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ACS

AUSTRALIAN-CANADIAN
STUDIES a multidisciplinary review

VOLUME 3, 1985.

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Looking Ahead: The Future of Women's Work

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Introduction

There are signs of an economic recovery, at least in profit rates. In order to maintain this recovery, we are told, restraint, especially in government expenditures and in employee demands, and investment, especially in micro-electronic technology, are necessary. In the meantime, official unemployment rates still hover around the double digit level, poverty continues to increase, wages and benefits fail to keep up with prices, and battles between employees and governments are becoming more frequent as well as more intense. As a group, the people most aware of the consequences of these trends — the growing depression, stress, violence, family disruption and the increasing inadequacy of food and housing — are those who take jobs in the human service occupations. Because those in the caring professions must deal with this reality, their attention is focused on the pressing practical problems of surviving through the day, on the how rather than the why, on the now rather than the when, on the parts rather than the whole. However, precisely because they are in immediate contact with this reality, they know that the band-aids are proving increasingly inadequate to treat the rapidly spreading wounds. They are the ones who are in a position to, and need to, search for explanations, to look for future trends, to make the connections by asking the larger questions, to relate theoretical explanations to practical issues in a way that can lead to more comprehensive strategies for dealing with the problems exposed and created by the current economic crisis.

At one and the same time, the crisis increases the pressure to provide temporary means for handling immediate problems and offers the opportunity to question the entire structure of our social systems. The crisis has encouraged politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to seize the opportunity to raise fundamental theoretical questions and to implement radical solutions. Australia and Canada, influenced as they are by policies developed in the United States and Britain, are being pushed in similar directions. Those in the social service sectors are particularly well placed to evaluate such developments critically, but only if they do so from a sound theoretical base.

The Theoretical Task

Such theory, we would argue, must be integrated and sex-conscious. By this we mean that it must not only fit together parts of the economy to develop a picture of the overall pattern, but also connect the formal economy to the household, in a context of changing state intervention and new technologies. Such theory must also begin with the understanding that there is a single system in each of our countries, a system dominated by the search for profit and reinvestment and characterised by a sexual division of labour that subordinates women to men and household to formal economy. This sexual division of labour reverberates throughout the entire political economy, with the result that changes in the formal economy, in government programs, in technology, in households, affect women and men differently. All economic and social policies, then, are women's policies.

While such theory must take into account the dominant ideas which primarily support

the interests of owners and of men and which play a central role in maintaining things as they are, it must begin by focusing on structures and conditions, because these set the limits, establish the parameters, in any society. Such theory is necessary because, although there are identifiable trends resulting from the search for profit and from sex segregation, the outcome is not predetermined. People can and do make their own history, if not under conditions of their own choosing. And people can do this most effectively if they understand what the trends are, as well as why and how they are supported.

Women's Work

Of course, the development of theory and strategy for coping with the current crisis is an enormous, continuing and collective project. In this paper, we seek to demonstrate the need for such a project by examining some aspects of women's work. We are focusing on women's work because work not only provides meaning and identity in our lives but also shapes our resources, our social contacts and our opportunities, because the subordinate position of women is located in the work they do, and because the overwhelming majority of clients (Owen, 1984b:217) and workers in the social service sector, where the current crisis is most clearly reflected, are women.

Similar political economies, histories and geographical barriers have led to similar patterns in Australia and Canada. In both countries, women's labour force participation rates have been rising, at the same time as their unemployment, underemployment and poverty have been increasing. Today, government 'restraint' programs and the introduction of micro-electronic technology threaten a further deterioration in women's condition. On the other hand, differences in the degree of unionisation, in government strategies and in geographical location have helped create variations from which we can learn and which clearly indicate that we can be active participants in making history. Our examination of current trends — trends which have developed more quickly in Canada — is designed as a warning as well as a call for more theoretical and strategic work, a warning that if we do not develop programs based on an integrated, sex-conscious theory, women will emerge from this crisis in a more secondary position than before.

Two important developments in the political economy have set the context for women's rising labour force participation: the growth of the state and de-industrialisation.¹ As a result of these developments, relatively few jobs, if any at all, have been created on farms and in forests, mines, fisheries and factories — in traditionally male areas of employment — and relatively many have been created in stores, offices, restaurants, schools and hospitals — traditionally female areas. Women were hired because they were cheap and available, and because they had the appropriate skills, training and attitudes to do the work.

