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ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

Statement submitted by the International Council of Social  
Democratic Women, a non-governmental organization on the  
Register of the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has received the following statement on the access of women to training and employment in the legal profession, architecture and engineering, covering the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Federal Republic of Germany, Finland, France, Israel, Luxembourg, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. This statement is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 28 and 29 of Economic and Social Council resolution 268 B (X):

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Legal position

In most countries, the legal position of women, as regards equal access to these three professions at all levels and training, is satisfactory.

There are some exceptions: in Switzerland, no women are admitted as judges in most of the Cantons, and they cannot, for instance, be heads of construction departments in public administration. In Belgium and Canada, women cannot be engineers in the mines, and in Canada - in Quebec - they are debarred from positions in chemical engineering which would require them to handle fumes of a poisonous kind or dangerous explosives.

Position in fact

The position in fact varies from country to country. In some it is, generally speaking, regarded as satisfactory by our affiliates. For Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Israel this is the case. The only qualifying comment in the case of Sweden is that the competitive struggle for higher positions is altogether very hard and may therefore prove too much for a woman with family. In Finland, as in Denmark, advancement is said to be a little more difficult than for men, but the situation in this respect is improving. In Denmark, the appointment of a woman as member of the Supreme Court is thought to be a measure of achievement; according to the Danish view, the small number of women in these professions is due not to outer obstacles, but to choice. In Israel, newcomers from Oriental countries have a negative attitude towards girls' education, but special efforts are made on all sides to provide equal opportunities for these girls, too.

Reports from other countries state that the position in fact leaves very much to be desired.

Of the three professions, the legal one is most established and accepted as suitable for women. This is shown by the following figures given as examples: The percentage of women among lawyers is 5 per cent in Sweden, 10 per cent both in Belgium and Luxembourg, 16 per cent in France. In Canada it is only 2.2 per cent; also, the law is still considered a male preserve. Eighteen per cent of Israel's law students and 14 per cent of the law graduates are women; 14 per cent of Austria's and 10 per cent of the Federal Republic of Germany's law students. In France, women lawyers are particularly in demand on questions of divorce, family affairs, etc. The number of women judges is also increasing, but this is

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is more recent and slower development. In the Federal Republic of Germany women judges are more frequently to be found at "Social Courts".

On the other hand, the number of women architects and engineers is still very small except in Northern European countries and, in particular, Israel, where 15 per cent of the architects, 5 per cent of the building engineers and 14 per cent of the chemical engineers are women.

The lack of opportunities for women is most pronounced in engineering. Here, they have little chance except where no man is available for a position. Their chances rise with increasing demand when employers are forced by economic necessity to abandon their resistance (Canada, Great Britain). Access to training is restricted. In Great Britain, for instance, only large firms as a rule will take women as apprentices. However, an inquiry of the Manchester College of Science and Technology in 1957 concluded that women can and should have the same training as men. In Austria, where there is a shortage of places in trade and technical schools, girls are the first to be refused admission. The rough environment in the engineering field makes some otherwise willing employers hesitate. In Great Britain, technicians in laboratories and drawing offices are readily accepted, but the chances of promotion for women are nil, except in the field of pure research. There is a reluctance to appoint women for higher positions which involve administrative responsibility, supervision and training, because of interruptions in their careers for family reasons. The same reluctance does not apply to research work.

In architecture, access to training is rarely restricted for women, but there are exceptions. In Belgium, women are not admitted to the Catholic colleges where four fifths of the country's architects receive their training.

A few general remarks on the main obstacles which hamper women's access to advancement in these three professions. They apply also to other fields in which long and costly training is required.

There is the reluctance of parents to accept the sacrifices involved in a long and costly training in the case of girls. Working-class parents will often hesitate more, for economic reasons as well as traditional bias. This is true to some extent even of a country like Sweden. For Belgium, however, it is stated that prejudice against higher education for girls is more widespread among the middle classes than the workers.

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Scholarships and grants are still insufficient to secure equality of opportunity across the social as well as across the sex barrier.

Resistance among employers is still widespread. An increase in the number of women in the technological field in particular depends on more employment opportunities opening up. Without such a prospect neither parents nor girls will abandon their present reluctance.

Church doctrine prejudicial to women's advance in the professional fields enters into the picture in some cases: orthodox Judaism in Israel, for example, or the strong Catholic influence in a country like Belgium. There the number of girls in the three high school years is about half of that of boys in state schools, but only one quarter in the Catholic schools.

Traditional views and feelings also operate against women's advancement within their careers. In several countries (in Austria and the Federal Republic of Germany especially) a far-reaching preference for men is shown on the question of promotion as well as appointment for higher positions. In Austria, it is extremely difficult for women in the public services - married and unmarried alike - to become permanent officials (and thus eligible for promotion); private enterprise is not free from prejudice either.

Sometimes the woman herself does not want a higher post with greater responsibility. The reasons are complex and have not yet been fully explored. But one reason for this unwillingness is the widespread opposition to women in superior positions. This creates very real difficulties in several respects.

It is also true that the desire of many girls, especially, though by no means exclusively, in working-class families, is to earn money quickly. Only education over a long period will change this. It depends very much on the right attitude of the teachers which is often not there, and also on the provision of proper vocational guidance. Our affiliates have always stressed that a modern vocational guidance service is most important from the point of view of equal opportunity for education. A rising standard of living and education, provided free of charge at all levels, are, of course, fundamental pre-conditions. Cooperation between teachers and parents, too, is important.

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To sum up, there are few legal obstacles to equality of opportunity in these three fields. To remove the obstacles which exist in fact, ways and means must be sought to influence the attitude of employers, parents, young girls and public opinion in general. Governments must be urged to set an example and give encouragement wherever possible, but the view that girls should be forced into new careers is not shared by our affiliated organizations.

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