



Working Women's Information Service

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A REVIEW OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT - 1980/1981

There has been a great deal of discussion lately, and quite a lot of media space given to an acceptance that women are being driven out of the workforce and back into their homes.

This growing acceptance is often based solely on the increase in unemployment figures and the fact that the rate of women's unemployment is higher than that of men. This notion is easily seen as credible because there is a deeper assumption that the role of women in the workforce is a transitory one and that they are pulled in and out of the workforce, on mass, at the whims of the economy.

Women are seen as a reserve army of labour which enters the workforce in times of full employment or labour shortage and is expelled as soon as the employment situation changes.

This analysis totally overlooks the fact that women actually do different work to men and so the availability of work for women is not necessarily tied in any way to the availability of work for men. The labour demands of the economy obviously determines the availability of employment, but since men and women do different work it is not simply a matter of women losing jobs when the economy contracts. This suggests that women's work is the same as men's, that women workers come into the workforce to take up the slack created by full male employment. Since women do

different jobs and are concentrated in different industries there is no basis for such an assumption.

In fact, in Australia, there has been a continual growth in the workforce participation of women which has fluctuated in its intensity but has overall represented a constant increase. The much cited war-time experience of Australian women is often misrepresented as showing women being expelled from the workforce after the war but in fact the actual number who left the workforce after that period was estimated at only 53,400 out of a female workforce, which at its peak, reached 800,000. (1)

Since the war the proportion of the workforce which are women has increased steadily - in 1947 it was 22.4%, by 1971 31.7% and by 1980 37%. (2)

One very marked feature of this increase has been that there has been almost no movement of women from traditional "women's" jobs. The increase has been due to an expansion of female employing industries.

Women do have a more transient relationship with the workforce than men but it is as individuals, not as a whole. An individual woman is likely to spend periods of her life not in the paid workforce intermittently with periods when she is employed due mainly to the domestic responsibilities which society lays at her door.

