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MARRIED WOMEN WORKING

The still commonly-held misconception that women only work for 'pin money' and that men are/should be the primary breadwinners has justified using women as a reserve army of labour. In the current high unemployment situation it is used to blame women for aggravating unemployment by taking school-leavers' jobs. It is important and timely to comment on the argument as the opposition to married women's right to work is being whipped up by politicians and the media (in particular the Murdoch press*) in the absence of any real clear economic policy or labour resource planning. This paper will consider the role of married women in the workforce in light of those misleading ideas.

The attacks on married women's participation in the workforce can be easily explained but are extremely shortsighted. The Royal Commission on Human Relationships states:

"Discrimination on the grounds of sex and marital status persists because of its long history, its strength and the fact that it is built into the customs, practices and institutions of Australian society; it persists because to many people it seems natural and inevitable; it persists because many people are used to it and are loath to change and because people feel they profit from it in domestic, commercial or public life."(1)

Instead of accusing married women "one could as easily single out of invent other sections of the workforce, say all the over 55's, or all the sons of migrants, or even all redheads, and advance the proposition that if they were forced out of the workforce, there would be more jobs available for the unemployed".(2)

Blaming married women for unemployment denies the important role they play in the labour market. In May 1977 women made up 35.6 per cent of the paid workforce and 63 per cent of women in paid employment were married. 41.9 per cent of all married women were in the paid workforce; about one third of these women have children under twelve years of age. Married women have constituted the greatest part of the growth in the participation of women in the paid workforce over the past twenty years.

The increased involvement of women in employment during these years appears to be related to four major factors:

1. Most women have their youngest child at school by the time they are 35;
2. There are an increasing number of jobs suitable for women as a result of increasing opportunities for skilled operatives rather than physical labourers;
3. Clerical/service occupations are expanding more rapidly than traditionally male-dominated industrial sectors;
4. There has been a changing social attitude towards female employment.(3)

However the worsening unemployment situation and increasing technological change have recently restricted the employment situation for women.

JOB SEGREGATION

Despite the increase in women's workforce participation most women still seek work in a limited occupational range. One third of employed

* See "Financial Review" Editorial 26.1.78

females are concentrated in three major areas - clerical, sales and service jobs - whereas men tend to be employed in a wider range of jobs. The Royal Commission on Human Relationships found that about 90 per cent of all women in the workforce consistently worked in occupations which were predominantly female.(4)

Women tend to be found in the more unskilled poorly-paid sections of the workforce with little opportunity for promotion or advancement. These areas are also the hardest hit by unemployment. The unemployment rate among females is higher than the male unemployment rate. In 1977 almost 40 per cent of the unemployed were under 20 years of age with a higher incidence of unemployment amongst young females. Yet most young women registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service (over 70%) are seeking work in the clerical and sales areas and are narrowing - not broadening - their career options. Males are seeking work in a wide variety of occupations and, even given high unemployment, are not - like females - limiting their employment choices.*

Table I illustrates how limited are the career choices of young girls. Rather than indicating that married women are 'taking' school-leavers' jobs, the table shows that females - particularly juniors - need to diversify more in their choice of occupation and to move out of the traditional female clerical and shop assistant areas.

Table I: Employment by Occupation - Married Women and School-leavers

	<u>Married Women</u>	<u>School-leavers</u>	
	(May 1977)	(Jan 1970-May 1976)	
		<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>
	%	%	%
Administrative, Executive and Managerial	2.4	-	-
Professional & Technical (nurses, teachers)	15.8	17.3	7.5
Clerical	30.8	45.9	15.8
Sales	12.3	14.6	6.9
Trades, production process workers & labourers n.e.c.	13.6	8.0	54.3
Service, recreation & sport	18.2	11.7	4.6
Transport & communication	2.5	-	3.2

(Source: ABS Persons aged 15-64 years. Employment status and period since leaving school. ABS "The Labour Force 1977.")

PART TIME EMPLOYMENT

In recent years there has been a rapid increase in part-time employment opportunities. Approximately 42 per cent of married women in the workforce work part-time with an average of 14.2 hours per week. Many young people do not seek part-time work to earn the equivalent of the dole, as the figures for unemployed females seeking work show. There were 29,100 married women - compared to 10,300 other females and 10,400 males - seeking part-time work in February 1976.

FORTY HOURS PLUS

In 1977 there were 170,000 people holding two jobs; 60 per cent were married men. The largest proportion (39%) of all married males were aged 25-34 years. This is the time when wives are unable to work due to child-rearing.

One and a quarter million men work overtime (i.e. more than 40 hours per week). This is 32.5 per cent of the male workforce. 127,900 males and 30,300 females worked on all seven days of the week. The Commission of Inquiry into Poverty states:

* This will be further investigated in Discussion Paper No. 26.

"Some fathers compensate for their low wages by working long hours or working on two jobs. In many instances this may create considerable pressure on the parents and their children."(5)

MIGRANT WORKERS

25.9 per cent of the female labour force is made up of migrant women most of whom (75.4%) are married and work mainly for purely economic reasons. Frequently they work in jobs other people will not take. The Jackson Committee Inquiry into Manufacturing Industry and the Poverty and Education Report of the Poverty Inquiry confirm this. Helen Hurwitz found, in a recent study on migrant women's problems, that, even if the reason of economic necessity were removed, many women would still choose to work so as not to be socially isolated at home.(6) It should not be surprising that women work for the same reasons as men - primarily for the money. How many men would work if they had financial security?

IN SUPPORT OF MARRIED WOMEN WORKING

Increased child endowment has not lessened the burden of all women as many men have reduced the budget they pay to their wives. A research study undertaken by the Royal Commission on Human Relationships shows that 31 out of 111 women questioned had no money at all during their marriage. A further 6 had no regular money.

