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# The Chilly Climate for Faculty Women at Western: Postscript to the *Backhouse Report*

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*Despite the great interest that the Backhouse Report had generated among members of the university community, little of substance appeared to be happening at the level of institutional change. Those seeking real and significant reforms began to wonder whether the Report would be ignored because of its historical nature and whether persistent inequities would be explained away as relics of an earlier era, unrelated to current procedures and practices. Given these concerns, a number of women began to think about updating the Backhouse Report and about documenting the "environmental" factors which have a negative impact upon women faculty.*

*Four faculty members, Constance Backhouse, Roma Harris, Gillian Michell, and Alison Wylie, conducted a series of interviews with a variety of faculty women during the summer of 1988. Their aim was to document the extent to which informal factors were creating problems within the workplace. These interviews were originally intended to serve as the background for testimony presented in public hearings that the University had been urged to hold on employment equity. However, none of the women interviewed was prepared to speak out publicly at the time. Consequently, Backhouse, Harris, Michell, and Wylie undertook to produce a second report which would provide the University community with an account of what they had learned in these interviews without disclosing the identities of the individuals concerned. Released in November 1989, this report came to be known as the Chilly Climate Report.*

*—Eds.*

## *The Chilly Climate Report*

### **I. Introduction: A Cold, Lonely Environment for Women**

In April 1988, Constance Backhouse released her report on the history of women faculty at the University of Western Ontario, raising questions about the Employment Equity Award it received in 1986. This report provides an update of Backhouse's study with a focus on recent history—the experiences of women faculty at Western in the last 15 years. It is based on interviews with 35 women, all but two of whom were employed at Western at the time. One had left some years earlier and the other had been interviewed for a permanent academic appointment but not hired. Six of the respondents have since left for more attractive, permanent positions elsewhere. Several others are actively seeking positions elsewhere. Although a number of factors inevitably shape these decisions, all who have left or plan to leave cite chilly climate issues as important. Two were quite clear that these were the primary motivations for leaving.

This report is intended to deal with the issue of gender discrimination, and as such it does not attempt to deal with the very serious problems of discrimination against women and men of diverse races, persons with disabilities, Native people, and other disadvantaged groups. We do not mean to suggest that these groups do not receive as much, if not more discrimination and harassment than White women.<sup>1</sup> However the representation of these groups among the Western faculty is still so negligible and undocumented that it is difficult to chart the extent and manifestations of the differential treatment.

All of the respondents have chosen to remain anonymous, and we have taken pains to ensure that their identity is not revealed by their accounts. There may come a day when those disadvantaged by discrimination feel they can identify themselves without exacerbating the problem. But at present, freedom of speech on these issues seems more like a distant dream. Threats of libel suits, professional stigmatization, and the multiple ways in which colleagues can evidence personal displeasure all combine to silence most discussion of this sort. For now, at least, the information must come by way of confidential sources.

The 35 respondents we interviewed described their experiences in a range of academic units across the campus including four professional or applied faculties as well as eight different departments from the Faculties of Social Science, Arts, and Science. Due to constraints of time, we have not tried to interview every woman in every faculty. We chose departments and faculties to represent a wide range of types of discipline and environment, and then interviewed as many of the women in these units as possible.



Not all women will feel that their experience is entirely captured by this report. However, we were overwhelmed by the number of times that our respondents described incidents that seemed to mirror problems related by other women at Western. In most cases there were three or four women who experienced the individual accounts which follow. Clearly these accounts represent something more than isolated instances of adverse treatment.

The focus of this research was not to unveil overt or intentional policies of discrimination. While examples of deliberate and conscious gender bias continue to exist in universities and elsewhere, not all those who discriminate intend to cause harm. The women who find themselves disadvantaged by differential treatment, however, often find little solace in the more benign motivation of discriminatory actors. It is the negative impact on the victims of discrimination which is the critical variable, not the ideology, understanding, or intentions of the discriminators. Accordingly, in this study, we sought to uncover the more subtle, underlying, pervasive attitudes and practices which systematically differentiate and disadvantage women relative to men. We might refer to these as "standing conditions" rather than explicit policies of exclusion.