Some of the new jobs were in technical and professional fields, particularly in teaching and nursing where women had long formed the majority of the work force. But most of the additional work was in low-level clerical, sales and service work which offered few rewards in terms of pay, intrinsic satisfaction, or opportunities for advancement. Although over half of Canadian women, and about forty-five per cent of Australian women, are now counted as active members of the labour force, about a third of them do clerical work, at least one in ten has a sales job, and about one in six does service work. (Armstrong, 1984: Table 5.15; Eccles, 1984: Table 5.4). In Canada, the concentration of women in clerical, sales and service occupations, taken together, has been remarkably stable since the 1940's (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1984: 18-63).

So has their concentration in the professional and technical field. Over the last 40 years, there has been an increase of only 1.4 percentage points in the proportion of women employed in this field. Moreover, this slight increase is more than accounted for by the rapid growth in technical, as distinct from professional, jobs. By contrast, the concentration of men has been increasing in the professions themselves (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1984:41). In Australia, women's share of professional, technical and related jobs actually declined between 1976 and 1982 (Eccles 1984:86).

In addition, much of the new work is part-time, also in clerical, sales and service jobs. Although methods of collecting data make comparisons difficult, it is clear that at least a quarter of employed women in both countries have part-time jobs and part-time pay, that part-time employment accounts for much of the growth in female labour force participation (Eccles, 1984:82), that an increasing number work part-time because they cannot find full-time work, and that, in spite of this changing demand, women's hours in part-time work are decreasing (Armstrong, 1984: Tables 4.22 and 4.24; Owen, 1984a: 9). By 1982, Women accounted for only 28% of full-time workers in Australia, an increase of less than 3 percentage points since 1966 (Eccles, 1984:82). In Canada, just over a third of the full-time workers by 1984 were female, indicating an increase of 8 percentage points in the female share of full-time employment since 1966.

The rising labour force participation rates that have created the impression of dramatic moves towards equality hide the rising female unemployment and underemployment in parttime jobs, and hide the fact that the proportion of women with good jobs and good pay has risen only slightly over the last 40 years.

Economic Need

Women have responded to the rising demand for female employees, in spite of their continued responsibility for housework, childcare and tension-management (Luxton, 1980; Cloward, 1983:36-53), primarily because they needed the income. With significant increases in energy, housing and transportation costs and in taxes, women could not compensate for falling wages and rising prices by working harder at their domestic chores. Taxes could not be paid in fresh baked bread, even if it is still cheaper to make your own, a questionable economy at best.² Some women earned income by undertaking what the International Labour Office (1984:51) calls clandestine work, work that 'is carried out on the fringes of the law or outside it altogether'. They cleaned other people's houses, did dressmaking, typing, catering, sewing and babysitting in their own homes, often because they could at the same time fulfil their domestic responsibilities. But many more entered the labour force, often taking part-time jobs in order to accommodate their domestic work. Between 1971 and 1981, the income of Canadian wives 'was the significant factor in preventing family income from declining in real dollars' and family economic resources continue to deteriorate. 'By 1979-81, increases in wives' income were no longer able to offset the decline in husbands' average income' (Pryor, 1984:102). O'Loughlin and Cass (1984:4) demonstrate that similar forces are operating in Australia. In both countries, it has been estimated that poverty in husband-wife families would have increased by between fifty and one hundred percent if women had not gone out to work for pay (National Council of Welfare, 1979: Table 3; Edwards, quoted in Cass, 1984:10).

The dramatic increase in women's labour force participation cannot then be taken as a

simple indication of progress or as a simple matter of choice. The growth has contributed to increasing demands from women for greater equality, which have in turn contributed to the movement of some women into traditional male areas of work, to some narrowing of the pay gap, and to some government programs, policies and services designed to deal with or prevent women's subordination. Most women have, however, continued to work at women's jobs in and out of the labour force, and to be paid women's wages or no wages at all, despite their economic need. Meanwhile, more and more of those counted as part of the female labour force are unemployed.

Unemployment

Signs of a developing crisis appeared early in the 1970's, as women's economic needs continued to grow while jobs failed to expand at their earlier rate. More women entered the labour market but an increasing number failed to find jobs there. Official statistics indicate that between 1973 and 1981, female unemployment rates rose much faster, and remained higher, than those of men (International Labour Office, 1984: 43). Combined with the statistics on segregation, these numbers show that women cannot be blamed for male unemployment. Women are not putting men out of work. And such figures significantly underestimate the numbers of women who want and need paid work (Armstrong, 1984: 185-7; Power et al., 1985: 63-70). Women constitute the majority of the hidden unemployed, because most still have their domestic work to do when their paid jobs disappear. If all the women who want and need paid work were counted, the female unemployment rate would, by conservative estimate, more than double (Power et al., 1985: 65).