Married women have made a valuable and recognizable contribution to the national economy.

1. They make up over 22 per cent of the total labour force. *"To exclude them in times of unemployment is to regard them as spare parts of the work force to be stored away until needed. It is difficult to envisage a more cynical denigration of the worth of a worker than to take this attitude."*(7)
2. They reduce the stress for their husbands who are no longer the sole breadwinners.
3. They are acquiring skills which, in cases of separation, divorce or widowhood, will mean that they can become self-supporting and will not be a burden on the taxpayers.
4. Only one out of every three women in Australia is fully supported by a man. The Poverty Inquiry showed that *"inadequate wages and pensions place considerable pressure on mothers to work. The Income Survey showed that 5 per cent of two-parent families were not poor only because the mother worked. A higher proportion of large families (8 per cent) were dependent on the mother's earnings, while a very large number of migrant families would be poor without the mother's earnings."*(8)
5. Of all families the two-income-earning family is now the norm:
 - 36 per cent of families have one income-earner
 - 42 per cent of families have two income-earners
 - 12 per cent of families have three or more income-earners
 - 10 per cent of families have no income-earners (including pensioners)(9)

The importance of the wives' earnings in raising the family above the poverty line can be seen from Income Distribution figures. In 1973/74 20 per cent of families with one income-earner earned \$4,500 or less per annum, whereas 20 per cent of two-income-earners earned \$6630; 40 per cent of families with one income-earner earned \$5740 or less whereas two-income-earner families earned \$8440 or less.

6. A recent study of married women production workers from Barry Guy of Monash University found that, although women were on low wages, in the majority of cases their wage formed a substantial percentage of the family income:

"Just over 45 per cent of the women reported their total family income to be less than \$250 per week; 32 per cent reported total family incomes of from \$251 to \$300 per week and 23 per cent reported family incomes of between \$300 to \$400. When

asked to estimate the extent of their own contribution, 75 per cent of the women reported that their wage comprised between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of the family income."⁽¹⁰⁾

7. Guy's survey and Income Distribution figures show that women's earnings play an important economic role in the family. In July 1976 ABS figures showed that only 38.7 per cent of all women in Australia were fully supported by a man. The first Main Report of the Poverty Commission lists fatherless families as those with the highest incidence of poverty. Approximately 50 per cent of these families were either very poor or rather poor. Separated and deserted wives were the most impoverished group. In July 1976 38 per cent of female heads of families with dependent children were in the workforce.
8. Arguments in favour of displacing married women from the labour force have been largely based on the breadwinner notion that women have employed husbands and thus don't need to work. These arguments ignore the findings of the Poverty Inquiry (above), i.e. that approximately one in ten families in Australia are one-parent families. Those arguing for jobs on the basis of need should consider whether:
 - (i) the children of poor parents should be given precedence over children of parents who earn enough to support them;
 - (ii) supporting mothers should be given precedence over single men;
 - (iii) parents of six children should be given precedence over parents of two children;
 - (iv) needs should take precedence over qualifications (doctors, nurses, plumbers, carpenters, teachers etc.).

This so-called needs argument was abolished by the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission in 1974 when the family wage concept was abandoned and women won the minimum wage.

Those who suggest that married women are depriving school-leavers of jobs should ask themselves how many male school-leavers (or unemployed adult males for that matter) would seek a job as a receptionist, typist, stenographer, machinist in a clothing factory, child care assistant etc. Although women predominate in the lowest-paid jobs they do develop skills with experience.

Few employers will train women unless they are subsidized to do so.* Adult women on the whole are paid so little more than juniors that employers find it more profitable to pay the small extra amount to gain the benefit of their experience.

Married women do not constitute a convenient economic group occupying a specific area of the workforce. They are distributed through it according to their skills, abilities and experience. Often these are quite considerable. To make this one group a scapegoat for the current unemployment situation and economic recession is to overlook the changes in the nature of employment and unemployment over the last few years - particularly their structural changes.

Dismissal of married women does not solve unemployment but actually relocates it by replacing one employee with another employee. There may be less women registering with the Commonwealth Employment Service but the real level of unemployment would not reduce.

An ANZ Bank quarterly survey for the first quarter of 1977 indicated that youth were failing to find jobs not because employers were employing married women as some act of perversity or that married were sneaking jobs from youth but rather that youths were failing to obtain jobs because they lacked experience. The survey findings concluded that the available workforce would be absorbed only if the pattern of the nation's education and training evolved to match changed demands.⁽¹¹⁾

* See Discussion Paper No. 9

The specious argument that married women are taking school-leavers' jobs can be clearly seen as an attempt to create social tensions amongst working people at a time when their living standards are under pressure through moves to reduce real income - the old 'divide-and-rule' technique.

RECENT UNION ACTION

After the Rockhampton City Council sacked an employee because she married, the Municipal Officers' Association sought to vary the award so that employees could not be dismissed on the grounds of marital status. The Arbitration Commission has reserved its decision.

The Federal Government, in its evidence, based on ILO Convention No. 111 on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, submitted that dismissing women on marriage was contrary to the policies pursued by the Government and was discriminatory treatment in terms of the Convention. Perhaps the argument against married women's employment could be seen in the same light.

WHAT UNIONS CAN DO

The ACTU Charter on Working Women and the CAGEO and ACSPA Working Women's Charters call for the right to work for everyone who wishes to do so. Unions should support the rights of their married women members and decry the fallacious arguments that there is a functional relationship between the number of married women employed and the number of young people unemployed.

Unions could make public statements answering the criticism of married women working.

Unions should mount a broad campaign to encourage girls to move into nontraditional areas of employment as per the ACTU Charter.

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