Table 1. (3) EMPLOYED WOMEN

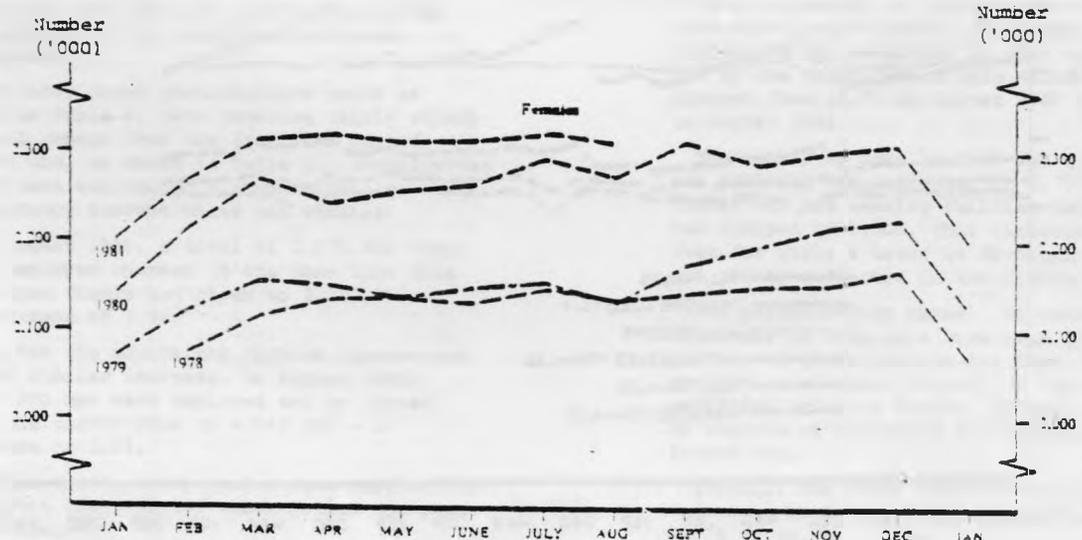
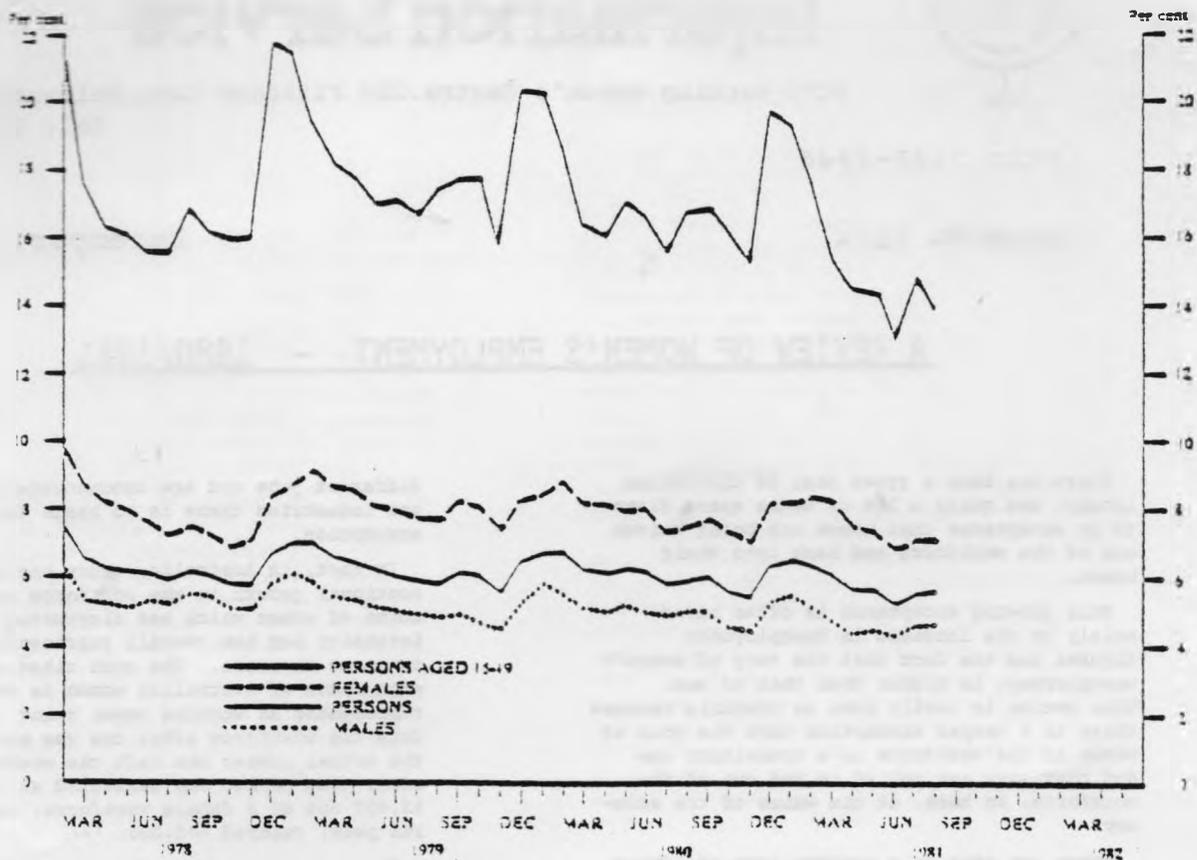


Table 2 (4)

UNEMPLOYMENT RATES

(THE UNEMPLOYMENT IN EACH GROUP AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE CIVILIAN LABOUR FORCE IN THE SAME GROUP)