We hope to illustrate that, as described in a recent Association of American Colleges (AAC) report, despite a widespread perception that "campus discrimination against women has ended" with the institution of legal provisions for equity, in many respects "things have not changed at all":

[T]he challenge of truly integrating women into academic life has not been surmounted by the passage of laws and the ending of many overtly discriminatory policies. . . . Men and women working in the same institution, teaching or studying in the same department, often have very different experiences from one another.<sup>2</sup>

There persist what the authors of the *Report* describe as "a host of subtle personal and social barriers" which often operate "below the level of awareness of both men and women." When recognized, they are perceived as "trivial" or "minor annoyances, micro-inequities" whose pervasiveness and cumulative effects are ignored. Most persist in refusing to recognize them as discrimination "even though they make women feel uncomfortable and put them at a disadvantage."<sup>3</sup> These barriers are constituted by conventional practices which communicate a lack of confidence in women, a lack of recognition, or a devaluation of their capabilities and successes. There is a clear understanding that those who deviate from the "norm," who depart from the characteristics of White, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle-class, gentile men, are still outsiders. Despite (indeed, perhaps because of) being informal and unconscious, these practices are particularly pernicious. Their effect is, predictably, that women's self-esteem is undermined and their

authority and credibility subverted in ways which ensure that they will not have an opportunity to realize their potential. The difficulty of identifying these barriers and the damage they do is well described by a senior male administrator at the University of Calgary, who says he is "ashamed to admit that it took me some time to recognize the kind of subtle but systematic discrimination that was being practised":

I first began to become aware of these attitudes when I saw how my Assistant Dean, a female, was treated ten years ago at otherwise all male meetings of Deans of Arts and Science. She received an elaborate courtesy that was not born of respect but, rather, of unease, and that made it clear that she was not perceived as another academic administrator to be judged on the basis of her competence, but as a different kind of creature. She was patronized and ignored. Much the same treatment has been recounted to me since then by other female academic administrators. The pain lies, as it would for any professional, in not being taken seriously.

My first reaction was to be both sad and frustrated, although nowhere near, I am sure, as frustrated as my female colleagues. . . . The sadness has since given way to impatience and anger. I am tired of watching my male colleagues project their own problems and inadequacies on any of my female colleagues who show some signs of competence. I have been particularly frustrated with the waste of talent which this involves.<sup>4</sup>

As this makes clear, the cost of such discrimination is not borne only by the women who are marginalized and undermined, but by educational institutions and by a society which, as a whole, can ill afford to squander the talents and capabilities of half the population. The *Association of American Colleges Report* concludes with the observation that the campus environment remains chilly for women "because good will alone is not enough." Substantial changes must be realized not just in explicit policies and formal, legal provisions for equity, but in the level of awareness about and concern with the ways in which "the campus is a different and far less supportive environment for women than for their male colleagues and peers."<sup>5</sup> Our aim in compiling information about the "environment" in which women faculty work at Western is to alert the University community to the demoralizing conditions that exist for women faculty within some of the departments on campus. It is discouraging that Western has not only an appallingly low percentage of women in full-time faculty positions, but that a number of women who have held these supposedly desirable appointments have chosen to leave as a result of their unpleasant experiences here.

It is not enough to simply recruit more women into faculty positions at Western—we have to examine their experiences once they get here, because, as one respondent put it, "For me, it's not solely a hiring issue any more, it's retaining women." Even if aggressive efforts were made to hire more women faculty, such efforts would be fruitless if the working environ-



ment remains so marginalizing, undermining, and unpleasant that women are unwilling to stay.

