In 1981, the last year for which statistics are available, only 1.5 per cent of Canadian tradespeople involved in plastering and related jobs were female. Only 6.4 per cent of painters and paperhangers were women and the numbers in other construction trades were just as low—one per cent in excavating and grading trades, one per cent in the masonry trades, 2.9 per cent in the insulating trades, and so on.

Looking at technical and professional construction occupations, Canadian women fare a little better, but not much. Only 7.5 per cent of all architects were women in 1981 and the drafting field, which has made greater strides than any other occupational area, had an 18.2 per cent participation rate by women.

The low level of participation by women in the construction industry is not news to anyone. What is news is that the federal government has made it clear that more women and other “visible minorities” are going to be given a better opportunity to get involved in construction careers. The talking and studying of the past decade is giving way to direct action by the government and employers who refuse to change along with the social tide are going to have problems.

“Employment Equity” is the catchword being used to describe the federal government’s intent to make sure that things change. It means equality of employment opportunity for women and the means to achieve it will include various forms of affirmative action.

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“Until this whole attitude of redefining social attitudes can take place however, the industry has a problem because the career choices which women have made traditionally have not led them into construction.”

Industry Initiatives . . .

So far, the construction industry has won an exemption from the new federal contract compliance regulations. The exemption recognizes the uniqueness of the construction industry and the hardships which would be imposed on smaller companies as a result of contract compliance legislation. But the exemption will disappear overnight if the industry does not show positive signs of moving towards the government’s goals of its own volition.

Taking the government’s message to heart, the Canadian construction industry is taking action to clean up its own shop. Not only because it is the “right” thing to do, but because the industry fears it might face the same sort of disastrous contract compliance regulations as have been introduced in many American states and local jurisdictions. Having knowledge of the American experience with “special preference procurement programs,” the Canadian industry is more determined than ever to avoid government involvement.

Leading the way in promoting employment equity in the industry is the Canadian Construction Association (CCA) and from there, initiatives are being undertaken by the construc-


types of measures, as well as efforts to increase awareness in non-regulatory ways.

Under the federal government’s employment equity program announced last year, Crown Corporations and all federally-regulated companies with more than 100 employees must now prepare plans to bring about employment equity and they will be required to monitor and report their results.

More significantly for the private sector, the government also now requires all companies tendering on contracts worth more than $200,000 to plan and implement employment equity programs within their companies.
tion associations at the provincial and local levels.

The flagship of the CCA effort is the Positive Employment Practices (PEP) Manual which outlines the problems, discusses the issues and recommends specific strategies for bringing about equality of employment opportunity for women.

Also a part of the CCA “PEP” program are employment practices seminars for employers across the country to create awareness of the problem, the government’s goals and the need to take voluntary action before having to face regulated solutions. The final phase of the CCA program is setting up monitoring systems to plot the progress being made and to identify further areas where direct action might be required.

At the local levels, women are finding their way finally onto the boards of construction associations and the associations are actively promoting the concept of equal opportunity for women and increased involvement by them. For example, the Toronto Construction Association (TCA) is sending members a monthly “Employment Equity Update” bulletin to debunk the myths about women in construction and to encourage their employer members to change the attitudes which might have helped to create the current situation.

TCA as well as other associations such as the Ottawa Construction Association also publish glossy magazines for their members and editorial policies now dictate regular profiles on women who have been successful in construction and articles about women’s issues in general.

In 1981, the American-based National Association of Women in Construction set up its first Canadian chapter, in Toronto, and that group has allied itself with the industry in general to develop training programs for women and to encourage them to seek construction careers.

The construction unions have also acknowledged their part in the problem and have come out with an open-door policy towards accepting women into the various trades. The unions too must show their sincerity to the government and as one business agent for the Labourers international union...
said this spring: “The heat is on and we are prepared to go out and drag women off the streets for our training programs if we have to . . . and we may have to.”

The statement points up the biggest dilemma of all for the industry—finding the large numbers of women to fill construction jobs and proving that progress is being made before the government says “time’s up” and brings in measures of its own. Changing social attitudes takes generations to accomplish and, in this case, education is going to have to take place at the very early stages of children’s educations. Girls and boys must grow up understanding that construction jobs are a viable and attractive alternative for women.

No Overnight Solution . . .

Until this whole process of redefining social attitudes can take place however, the industry has a problem because the career choices which women have made traditionally, and still do make, have not led them into construction in any significant numbers. Often it is cold, unpleasant work and few women appear ready to do it even today. One can only hope that the government is patient enough to realize that there cannot be any dramatic increases in female participation overnight.

The overall participation rate of women in construction was 7.9 per cent in 1981 and would not be much higher today if statistics were available. This compares to a 29.4 per cent participation rate in Canadian manufacturing industries. It is obvious that the construction industry has fallen behind in attracting female workers and just as obvious that the time for action has come. There do exist very real barriers to female participation and they are now being torn down. What remains to be seen is if more women will consider entering the industry after these barriers have been removed.