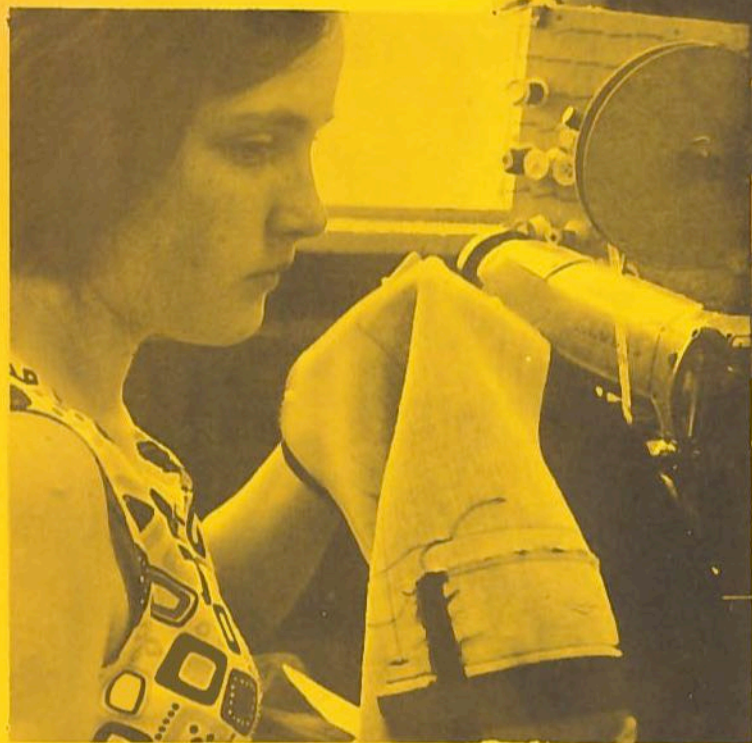


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MORE ON THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION

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by

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In the September 1969 issue of Monthly Review there is an article by Margaret Benston on "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation". She defines women as "that group of people who are responsible for the production of simple use values in those activities associated with the home and family". Further, they are "denied an active place in the market" and "remain a very convenient and elastic part of the industrial reserve army". While agreeing with Benston's analysis of women's role in the home, we feel that the changing sex composition of the labor force since the Second World War belies her emphasis on women as houseworkers, which minimizes their role as wage laborers.

In the United States in 1940, only about 1 in 4 women (14 years and over) were in the labor force, 1 in 10 mothers worked, and about 1 in 12 women (18 to 24 years old) were still in school. By 1968, almost 2 in 5 mothers worked, and more than 1 in 5 women (18 to 24 years) were still in school.* Rather than excluding women from the labor force, monopoly capitalism has increasingly drawn women out of the home and into the market. Between 1947 and 1968 the labor force participation rate for men in both civilian and military employment fell from 86.8 percent to 81.2 percent (reflecting longer schooling and earlier retirement), while that for women rose from 31.8 percent to 41.6 percent. This marked increase in the proportion of women working occurred while the proportion of adult women in school increased from 9.9 percent in 1950 to 22.1 percent in 1967, and now exceeds the proportion of 18 to 24 year-old men who were in school in 1950, 20.1 percent. During the same period, 1950-1968, the percentage of women not in the labor force because they were "keeping house" fell from about 60 percent of women to less than 50 percent. In July 1969, there were 47,681,000 males (93.4 percent of the total) 20 to 64 years old in the total labor force, while there were 25,807,000 females (48.1 percent) 20 to 64 years old in the total labor force and 25,810,000 females not in the labor force because they were "keeping house".