## II. The Hiring Process

### Interviews: Dispiriting, Perfunctory, and Inhumane

Before I came I heard comments from [a prominent scholar in her discipline from another Canadian university] and other feminists about Western's reputation for being insensitive to women. "Does she know what she's getting into?" they said. It made for an interesting beginning. [Respondent]

The undermining of women faculty often begins during the hiring process. At Western, as at other universities, hiring is a highly decentralized process. Candidates are recruited and interviewed by members of the department they hope to join, that is, by their colleagues. One respondent, an eminent scholar in her field now at another major Canadian university, described the experience of interviewing for an appointment at Western during the mid-1970s as "an ugly memory": "Gender discrimination is pandemic in academic employment. Its manifestations at [my current university] are virulent. But I have never encountered the disease in so florid and prideful a presentation as at Western."

After having completed her dissertation at a top-ranking American university and teaching there in a junior position, she was pleased to be invited for an interview for a position at Western. Western held special attraction for her because she had grown up in southwestern Ontario. After giving her presentation, which was poorly attended by department members in her area, she spent two days alone in a windowless office waiting for people in the department to come by and speak to her.

On her way to the airport, when she was "dispirited, misguidedly feeling personally responsible," she was told by a senior member of the department not to get her hopes up because "one of the most published scholars in the department had vowed that no woman would be hired so long as he was a member of the university and that the consensus among colleagues was that he was right to stand his ground." She was later offered a one-year job which she turned down — the tenure-track post went to a man.

Another respondent described a more recent recruitment visit. "I interviewed in the Spring of 198- for a teaching job here. Half of the questions I was asked were gendered in nature." One of the most frequently asked questions was: "How would you feel working in a department that is mostly male?" This respondent surmised: "They were trying to find out how feminist I was."

Several years ago, during another interview for a faculty position, one of the respondents recounted how she had been picked up from her hotel by a male faculty member, dropped off in his office, and left by herself with *The Globe and Mail* for an hour. "What was so astonishing about this," she said,

was that he left without saying anything. I wondered where he had gone, whether some unexpected emergency had arisen. I discovered shortly afterwards that all this time he was chatting next door with a male colleague. I guess his discomfort with a prospective female faculty member was such that he just couldn't bear to sit down and exchange pleasantries with me that morning.

Some respondents reported that their area of speciality had been singled out for sexist comment or derision during recruitment visits. One respondent described the scene after she was brought into the faculty lounge to meet the other members of the academic unit. "Prof. X burst in and said, 'I hear you're in the field of \_\_\_\_\_. So tell me, what's a nice girl like you doing in a field like that?'"

Where the candidate's field of specialty was a feminist one, this could provoke further abuse. Another respondent told of giving a recruitment seminar on her research on women. Shortly after the lecture, one of the men on the faculty stalked up to talk to her. "He was at pains to show me that he had worn his 'male chauvinist pig' tie (a tie with pink pigs, sporting the letters MCP on their behinds) during the seminar. He was so proud of that. I couldn't believe his arrogance and his insensitivity."

Sometimes these attitudes can appear to have a direct impact on hiring decisions. One respondent described attending the colloquia given by two women candidates competing to teach in one department:

The first gave an excellent colloquium, had a good curriculum vitae, and handled the questions with great confidence. The second was very nervous, didn't handle questions well, and wasn't nearly as competent or confident. However she was much prettier, and was dressed in a very feminine manner. The latter woman was selected for the job. I think that she was chosen because she was less threatening to the men in the department.

Other women candidates suffered complications that arose, not from their own making, but because they were married to male academics. On occasion, departments assume that an academic couple will only come as a unit. "One woman applied for a position," noted another respondent, "but she didn't get seriously considered. I think she wasn't treated seriously because we didn't want to hire her husband."

Where women are hired at the same time as their husbands, this can prove to be troublesome as well. One respondent had been hired at Western at the same time as her husband. She was the first woman ever hired to



teach full-time in her faculty, and some of the professors were uneasy about the development. "The most hurtful comment I heard was that I came in as part of a package deal with my husband," she told us. "One member of the faculty went around saying that the University would never have appointed me otherwise. I was astonished. It simply wasn't true, and furthermore, I never would have come if that had been the basis of the offer."

