

A Rare Find-

The Triumphs of York's Librarians

Librarianship is a skewed profession in terms of gender. Where some professional sectors have had difficulty achieving affirmative action with respect to hiring enough women, libraries have not faced this problem. Librarianship has been dominated by women since formalized library education began early in the twentieth century. The significant presence of females in the library profession has meant that librarianship has suffered some of the same ills that other female dominated professions have such as teaching, social work and nursing. Although people working in these occupations are well-educated and highly skilled, they have not historically been remunerated as such, nor have they achieved a collective social status comparable to male-dominated occupations.

As far as the York community is concerned, the disparity in wages between librarians and other academic or professional staff was recognized early on by astute and active women librarians employed by York in the late 60's and early 70's. Their interest and activism ultimately led to librarians' full participation in York's academic and research community, by virtue of the achievement of faculty status for librarians.

Librarians are present in the first collective agreement (1976-1978) ratified by YUFA after it became certified as a labour union. The background to this achievement for York librarians dates back to 1969-1970, when a group of librarians appealed to York administration to review the status, salaries and professional opportunities available to them at York University. A committee called the Presidential Committee on Professional Librarians was formed and met regularly throughout 1975 and 1976. This committee, in addition to addressing the professional concerns of librarians, acknowledged that gender issues had contributed to the inequities experienced by the librarians.

The following is from the minutes of the meeting of August 27, 1975: "Librarianship is a sex-stereotyped profession and has been paid and evaluated in the past on that basis; in addition, men are, within the (York) system, very quickly promoted through the ranks to middle and upper management, so that women constitute almost the entire membership of the lowest professional ranks."

In the year 1970, 75% of York's librarians were female. That number has not changed significantly, and today it stands at 71.4%. What has changed is that librarians at York are compensated for their education and experience. They receive the full range of benefits that teaching faculty receive, and are also weighted with the responsibilities that accompany faculty status.

It should be noted though that outside of York, the vast majority of librarians are not well-paid and continue to experience the effects of a long history of low salaries and status. In many libraries, equal pay for equal work and even pay equity has not yet been achieved. The most recent figures bear that out: in the 2002-2003 Association of Research Libraries salary survey, which includes data for Canada and the U.S., women are reported to be earning 94.1% of what men earn for the same work. The only arena where women librarians have closed the gender gap in terms of pay is in the "special library" field – libraries that are in non-traditional settings such as for-profit firms.

According to the Special Library Association (U.S. and Canadian data) women have been earning the same or more as men since 1999. It is the first professional library association to make that claim.