an aging population (2). The union further predicted that turnover and attrition rates would increase unless something was done about wages and occupational status. The main strategy proposed was to make employment conditions for women more similar to those for men: full-time and regular contracts, with recognized occupational status, training and credentials.

Norwegian researchers had also begun to document some unsettling truths about girls' secondary schooling: it was dead-end, did not provide occupational qualifications, nor did it lead to certification or portable credentials that were of any value on the labour market. This contrasted with the very systematic ways in which "masculine" programs such as carpentry, plumbing, mechanics are directly linked into apprenticeships, and provide recognized certification (3).

Initially, the NKF focused its efforts on childcare assistants. Municipal governments are the largest providers of childcare services in Norway; municipal centers employ workers whose education is recognized and certified across the country, and assistants who often have little or no formal training or education beyond secondary school. Trained childcare workers carry out much of the administrative work, oversee relations with parents, and work directly with the children, while assistants work with the children, prepare food, supervise outdoor activities and so on. The division of labour between childcare workers and assistants is regulated by state policy and collective bargaining.



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The union came up with what they call a generalist scheme. This scheme aims to provide women working in areas such as home-help and day-care assistance with a training model that could improve their wages and occupational mobility, both geographically and institutionally. The generalist apprenticeship model would offer a combination of experiential and theoretical learning, workplace and school-based training, and promises of increased status if "women's work" could be seen as a trade or craft. Women already in these occupations were to be offered grandmother clauses, whereby their skills and experiences would be recognized and accredited.

When the NKF began to work on an apprenticeship training model for childcare assistants, the organization of childcare workers had a mixed response. Although they took part in discussions about curriculum and organization of training, they were concerned that job classifications would be altered to the detriment of their members as trained childcare assistants became a cheaper and more competitive source of labour for cash-strapped municipal employers (4). Pilot projects are underway in Bergen and Oslo, and it is not clear whether or how the tensions between the two groups of female workers will be resolved.

Apprenticeship training presumes certain models of learning: it begins with experience rather than theory and it moves in and out of learning and work. It is a working class

training system, regarded by working class men as a way of learning a job so that they can control access, obtain autonomy, organize collectively to protect employment, bargain for wages, negotiate job classifications and so on. The apprenticeship is also widely regarded in Norway as a solid and popular form of training. It has status attached to it, although it is a status hitherto reserved for working class men. As in Canada, attempts to "fit" women into traditional male apprenticeship have not paid off in terms of significant numbers, in spite of very dedicated efforts (5). The generalist proposal, then, brings "male" and working class models of learning to women's work, rather than bringing women to "male" employment.

This initiative could also have an effect on the class relations among women in the health and social service sector. As in Canada, there is a hierarchical division of labour between health/social service sector workers according to categories such as professional and non-professional, supervisors and front-line. While professionals such as nurses, social workers and teachers obtain their credentials and status through widely recognized and compulsory certification processes, non-professional and so-called unskilled workers may or may not have training, their employment is less secure, often part-time and low paid.

There is an intention built into the apprenticeship proposal to reach those who have been excluded from professional education and certification procedures those who take non-academic programs in secondary schools (or who drop out), or women who are returning to work after many years as full-time home-makers. In this way, one of the effects of the union initiative could be to reorganize class relations among women in affected sectors, to the advantage of the lowest paid and most vulnerable workers.

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Professional women in the health sector have responded with unease, seeing challenges to their skills and knowledge, and to training and education models through which they have been able to obtain relatively well-paid and protected jobs. These women are rightfully suspicious of the ways in which such a training model may be used by employers to split women, to transfer job classifications now held by professionals to lower paid workers trained through the apprenticeship model. For example, women who are trained and work as supervisors of daycare centers worry that better trained assistants may encroach on their turf, pushing supervisors out of dealing with children altogether and into solely administrative positions. As assistants will continue to be paid less, but will have better training, employers can argue that they can also take on a larger share of jobs. The same sort of arguments have been made about the distinction between nurses and nursing assistants (6).

Such fears are quite justified when public sector spending is under increased scrutiny and cuts are the order of the day, when conservative and social democratic governments alike adopt cost-efficiency models as measurements of productivity. At the same time there are large numbers of women whose working conditions and wages are completely out of step with the responsibilities they hold, and with the incomes they need to survive.

Through its initiative, the NKF has tried to turn the discussions of skills, competence, training and flexibility to the advantage of these women. They have tried to make visible the knowledge, skills and experience that are required in caring occupations, and to shift assumptions that such work "only" requires "naturally" feminine attributes. In this sense they are attempting to subvert the discourse and take the political initiative to say: What women do is important; what women do is hard; what women do requires knowledge

and experience; what these women do is just as much skilled work as what men or "professional" women do. The NKF argues that the type of know-how women develop during years of caring for children, managing households, budgeting, planning and preparing food, cleaning clothes and rooms, looking after the needs of others, is just as much a skill as those acquired by boys and men fixing cars and machines. In developing the proposal to bring training and regulation of caring occupations within the law governing apprenticeship, the NKF has been careful not to emphasize the wage implications, though it is widely recognized that workers who have a trade are better paid than those categorized as unskilled.



