

At Detroit News

Sex bias suit ruled as class action

By Ellen E. Mason
special writer

A \$10 million sex discrimination suit which seeks to force the Detroit News, Michigan's largest newspaper, to hire and promote more women in its news department has been certified as a class action in Detroit's Federal Court.

This is very significant because until U.S. District Judge Avern Cohn certified the action as a class action, the court could only rectify the grievances

of the four plaintiffs," said Philip Green, attorney for the four former and current female employees.

"Now the court can revamp the employment policies of the News as applied to all women coming into the editorial department. It could order an affirmative action plan."

THE SUIT alleges that at the Detroit News women are not paid equally with men for comparable work, women are placed in stereotyped positions, women

are not given challenging assignments which would allow them professional recognition and growth, and that women are not promoted equally with men.

The suit seeks promotions and pay raises for female employees denied them in the past because of alleged sex discrimination. It also seeks to end the alleged discrimination practices of the Detroit News.

"About 250 women are now included in the suit," Green said. "These include all women who have worked on the editorial staff since Feb. 23, 1976, and all women employed by the News who have applied for transfer into the newsroom."

The number of women included in the suit could potentially become larger, since the court left open the possibility that women who applied to, but were not hired by the Detroit News, could also be included at a later date.

"We hope this suit helps readers become aware that at the News the stories are filtered through an all-male point of view," Green said.

"We hope it will set an example for a lot of people because of the News' high visibility."

WILLIAM SAXTON, attorney for the Evening News Association, parent company of the Detroit News, said that certifying the suit as a class action was purely a procedural matter and had nothing to do with the merits of the case or the validity of the claim.

"It's like the court sending out invitations to a picnic and saying who can come," Saxton said.

He said the class action certification is often used by plaintiffs' attorneys to put them in a better bargaining position for settlement of a claim.

"But the Detroit News does not discriminate and we intend to show that," Saxton said.

WRITERS, photographers and most editors at the Detroit News are members of the Newspaper Guild, however the union sets only a minimum for salaries, Green noted.

"The men at the News have been more successful at negotiating raises than the women," Green said.

He said that women in the Accent department are paid less than men in the city room even though both are classified as reporters.

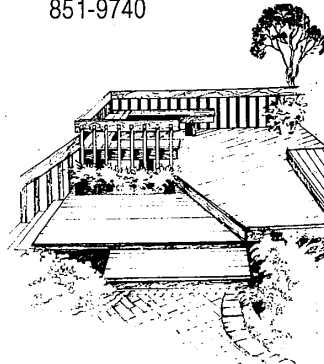
He claimed that women are also assigned "soft" news stories instead of the breaking hard news which most often makes the front page and wins national press competitions.

Green also said that since the suit was filed two years ago, the Detroit News has begun promoting women. The original four plaintiffs in the suit are former News reporter Mary Lou Butcher of Southfield, and present employees Dianne Dunn and Vivian Moore of the newspaper's reference library, and Marcia Biggs, an editorial assistant.

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