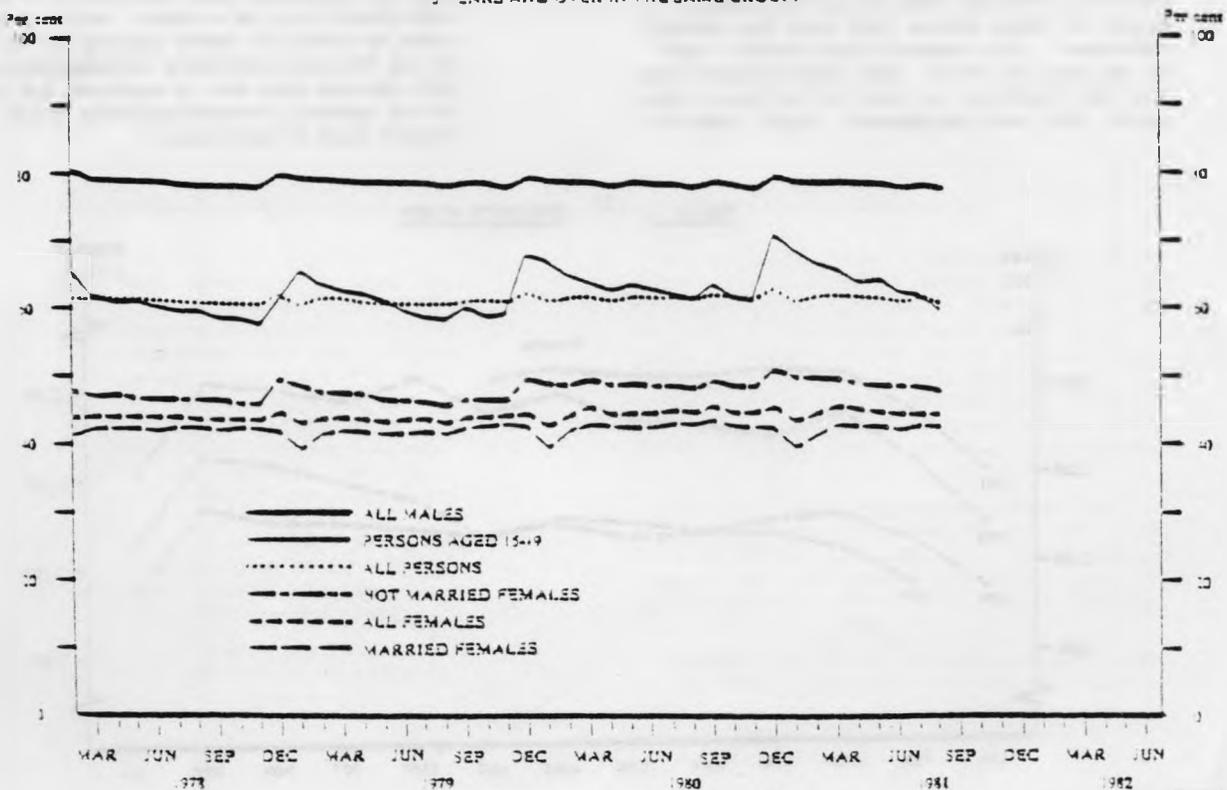


NOTE: From February 1978 the population survey has been conducted monthly. Previously, surveys were conducted in February, May, August and November each year.

Table 3 (5)

LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES

(THE LABOUR FORCE IN EACH GROUP AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE CIVILIAN POPULATION AGED 15 YEARS AND OVER IN THE SAME GROUP) -



There are many indications that women's employment is under threat at the moment not the least of which are the introduction of new technology which is displacing women workers and the effects of the economic policies of the Federal Liberal Government.

These threats must be viewed seriously for they foreshadow a great loss of women's jobs. But, at the same time, it is very important to examine the situation in order to understand the trends as they are taking place.

It would be a grave error to underestimate dangers inherent in the current economic climate but just as grave to misread the signs and to jump to incorrect conclusions. If we are to defend women's jobs, and their right to work and to improve their conditions of employment, it is vital that our analysis of the workforce participation of women is comprehensive.

The number of employed women up to August this year has been consistently higher than those employed in the same period in 1980 although the seasonal peaks have been lower and the increase has been less than that from 1979 - 1980. However, in 1979 the increase from 1978 was significantly lower as shown by Table 1.

Although there has been an overall increase in the number of women in the workforce, there has been a decrease in some age groups as shown in Table 4.

There has been a drop at either end of the age scale although the most significant drop has been for young girls. In August 1980, there were over 16,000 more girls, aged 15 - 19 years, working than there were in August 1981.

