

WOMEN IN ALASKA'S LABOR FORCE

by

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In the last two decades the role of women in the nation's labor force has grown tremendously. Improvements in technology, particularly in the home, and changing social attitudes are freeing women to seek employment in increasing numbers. As a result of the influx of women into the labor force, the demand for more information also has grown.

Results from the Current Employment Survey for the month of May indicate that women comprise approximately 32 percent of private nonagricultural wage and salary employment in Alaska. This is somewhat below the national ratio which has been between 37 and 40 percent during the last four years. The low percentage of women in Alaska's labor force is most likely due to the differences between the industrial composition of Alaska and the nation as a whole.

One outstanding difference has been the magnitude of the construction industry in Alaska. Due to the construction of the trans-Alaska pipeline, Alaska's construction industry is proportionately much larger than the construction industry in the rest of the country. Prior to construction of the trans-Alaska oil pipeline women had represented about 5 percent of construction employment in Alaska. This ratio improved to 8 percent during pipeline construction. As a result, the number of men working in Alaska's labor force grew at a much faster rate than women. Since completion of the pipeline, women's participation in the construction industry has remained relatively unchanged. In May of this year, Alaska's construction industry was still 92 percent male, which corresponds with the national ratio.

The ratio of women in Alaska's other industries varies widely from about 14 percent in mining to approximately 74 percent in the finance industry. As mentioned previously, differences in the ratio of women employed in Alaska and the nation are primarily due to industrial composition. For

example the logging and fish processing industries make up most of the manufacturing industry in Alaska. In Alaska, these industries historically have been male oriented. The manufacturing industry on the national level is much more diversified and includes industries such as textiles and electronics which employ a large number of women. Industries which tend to have a low percentage of women workers, are those thought to involve strenuous manual labor, geographic isolation, or specialized skills. In themselves none of these obstacles are insurmountable, however, social mores change slowly. The low percentage of women in mining (14%), construction (8%), and manufacturing (14%), may have been the result of long held social attitudes rather than the ability of women to perform the necessary work.

The trend for women to be channeled into what might be referred to as "traditional" jobs in the trade (44% women), finance (74% women), and services (38% women) industries has created a gap between earnings received by men and women. The Alaska Department of Labor's Job Service offices regularly report the average starting wages of persons who find employment through its offices. In May of 1974, the average starting wage for men was \$3.97. The average starting wage for women was \$3.26, which was only 82 percent of the average starting wage for men. During pipeline construction the starting wage for women was only 73 percent of the men's wage in 1975 and 76 percent in 1976. This gap has closed slightly in 1977. However women's starting wages still are only 80 percent of the average starting wage for men.

A major concern among all minority groups in the labor force is the loss of jobs during periods of economic decline. With the completion of the trans-Alaska oil pipeline, the number of jobs available in Alaska has dropped tremendously. The justifiable fear of "last hired first fired" though potentially a real threat to progress made by women in recent

years, generally does not appear to be the case in Alaska. Though the total number of unemployed men and women has increased significantly this summer, the ratio of unemployed men and women has remained proportionately the same as in past years. In May of 1974, 28 percent of those claiming unemployment insurance were women, as opposed to 25 percent during May of this year.

Generally, women in Alaska are entering the labor force at about the same rate as women in the rest of the nation. On the other hand, it is quite apparent that some barriers to employment still need to be overcome in Alaska and the nation before women will share equal employment opportunities with men.

