

# Trade work for women remains elusive

January 22, 2012 - 4:35am BY RACHEL BRIGHTON JUST BUSINESS



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Duncan MacMillan High School student Gillian Spears opens the hood of a Volvo truck in the heavy duty mechanics area of NSCC Akerley Campus in November 2008 as part of Techsparation, a program aimed at attracting women to trades. (CHRISTIAN LAFORCE / Staff)

While researching a story some years ago I found a photograph of six women working on clinker-built boats at a Baddeck shipyard during the First World War.

Three of the women, identified as Miss Ongo, Mary MacNeil Campbell and Louise McNeil, wore baggy caps, heavy shirts and overalls, and one wore stockings and a skirt. Their small, nimble hands were perfectly suited for the finishing work they were engaged in.

It is a romantic picture that speaks volumes about the social shifts that come about in times of economic change. In this case, a war that drew thousands of women into civilian jobs while men served in the Armed Forces.

Some of that romance hovers over the Halifax Shipyard today as a new generation of workers prepares to enter that trade.

The interesting question is whether young girls will grow up dreaming of becoming shipbuilders or working on an offshore rig, which is more possible now that Shell Canada Ltd. has announced an offshore drilling program here worth \$970 million over six years.

Some answers to this question will be sought at a Halifax conference in May that is being organized by the Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology. Conference supporters and participants will include the Halifax Port Authority, the Cherubini Group of Companies as well as women in business, industry, research, education and the arts.

The conversations that will take place there will be timely because the mega-projects in the shipyard and offshore not only promise an economic boon, they may also change the face of the workforce.

It is expected that schools, colleges and universities will be sharpening their efforts to promote a career in trades or engineering and that some of these campaigns will be pitched to young girls and women.

These new opportunities may be no big deal to many young women who have been raised to think there are no careers or career heights that are beyond their reach. But the evidence shows that attitude alone does not bring equality of opportunity.

A federal government report on women in science and engineering observes that the "supply pipeline for university graduates in science and engineering begins early on in elementary school" when opinions about skills and careers are formed. But the pipeline is "leaky" because for a variety of reasons the ratio of women to men diminishes as they move up the academic ladder.

Women in Canada hold just under a quarter of the jobs in natural sciences, engineering and mathematics, according to Statistics Canada, and just over six per cent of jobs in trades, transport and construction.

That gap may close if a new generation of schoolgirls is inspired by these new economic opportunities.

There is no reason why there should be an equal number of women working in shipyards or on offshore rigs. But girls ought to have an equal chance of becoming shipbuilders or "derrickmen" if they have the skill, strength and desire to do so.

*Rachel Brighton is a freelance journalist and a former business editor and magazine publisher.*

## Photos



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