It is difficult to treat women simply as unpaid producers of use-values in the home when more than two fifths of them are in the labor force. (Only three fourths of men are in the civilian labor

*Unless otherwise noted, all calculations are derived from Historical Statistics of the United States, the Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1968 and 1969, and Employment and Earnings, Vol. 16, no. 2, August 1969. For working mothers, see U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, Leaflet 37, "Who Are the Working Mothers" 1967.

force.) Only 28.1 percent of the civilian labor force in 1947, women were 37.1 percent in 1968. In April 1969, while women accounted for only 20 percent of employment in transportation and utilities and only 28 percent of the manufacturing workers, they were 39 percent of the wholesale and retail trade workers, 43 percent of the total government employees, 51 percent of the workers in finance, insurance, and real estate, and 54 percent of the service workers. Not only are women crucial members of the labor force, but the home is ceasing to provide them with a shelter from the imperatives of the market. The Department of Labor says that 90 percent of girls today will work some time in their lives.*

If the system needs to keep women in the home, as Benston says, then it is failing badly in meeting this need. Benston also suggests that one of the sources of the women's liberation movements may be in the development of embryonic capitalized forms of home production which are freeing women to demand equality in work, pay, and status. Looking further for clues to the recent upsurge in the interest in the problems of women, perhaps we should look not just at the home and not just at the work place, but at the contradiction between women's role in one and the other. Women have been doing unpaid labor in the home for a very long time; this by itself is an unlikely source of women's discontent. Further, we argue that higher unemployment rates, lower wages, and unequal job opportunities for women are the results of the contradiction between women's cultural role and women as free wage-laborers.

In this society the father's family role is a market one, that of "provider". This role is compatible with his role as free wage-worker. But the mother's culturally defined role is a non-market one, the practical day-to-day care of children. While men can comfort themselves with the thought that "at least I'm providing for my family", working women fear that "I'm neglecting the children, too". As a result, women experience all the alienation faced by any worker under capitalism, face a conflict rather than a reinforcement of cultural values, and are not even financially rewarded for their discomfort.

To be treated equally as a free wage-worker requires equal cultural freedom to enter into the wage relation. But women do not enter into the market with the same cultural freedom as men. Men face lower unemployment rates than women. Women's role as mother contributes to this difference. Further, labor-market segmentation is exacerbated by the fact that men face conscription into the armed forces, so that the draft creates a relative labor shortage of male workers. From 1947 to 1962, when the armed forces averages about two and a half million men, the yearly male unemployment rates averaged 4.6 percent, or only about 0.6 percent lower than the 5.2 per-

increasing discontent among women is due to the rapid proletarianization for women during the same period. Since 1962 however, when the military averaged more than three million men, the male unemployment rate was only 3.83 percent, or about 1.67 percent lower than the 5.5 percent for women. Because they face the draft, men receive the "bonus" of lower unemployment rates. Furthermore, the typical work experience of women is to enter the labor market twice as many times as men do--once before they have children and once after the children are old enough to allow the mothers to return to work. In recent years almost half of the unemployed women are "re-entering the labor force". In July 1969, the percentage of those women who were unemployed by reason of "losing the last job", was approximately 37, or close to their proportion of the total labor force; on the other hand, of persons unemployed by reason of "re-entering the labor force", women outnumbered men by 2.2 times. Finally, since the "provider" role is the father's, mobility is largely determined by his job opportunities, not the mother's; thus, the woman in two-worker families bears disproportionately any unemployment burden involved in mobility. Thus, the higher unemployment rates faced by women, which are not independent of "discrimination" are largely due to the fact that women, in their role as mother in the nuclear family, enter the labor market on different terms than do men. The "natural market forces" do the rest.

The median income of women workers is only about 60 percent of the median income of men workers. There is no doubt some truth in the businessman's explanation of this difference, that women do have absentee rates two to four times higher than men's and the job tenure of women is about half that of men (2.8 years vs. 5.2 years).* It is the mother, not the father, who leaves the labor force to have children and then stay home from work when they need care. These factors entail more outlay for overtime and more frequent training of workers, adding to the costs of hiring women. Contributing to the lower median incomes of women are the facts that women are predominantly white-collar workers (about 60 percent of women workers), are relatively non-unionized (a situation made difficult to remedy due to low job tenure), have been competing with a rapidly expanding supply of women workers, and face some overt discrimination. In any case it is clear that, given women's conflict between rearing children and working, employers tend to hire women at jobs where training costs are relatively low and absenteeism is not costly.