For the most part, the segregated market and the growing crisis have meant that women are competing with a large supply of other women for declining work in female job ghettos. When they do compete directly with men, the women usually lose (Armstrong 1984:67-98). Although the recession in the early 1980's hit first, hardest, and most obviously the sectors where men work, reducing differences in official male and female unemployment rates and for a short period pushing male rates above the comparable ones for women, some recovery has reduced male rates while female rates have failed to decline.

High unemployment rates and the shift in jobs away from the primary and secondary sectors have encouraged men to search for work in traditional female areas, especially in part-time work (Armstrong, 1984:67-98). At the same time, high unemployment means that women, as the last hired in traditional male areas, are the first to go, and unemployed women often find it more difficult than men to find other paid work. A recent Australian study of workers laid off from an electrical goods manufacturer found that the men were much more successful than women in finding new jobs (Curtain, 1985:20). And when their husbands are unemployed, women also bear the burden of stretching a significantly smaller food dollar. Unemployment, too, is a women's issue.

The Feminisation of Poverty

It is within this context of increasing female unemployment and under-employment, of continuing segregation and low wages (Bryson, 1977), that what even *Business Week* (Cahan, 1985:58) calls the feminisation of poverty must be understood. When growing family disruption — itself related to worsening economic conditions and rising female labour force participation — and women's increasing longevity (although not good health) are added to these processes, the explanation for women's increasing deprivation is almost complete. More women are poor and more of the

poor are women. This is not surprising, given the groups most susceptible to poverty. Being young or old places people at high risk — and women constitute over 40% of unemployed youth, while at the other end of the age spectrum, they make up the majority of the elderly, and a large majority of the elderly without private pensions, superannuation or spouses.

Single parents are also a high-risk group,³ particularly in societies such as ours with only limited childcare facilities and with few means of enforcing child support orders. Women are the overwhelming majority of single parents. Low-wage earners frequently face poverty and it is women who make up the majority of those paid minimum or part-time wages.⁴ Unemployed and disabled people are often forced to live on very low incomes, and while women do not form the majority of this group, their numbers are large, and, as is the case with other high risk groups, growing.

Statistics Canada (1985:2) concludes that

Poverty is a major concern of Canadian women. One in 10 Canadian families is headed by a lone parent woman, and 50% of these women are supporting their families on incomes that are below Statistics Canada low-income cut-off lines. One in three Canadian women over 65 years of age lives alone, and 60% of those who live alone are supporting themselves on an income that is below the low-income cut-off lines.

In her study of poverty in Australia, Bettina Cass (1984: 21) found that:

As a result of the marked deterioration in the labour market in the recession since 1974 resulting in increased rates and duration of unemployment; as a result of the increased proportion of single parents excluded from paid employment; as a result of the increased costs of forming a household for families with children; as a result of the decreased value of income support for children through the tax/transfer system in comparison with the slightly increased real values of income support for pensioners without children — the impact of poverty has shifted to the younger stages of the life cycle. The groups most vulnerable to insufficient income, economic and social marginality in the current period are women-headed single parent families without at least one parent in full-year, full-time work; the long-term unemployed; non-aged single women.

The economic crisis, combined with continued sex-segregation of domestic and wage work, means the increasing feminisation of poverty (Bryson, 1983).

State Responses

As women's poverty, unemployment and underemployment continue to rise, signs of a recovery continue to be weak and governments respond with what Graycar (1983) calls a retreat from the welfare state. When governments introduce 'restraint' programs, as they have in Canada and as they promise to do again in Australia, women bear the brunt of the belt-tightening because they constitute such a high proportion of those receiving and delivering benefits and services.

In the past, government expansion has not only meant more jobs for women, it has also meant more good jobs for women. A large proportion of the women with technical, professional, managerial and administrative jobs work directly or indirectly for the government (Armstrong, 1984:78-81) in education, health and public administration. Women have also found their best opportunities for promotion and their best pay, absolutely and relative to men, in the state sector (Denton and Hunter, 1982:40). These better conditions are, in turn, related to the high rate of unionisation in the public sector. With fewer jobs and with government attempts in Canada at least to limit the power of these unions (Armstrong, 1984:127-30), women's strength is being and will be, significantly reduced.