The number of girls registered as looking for work has also decreased. In August 1980, 55,100 girls not attending school were seeking fulltime employment - this year that figure was 46,400 - a percentage decline of over 15%.

The overall population for girls in the 15 - 19 years age group has decreased by 6,700. In 1981 there were 1,600 more 15 - 19 year olds attending schools. Since the number of jobs filled by girls in this age group has dropped, there is a large increase in the number of girls who are not attending school and are not seeking full-time employment.

Table 4. NUMBER OF WOMEN IN LABOUR FORCE BY AGE - SHOWING INCREASE AND DECREASE FROM AUGUST 1980 - AUGUST 1981 ('000) (6)

Ages	August 1980	August 1981	
15 - 19 years	370.9	354.8	- 16.1
20 - 24 "	438.3	445.7	7.4
25 - 34 "	617.6	632.3	14.7
35 - 44 "	508.4	523.7	15.3
45 - 54 "	252.3	262.6	10.3
55 - 59 "	106.6	110.3	3.7
60 - 64 "	41.4	37.5	- 3.9
65 & over	23.6	21.5	- 2.1
Total	2,459.0	2,488.4	

If we are talking about women being "kicked out of the workforce", a more significant comparison of employment numbers is with those of men. For if these employment and unemployment trends are proportionately similar, we cannot conclude that women are being excluded from the workforce but that the economy is not providing sufficient employment.

The labor force participation rates as shown in Table 2. have remained fairly steady for all groups over the four year period shown. And, as shown in Table 3., unemployment rates have maintained a proportional consistency between males and females.

In August 1980, a total of 2,275,300 women were employed whereas at the same time this year that figure had risen to 2,311,000 - an increase of 1.5%.

For men the equivalent figures represented a very similar increase. In August 1980, 3,970,900 men were employed and by August 1981 the figure rose to 4,045,300 - an increase of 1.3%.

In the twelve month period from August 1980 to August 1981, 35,200 women joined the paid workforce.

This situation needs careful analysis. It suggests that girls are increasingly accepting the inevitability of unemployment and are very likely to be undertaking unpaid domestic labor of one kind or another.

This conjecture is strengthened by a drop from 58,300 to 49,300 in the number of girls registered as unemployed in this age group and by the unemployment rate which has dropped from 18.7% in August 1980 to 16.7% in August 1981.

The number of boys in this age group who are employed has increased by 3,700 but the number who are seeking fulltime employment has dropped by 6,900. This situation shows that for girls a trend is developing which is not really reflected in the figures for boys.

The participation rates⁽⁷⁾ of women in the workforce in some ways give us a clearer picture of the situation for they show the proportion of women who are in the paid workforce which is a more concise indication of whether or not women are actually being forced out.

Overall, the labor force participation rates for women have dropped very slightly from 44.7% to 44.3%.

Table 5: PARTICIPATION RATES FOR AGE GROUPS - ALL WOMEN

Ages	August 1980	August 1981	
15 - 19 years	59.2	57.0	- 2.2
20 - 24 "	71.2	70.7	- 0.5
25 - 34 "	52.9	53.0	.1
35 - 44 "	58.7	58.1	- .6
45 - 54 "	47.7	49.1	1.4
55 - 59 "	29.1	29.7	.6
60 - 64 "	13.5	11.8	- 1.7
65 & over	2.9	2.6	- .3
All	44.7	44.3	- .4

The group which it is most feared will be eliminated from the paid workforce is that of married women. If we look at the participation rates of married women compared to non-married women, broken down by age, we can see that married women's participation is in fact fairly stable.

The growth of the participation rates of married women has steadily increased since the end of the second World War. In fact, married women have largely been responsible for the increase in women's employment overall. In 1970, 35.2% of married women worked. And by 1980 that figure had risen to 42.8%. And, as shown by Table 6., has dropped slightly in that last twelve months. However, this slight drop is reflected throughout the workforce - for males there was a drop in participation rates from 77.9% to 77.5%.