Another woman was hired while her partner was in the same department. She soon learned that it was widely assumed that she owed her job to her partner's intervention. She was most upset about these allegations, since her partner and the Chair of the Department had publicly specified that he would not be present at any of the interviews or meetings concerning her appointment. "In fact, everyone knew that he hadn't been involved, and yet it was assumed that it was purely my sexual interest that had got me the job; I was incensed."

### III. Conditions of Appointment

#### Limited-Term Appointments

The most sought-after academic positions are "tenure-track" appointments, which entail the possibility of a permanent career in the university. The *Backhouse Report* showed women holding only 9% of these positions at Western. "Limited-term" appointments, which are much less desirable, are generally for a specified period of time (typically one to three years), after which the employee's contract terminates. There is generally no prospect of permanent employment with these latter positions. A disproportionate number of women are found in the limited-term appointments at Western.

For many women on term appointments it is difficult to disentangle their treatment as women from that as members of an underclass, a "caste," as one respondent described it, of temporary but full-load instructors. Several described their departments as appointing as much as a third of their full-time faculty on term positions. It is one thing to justify these appointments as ones to "fill in" for permanent faculty on an occasional basis. It is quite another to set them up as continuously staffed, rotating appointments.

The savings for the department, of course, can be significant. The University avoids making long-term financial commitments. It covers as much as 50% or more of its teaching commitments by issuing rotating, entry-level contracts, thereby retaining considerable flexibility in staffing. However, the consequences for those filling these positions can be devastating.

One respondent was a woman who held a term position for five years (before moving out of the province to take a tenure-track job). She described the situation as one where three-quarters of the permanent faculty were men, but women made up a much higher proportion than this among the

term appointments. She clearly perceived an emerging caste system with an obviously gendered dimension. In her department this was coupled with a range of exclusionary and discriminatory practices. Since term appointees were seen as "just passing through," little effort was made to involve them in the life of the department. They frequently arrived to find a heavier teaching load than they had been promised, and collectively they carried a much higher proportion of students than permanent faculty did.

"These sorts of bad practices will back-fire," claimed one respondent. "Soon these departments will find that they have to hire from the pool of those they have 'manhandled'. Western has an especially bad reputation for its treatment of limited-term appointees in my discipline. The word is out and already lots won't take these jobs. We also talk. We may be invisible, but we are not silent."

There's a woman in [my area] on a one year appointment, who just graduated [with her PhD]. She worked her butt off. . . . She has a book off to the publisher, and she's giving papers all over the province. We all knew [another faculty member] was leaving, and we'd need someone to teach her courses. But when it came down to June, the head of our faculty said there was no money, and he offered to pay [this woman] by the course for three courses, at a total salary that was significantly less than she had been earning.

A number of women who have held limited-term appointments at Western have left to take tenure-track positions at other universities. It was the perception of several of the respondents that when men are in a similar position, their administrative heads often lobbied successfully to have their appointments converted to tenure-track positions. In contrast, little such lobbying was seen on behalf of women.

### **Part-Time Appointments: Good Enough to Teach but . . .**

Part-time faculty members are in an even more precarious position than limited-term people. They face even greater uncertainty over their prospects of continuing employment. Often these instructors are not notified until the very last minute that they are needed to teach. They are paid on a per-course basis, a rate of pay that is considerably less than that received by their colleagues who hold regular, continuing appointments. Indeed, some make less money than the teaching assistants they supervise. Generally, they receive no employment benefits whatsoever. In an effort to amass a salary they can live on, many of these individuals carry a much heavier teaching load than full-time professors. Although detailed statistics have never been kept on the University's use of part-time faculty, it is obvious to everyone that women are found in this group in much higher proportion than in full-



time positions. One would have thought that this might have presented Western with a golden opportunity to recruit female candidates for tenure-stream positions. However, it doesn't seem to work that way. There appear to be several built-in barriers to faculty hoping for promotion from part-time status to full-time careers.