Equal access to jobs outside the home, one of Benston's preconditions for women's liberation, will require that men and women become equally free of non-market norms of behavior. Perhaps the

*V.C. Perella, "Women and the Labor Force", Monthly Labor Review, February 1968, p. 9; H.R. Hamel, "Job Tenure of Workers, January 1966", Monthly Labor Review, January 1967, Special Labor Force report. p. 31.

tion of women who are facing a market which expresses the contradiction between the non-market norms of motherhood and the market norms of free wage-labor. If women were to attain equal pay and if parents were to share the practical child-care responsibilities, the contradiction between the nuclear family and free wage-labor under capitalism would become clear as employers turned from married to single workers because of their greater reliability and job tenure. Of course, as associates who agree that the emancipation of women requires, in addition to equality, the industrialization of housework and the socialization of child-rearing, we can struggle for the abolition of both the nuclear family and capitalism. But it should be clear that capitalism itself is undermining the nuclear family as mothers become workers. (Currently, in any month, almost 40 percent of mothers with children under eighteen are in the labor force.)

Lastly, we believe the data call into question Benston's statement that "no one, man or woman, takes women's participation in the labor force very seriously". The three fifths of women workers who are married and contribution to family income probably take it very seriously. The dramatic recruitment of women into the labor force since the Second World War and the concomitant increasing exploitation of family labor have been largely responsible for the spread of the "middle-class life style". The U.S. Department of Labor aptly summarizes the situation as of March 1967:

Nearly half of all women 18 to 64 years of age work in any one month. About 3 out of 5 of these women are married and living with their husbands. Almost all of these wives contribute to family income. It is often the wife's earning that raise family income above poverty levels. In other families the wife's contribution raises the family's income from low- to middle-income levels. In fact, it is at the middle-income level that the largest proportion of wives are in the labor force.

There were 42.6 million husband-wife families in the United States in March 1967. In 15 million of these families, the wife was in the paid labor force. In the husband-wife families where the wife was an earner, the median family income in 1966 was \$9,246 a year. In those families where the wife did not work, the median family income was \$7,128.

The likelihood of escaping poverty is much greater among husband-wife families when the wife is an earner than when she is not. Nearly 5 million husband-wife families had incomes of less than \$3,000 in 1966. Only 5 percent of all husband-wife families fell into this income group when the wife was in the paid labor

force; 15 percent, when she was not.

An income of about \$7,000 in 1966 dollars is considered a modest but adequate income for an urban family of four. Twenty nine percent of all husband-wife families had incomes below this mark when the wife was a worker; 49 percent, when she was not.

The higher the annual family income (up to \$15,000), the greater is the likelihood that the wife is in the labor force. The labor force participation of wives in March 1967 was lowest (13 percent) in families with 1966 incomes of less than \$2,000, and highest (53 percent) in families with incomes of \$12,000 to \$14,999.

Just how much do working wives contribute to family income? According to a study made by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median percent of family income in 1966 accounted for by the wife's earnings was 22.2 percent. However, when the wife worked full time year round, it was 36.8 percent.*

These data speak for themselves. The maintenance of the family's standard of living, and in many cases the avoidance of poverty, is now substantially dependent upon not one but two income earners. This is an irreversible process. Women's participation in wage labor can no longer be regarded as "transient". The time is past when women can go home again.

*U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, "Working Wives--Their Contribution to Family Income", December 1968.

Is there an instance in all of history of an oppressed class being secured in all their rights without assuming a "belligerent attitude"? Just imagine some writer in the old Boston Gazette saying in the height of the revolution of '76, "I am sorry James Otis, John Adams, Patrick Henry and George Washington are so belligerent. How disgraceful to the memory of the Puritans, for New England men to rush on board a vessel and pitch a whole cargo of tea into the harbor; what spiteful child's play was that! How much better to have petitioned King George and his Parliament in a dignified manner for a 'respectful consideration' of their greivances."...When we can get all our women up to the white heat of a "belligerent attitude", we may have some hope of our speedy enfranchisement.

--Elizabeth Cody Stanton, 1873

What is now called the nature of women is an eminantly artificial thing--the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others. It may be asserted without scruple that no other class of dependents have had their character so entirely distorted from its natural proportions by their relation with their masters.

--John Stuart Mill

Woman was the first human being that tasted bondage, woman was a slave before the slave existed.

--August Bebel

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