Another very important factor is the close parallel between the percentage of married women who are employed and that of non-married women. In August 1981, 1,417,000 married women worked representing 40.3% of all married women. At the same time, 393,200 non-married women worked - 42.7% of all non-married women. It is evident that in fact there is very little difference between the proportion of married women and non-married women who work. The unemployment rates are significantly higher for non-married women (4.9% for married women and 10.4% for non-married women) and so is the labor force participation rate (42.3% for married women and 47.8% for non-married women). This inconsistency between employment rate and participation rate is partly caused by high youth unemployment but also shows the extent to which married women do not register for unemployment.

Table 6: COMPARISON OF PARTICIPATION RATES

Ages	August 1980			August 1981		
	Males	Married Women	Non-married Women	Males	Married Women	Non-married Women
15 - 19 years	62.8	46.7	59.9	62.0	46.7	57.5
20 - 24 "	90.6	56.5	34.4	91.3	54.7	33.6
25 - 34 "	95.5	48.0	75.8	95.3	47.5	77.3
35 - 44 "	95.9	57.7	66.2	95.2	57.1	65.3
45 - 54 "	91.4	46.2	55.1	91.3	47.9	56.3
55 - 59 "	83.3	27.9	32.9	81.1	27.0	39.1
60 - 64 "	50.1	12.9	14.3	51.2	10.7	14.5
65 & over	11.1	3.2	2.7	10.5	2.5	2.6
Overall	77.9	42.8	48.00	77.5	42.3	47.8

It can also be seen from Table 6. that the only age group with an increased participation rate for married women was among 45 - 54 year age group. For non-married women the increase showed over a wider age range from 45 - 60 years and there was also a slight increase in the 25 - 34 year group. This suggests that whilst women's participation is not falling, women who have jobs are retaining them but no jobs are being created for the young women. This is consistent with the sort of job displacement which is taking place due to the introduction of new technology where job loss is taken up by natural wastage and new jobs are not becoming available for the young.

This is not the case with males where the only age group which reflects an increase in labor force participation rates in the 20 - 24 year age group.

The trends of women's employment do show that there is certainly cause for concern and careful vigilance by women. However, they do not reflect the commonly held notion that women are being "kicked out of the workforce and back into the kitchen". This notion conjures up an army of married women being forced to leave the workforce en masse and return to their unpaid domestic labor at home and should be avoided for two reasons.

Firstly it continues to perpetuate the social ideology that women who are not in the paid workforce are necessarily housewives and that in turn perpetuates the notion that unpaid domestic labour is a women's rightful and prime task.

Secondly, it is not an accurate reflection of the actual situation. The trends are much more subtle - it is young unmarried women who are bearing the brunt of unemployment although their rate has dropped this year.

To mistake these trends or to use misleading terminology would detract from any action taken by women to defend their right to work and the gains they have made in the paid workforce. If we are to develop effective policies, strategies and objectives for women's employment, we must first understand exactly what is happening.

As mentioned earlier, there are economic trends afoot which cast a greater shadow over women's employment. A lot more analysis of the exact situation is required to ensure that these signs are not misread or misinterpreted. This paper has been limited in this respect by its major task, to review women's employment over the last twelve months. Many of the points raised in it need enlarging but it has, we hope, provided a few signposts for further analysis.

Written and researched by Lynn Seaton

Notes:

- (1) *Estimation of Department of Labor & National Service, Commonwealth Year Book, 1981.*
- (2) *Karina Alford, Women and the Aust. Labor Market: Recent Changes and Trends: An Overview, Women and Transition Conference, United Nations Association of Aust. National Status of Women Committee, Melb. June 1981.*
- (3) *ABS. The Labor Force, August, 1981, Cat. 6203.0, Page 5.*
- (4) *Ibid. Page 7.*
- (5) *Ibid.*
- (6) *All figures quoted from hereon are taken from ABS, The Labor Force, August 1981, and August 1980, Cat. No. 6203.0, unless otherwise stated.*
- (7) *Participation rates represent the Labor Force expressed as a percentage of the civilian population. It is important to remember that the labor force figures include the unemployed as well as the employed.*