Many of the part-time women must make a very heavy commitment to teaching. Consequently their rates of publication are lower. Research is not stressed as an integral component of part-time teaching, but for faculty hoping to make the transfer to full-time status, the failure to publish is fatal. The full-time faculty view the research of part-time faculty as second-rate, which in turn may erode self-confidence and further hinder their ability to conduct research.

This cycle is described very well by one respondent in our survey. She completed a master's degree in her Department in the early 1980s. Since then she has taught an average of 2 1/2 courses per year for the Department. Early on, a visiting professor encouraged her to do doctoral work, and he invited her to come and study at another university. She went to her Department head and asked for a letter of support for a graduate scholarship. He talked her out of doing the PhD, stressing how hard it would be for her to commute (she had small children). At the time, she was somewhat suspicious of his real motives. She thought he might be counselling her against the PhD because he needed her around to teach. Nevertheless, she took his advice and stayed on in her part-time capacity at Western.

Shortly thereafter an opening came up in the Department for a one-year, limited-term contract. Our respondent felt she was ineligible to apply because she didn't have a PhD. She pointed out that she certainly wasn't encouraged to apply. Indeed, she has begun to wonder if she will ever have a shot at an academic career. "I don't have anyone to talk to about possible research ideas. I don't publish because I don't feel confident that I'd be taken seriously." She obtained very high teaching ratings, she developed new courses, and students asked to take her courses but "it doesn't seem to mean anything." She felt that her Department did not encourage women students to do graduate work, whereas male students "received really special treatment."

The strong message in these appointments is that "you're good enough to teach but not good enough to be a real faculty member." This is not only demoralizing for the Instructor, but it signals a lack of respect for students, as it clearly indicates that the enterprise of teaching is less worthy of the allocation of the University's resources than those of research and the management of the University. Strangely, these instructors often handle so much of a department's teaching load that without them the department simply could not function. Yet they are seldom seen as potential recruits

when full-time appointments become available. Particularly when departments have very few women, if any, in full-time positions, this seems a foolish oversight.

One part-time Instructor we interviewed felt her position was so tenuous that it was not safe to allow her comments to be printed in this report. Even with anonymity, she feared that she might suffer negative reprisals, should someone inadvertently identify her. "I feel so afraid," she explained. "They can simply refuse to renew my contract. They don't have to give me any explanation at all. There are no safeguards if they want to fire me for speaking out."

### Double Standards

A number of the respondents reported that there seems to be a double standard for the hiring of women and men. For example, in one faculty, new instructors were often hired without PhDs. The expectation was that professors would earn their PhDs before tenure was granted. But according to one respondent, there was some disparity in the institutional support offered to men and women trying to complete their degrees. The Faculty was much more forthcoming with assistance in the form of "time off" for research leave and scheduling adjustments for men than for women.

Another respondent from a different department stated that, in her opinion, there was significantly different treatment of male and female junior faculty members. She noted that when she won an externally funded post-doctoral fellowship which required that teaching be limited to one course, she encountered considerable hostility from other members of the Department. "They characterized me as 'getting away' with no teaching," she told us. As she saw it, the irony was that junior faculty were strongly encouraged to get such fellowships. And the attitude was considerably different for men. "The men who were successful were seen as assets, as 'serious researchers,'" she pointed out. She has since left this Department for a tenure-track position elsewhere.

Another respondent encountered difficulties over course assignments. Her Department wanted her to teach courses that did not correspond to her area of research. She asked for a change in assignment. This move received an extremely hostile response, which she found very surprising, since she knew the request was perfectly reasonable, given current resources in this Department. If a similar question about teaching assignments were to arise with regard to a male faculty member, she felt the problem would have been approached in quite a different way. Even if the request couldn't be immediately granted, it would have been seen as normal ambition. In her case, however, it was clear from the comments that were made that her request



was regarded as selfish. This respondent found it difficult to say whether the situation arose because of her gender or because the professionalism of her male colleagues was being threatened. Nevertheless she felt that they didn't quite see a woman's credentials as equal to a man's.