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'Restraint' programs also mean reductions in benefits and services for women. The growth rate in expenditures on social security has slowed considerably in Australia (Graycar, 1983:4), while the numbers requiring assistance have increased significantly. Moreover, the allocations within social security expenditures have shifted away from assistance to families towards help for the unemployed (Graycar, 1983: 4). Most of those receiving family support payments are women; the majority of those deemed eligible for unemployment benefits are men.

When public expenditures on items such as childcare facilities, services for the elderly, housing and transportation subsidies, and rape crisis and other women's centres, are either reduced or frozen in times of increased need, the impact is much greater on women. Their dependence on these services, which are mainly services for women delivered by women, reflects their subordinate position in the home and in the labour force. When the state fails to provide these services, pressure is placed on women to provide them without pay. Yet as fewer and fewer women can rely on male financial support, and as more and more of them seek paid employment, they have less time, fewer resources, and often little desire to provide at home or in the volunteer sector what the state fails to provide in the public sector.

At the same time as governments are introducing 'restraint' programs in areas which primarily affect women, they are developing job creation programs in areas which primarily affect men. As Borowski (1984:42) points out, higher Canadian unemployment rates over the last decade have meant that 'Canada has a much larger number of employment-related programs in place than Australia'. But rising unemployment rates are encouraging Australia to follow suit, so the time is ripe for a brief examination of Canadian programs and their impact. Although all these programs contain clear statements about equal access, sex segregation means that the impact has been different for women and men. In 1983, three of the four largest programs were directed towards creating employment in the primary and secondary sectors dominated by men, implying that here, at least, the problem was jobs, not people (Armstrong, 1984:123-127). Another strategy has involved what could be termed the financing of bankruptcy through the provision of small sums of seed money for investment in private enterprise. This money too is much more likely to go to males.

A third strategy involves spreading the work around. A government commission (Labour Canada, 1983), established to investigate part-time work, recommended expansion of part-time jobs for women as well as for the young and the elderly, and recommended some increased protection for workers in these part-time jobs. The commission also suggested the active encouragement of job-sharing, of two people doing the one job. This scheme is most applicable to a limited number of women working in technical and professional jobs, where half a salary is often equivalent to one woman's full pay in other sectors. Adoption of these proposals would not only mean that more women would receive part-time pay and part-time benefits in jobs lacking opportunities for promotion, but that they would retain the primary responsibility for domestic work as well.

Another strategy for spreading employment is work-sharing, a program which in Canada permits employees in certain hard-hit areas to work four days a week and be paid for the fifth out of unemployment insurance funds. Largely directed towards the primary and secondary sectors, this scheme too has mostly served to maintain male jobs (Armstrong, 1984:124). It is worth noting that the major advantages listed for part-time work, job-sharing, and work sharing — higher productivity, more time for family responsibilities, higher employment and the maintenance of skills — are equally applicable to a shorter work week and to men as well as to women.

Women and young men have been the targets of a fourth strategy, skills upgrading and on-the-job training schemes. Such schemes imply, however, that for women and young men, the problem is people, not jobs. They often involve narrowly training people for specific jobs or specific skills; yet if there is one thing we know about the future, it is that many of the skills and jobs of today will not be in demand tomorrow. Moreover, an emphasis on skills and training, as opposed to broader educational development, also redirects education funds away from areas in which women have traditionally taught towards those where men predominate. Finally, employment schemes which offer subsidies to employers to hire and train young people, in this the International Year of Youth, may also lead to labour substitution, especially to the substitution of young men for older women, rather than to the creation of new jobs. Job creation schemes in Canada then have done little to create or even maintain employment, but when they have been successful, more of the benefits have gone to men.

The New Technology

While few would pin their hopes for the future on government job creation schemes, many would place their bets on the new technology. Employers are understandably enthusiastic about the possibilities of micro-electronics. The invention of the microchip — a tiny, cheap, relatively sturdy piece of silicon that contains complete electronic circuits and that can do what a large, expensive, fragile and therefore limited mainframe computer did in the past — allows the dispersion and application of computer processes to an incredible range of tasks, at a price and in a form that many can afford and understand. Primarily designed to increase productivity and managerial control, the new technology is particularly applicable to information processing, an area long resistant to these processes. While employers generally acknowledge that there may be some short-term reduction in employment as a result of technological change, they argue that, although much of the equipment is already in use, it has had little employment impact and that, in the long run, the new technology will create more jobs than it destroys.