*Municipal government  
are the largest providers  
of childcare in Norway*

The union is therefore caught in a political dilemma. It must sell the proposal to employers who are concerned about wage implications, who will only accept the scheme if they can obtain a more flexible and skilled workforce, without having to pay higher wages for such a large group of employees. On the other hand, women who work in these occupations have an obvious interest in obtaining higher wages as a reward for taking training and further education. For them, the promise of higher status and recognition of their skills are empty gestures in the face of employers' demands that they be more available and flexible.

At the same time, the male trade union movement leadership has been reluctant to accept female caring occupations as skilled work. One women in the NKF talked about this experience at a public meeting: "We repeatedly meet male culture in the expressed views of those who give thumbs down to women's reasonable claims to fair and just reform" (7). Another women union leader very tellingly asked me to turn off my tape recorder when I asked her about the responses of the union leadership to the NKF proposals. Her disappointment and frustration with her male trade union comrades were palpable, but too volatile to be expressed in an interview.

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The response from organizations representing nurses, nursing assistants, teachers and early childhood educators has been to applaud for the initiative to organize more systematic education and training for women entering these occupations. Indeed, women themselves had pressed for this long before the union leadership launched their initiative. But they also see the need to critically assess the form and content of education for women, the possible effects the training may have, its organizational and workplace implications for groups who would be included or excluded from it.

These are difficult issues. Partly they are about defining the skills, knowledge's and competencies required to perform and organize certain kinds of work. Part of the solution may be a different approach to the notion of "skill." That is, we need to rescue skill from the idea that it consists of a capacity or possession of individuals, or that the degree of skill can be observed and measured directly in someone's performance of a job. Rather, skill must be seen as a feature of the social relations of education and work, and as part of ideological constructions which serve to divide people in the workplace. One of the key divisions which notions of skill serve to reinforce is the division between jobs done by women and men. As Phillips and Taylor, Jenson and others have argued, once you begin to look at what people actually do and what they need to know in order to do it well, you begin to see that the label "skilled work" is often attached to a job because of the male gender of the person usually performing it (8).

At the same time, however, we must acknowledge what workers learn by virtue of their experience or their training for a job. Thus, it is politically important to expand the notion of what counts as skilled work by claiming and defending women's knowledge and skills, while at the same time questioning the ways in which ideological notions of skill have been used to exclude women from many occupations.

The Norwegian health sector proposal is important here in its explicit objective to promote "feminine" occupations as skilled. That is, the work that women do in caring occupations is not something that we naturally know how to do; it is work which requires extensive knowledge and a wide range of learning and competencies. And, finally, it is work that warrants wages that are comparable to "male" skilled occupations, or to professional "female" jobs.

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1. See Harriet Holter (ed.) *Patriarchy in a Welfare State*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1984, and Anne Maie Berg, Randi Lavik and Inger Lise Solvang, *Tid til Likestilling? Likestillingstpolitikk og Tidsorganisering*. (Sex Discrimination and Public Policy, Norway 1970-1990, English Summary), Oslo: SIFO Report No.5, 1990.
2. This section of the paper is based on interviews with public and private sector union leaders, employer representatives, government administrators and policymakers involved in education, apprenticeship and training issues. In addition, I collected policy reports, official legislation and regulations, curriculum guidelines, union and management journals and reports, and newspaper, magazine and journal articles.
3. Runa Haukaa and Birgit BrockUtne, *Kunnskap Uten Makt*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1980.
4. "Omsorgsfag," *Rode Fane*, No.1, 1989, pp. 8- 12. (Interview with leaders of organizations in the health/welfare sectors about the generalist training proposal.)
5. Liv Mjelde, "Between Schooling and Work, Women and Vocational Training in Scandinavia," *Resources for Feminist Research*, 1984.
6. "Omsorgsfag," *Rode Fane*.
7. Margot Dvalvik Seter, speaking as representative of the Norwegian Union of Municipal Employees to Public Hearings on Wages and Gender (Lonn og Kjonnn). *Horingsrapport*, Oslo, 1987, p.61.
8. Jane Jenson, "The Talents of Women, The Skills of Men: Flexible Specialization and Women," in S. Wood, *The Degradation of Work (2nd ed.)*. London: Hutchinson 1988; Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, "Sex and Skill," in *Waged Work. A Reader*. (Collection of papers from Feminist Review) London: Verso, 1986.