### **Broken Promises**

A particularly blatant instance of gender discrimination in terms of appointment was described by a woman who had taught at Western on a sessional basis for several years while completing her doctorate. One year another sessional, a man also without a PhD, was hired. She was astonished to learn that the new Chair of the Department had appointed the man at a rank above her and lowered her rank.

She could not think of any explanation for this, since her qualifications were at least as good as the man's in all relevant areas. Furthermore, the outgoing Chair of the Department had made an oral commitment to rehire her at her previous rank. So she asked why this had happened and was told that the male sessional got a higher rank because he was "visiting." When pressed, the new Chair was unable to say in what sense she was not also "visiting." "Evidently the Chair's assignment of rank was completely arbitrary," she said, "and it violated the previous commitments made to me." What added insult to injury was the fact that this woman had competed very successfully on the job market the previous year and had turned down two firm offers in favour of remaining at Western on the terms originally offered.

In a unit in which faculty were regularly appointed without a completed graduate degree, one respondent described having been hired in the early 1970s with the promise that, when she completed a degree which was in process, she would automatically receive a salary increase and a promotion. At the end of her first year, when she had met these requirements, she found that she was not promoted. Over protest, this decision was reversed. Her assessment was that her faculty thought that because she was a woman, she would not put up much of a fuss. Comparing her experience with that of her male colleagues, she stated: "I think they thought I would back down on my request for promotion, but I didn't."

A woman with extensive teaching and research experience reported that she and her husband had agreed to come to the University on the understanding that a position would be coming open in her area within a few years and that, in the meantime, she would hold a research contract. (Her husband, of course, was given a full-time faculty appointment.) To her surprise, when she received the contract from the Faculty, it specified that in addition to doing research, she would have to teach one course. She agreed

reluctantly, but was even more taken aback when she discovered that the Faculty then wanted her to teach two courses. At this juncture she contacted the member of the administration who had recruited her and her husband, a man who had since left the Faculty. He supported her and with this backing she took the case to the Dean, and managed to keep her load to one course.

Her teaching ratings were extremely high that year. In fact her students won an internal competition on the basis of work done with her. Thus she was delighted when a job opened up in her area. She actively competed for the position, and was most anxious to learn the outcome of the search. She began to worry when she was repeatedly put off and told that no decision had been made, despite all kinds of awkward interaction that made this seem implausible. Well after an offer been made, she learned that the job had gone to an outside candidate, a man who had never done any teaching and had no publications. The reason given was that the man had 10 years' experience in the field (outside of the University) that she lacked. She was exactly 10 years younger than this man and observed: "Obviously they knew, when they first hired me, that I was too young to have had much (comparable) experience." In any case, she added: "I've never read a study yet showing that such experience is related to success as a faculty member." When she took the matter to the Dean, she was informed that her existing contract would not be renewed for lack of funds. Strangely enough, she was offered further part-time teaching that spring, but told that, as a part-time employee, her contract would have to be terminated over the summer. When she suggested that she would then have to collect unemployment insurance, the Faculty administrators were furious. Evidently one expressed concern that, "with all the heat on about women at Western, what would it look like for a female faculty member to be standing in line to collect UI." She says in retrospect that, "My biggest mistake was to trust their verbal assurances; I thought I had a contract."

One might be tempted to dismiss these accounts as atypical, one-of-a-kind debacles due to human misunderstanding. However, as respondents pointed out, they happen far too frequently to constitute mere mistakes. One respondent emphasized that her experience was not unusual. She pointed out that even in the short time she had been at Western, she had learned of two other women brought to the University under promises of employment that were not kept. "They were given little support, and virtually no recognition for the work they did within the Faculty," she stated. "Their original contracts were terminated, and they were asked to switch over to employment by piecework, teaching course-by-course on a part-time basis."