Precisely because this technology is designed to increase productivity and managerial control, employees — especially female employees — are more pessimistic about its consequences. With one-third of employed women doing clerical work, work which is in the process of being radically altered by micro-electronics, and with a large proportion employed in labour-intensive sectors of the trade and manufacturing industries which can now be technologically transformed, women's pessimism is not surprising. And it can only be reinforced by the impact the new technology is having on promotion ladders, as the lower administrative positions disappear from offices (Menziez, 1981; Windsor, 1984).

The new technology is, at one and the same time, a cause, a reflection and a resolution of the current crisis. Its introduction is both justified and hidden by the crisis. Its current impact is difficult to measure, because the high unemployment rates are blamed on the crisis in general, rather than on technological change in particular. Moreover, the impact is hidden by silent firings, by jobless growth and by the failure of most governments to record turnover rates. And the impact is delayed by technological change clauses in union contracts, by the need to train customers to do the work, by the sometimes increased employment during change over to the new technology, and by the staged development of the technology, which often prevents employment from declining significantly until the fully automated office or plant is in place.

While this micro-electronic technology is creating some new jobs, it is likely to destroy many more jobs than it creates for women. As Benston (1983) points out, there are basically five areas in which jobs will be created. First, there are jobs operating the new

equipment. Many of these new jobs are in word processing and these jobs are going mainly to women, although the use of technology is encouraging some men to move into the field. However, there will be fewer and worse jobs in information processing. Female word processors are merely replacing female typists, and doing the work at a much faster rate, primarily because the machines require fewer skills and allow the organisation of work in such a way that women do nothing but type. It is this kind of work which gives rise to repetitive strain injury and which leads researchers like Wilkins (1982) to argue that half of the health hazards related to the new equipment are the result, not of the machines, but of the organisation of the work that such machines permit. Furthermore, because these new machines can automatically time and record the errors of the operator as well as communicate through telephone lines to a main office, they also make it possible to have much of the work done at home by women. Women could be forced to purchase their own equipment, pay overhead costs, do the typing and babysit the children all at the same time, away from the distractions of union organisers or chats with other workers.

The second area of micro-electronic job creation is the production of the hardware. Jobs are expanding for women here too but they are low-paid jobs which involve detailed, dull, boring, monotonous factory work which is mainly done by women in Third World countries, until their health is ruined.

The third area for job expansion is the production of software. Developing programs can be interesting work, although tasks are being automated in this area as well. Men's skills, education, training and socialisation mean they have the advantage here. Some women have been developing skills in this field, but automation may mean both that job expansion will be limited and that women, as the later arrivals, will get the more automated work.

A fourth field often listed as growing with the technology is maintenance and repair. Most of these jobs have already been captured by men. Moreover, this is unlikely to be a significant growth area because much of the equipment takes new components rather than requiring repairs, because the smaller machines are so inexpensive and changing so rapidly that people are more likely to replace than to repair them, and because the larger machines are increasingly being built with self-diagnostic capacities which can either correct problems or tell people how to do so.

Finally, there will be some expansion of jobs in teaching and research, but these too are likely to go to men rather than to women, given that for a variety of reasons, computer science has already been established as a male field. Moreover, as educational institutions shift their emphasis towards micro-electronic technology, they are reducing their staffs in other, traditionally more female areas.

Technology then, will likely mean fewer, and worse, jobs for women.

Conclusion

If present trends in Canada and Australia are allowed to continue, the future does not look bright for women. Their economic need will increase, while their support from men and governments will decrease, as will their opportunities for full-time, meaningful paid employment. At the same time, their unpaid employment, both domestic and volunteer, will grow.

This future is not inevitable. The new technology is not determining. Policies can affect outcomes, as the current differences between Australia and Canada indicate. The new technology could be redirected and redesigned to eliminate rather than expand dull, monotonous, repetitive work. Increased productivity could mean shorter work weeks for

everyone rather than no paid employment for some and forty or more hours for others. Work of both the domestic and wage variety could be redistributed and redefined rather than sex-segregated and only sometimes rewarded with pay. Policies could expand and redirect human services rather than weaken them. Poverty could be reduced rather than extended and intensified. But such alternatives are possible only if those in a position to ask fundamental questions, to connect the daily reality to explanations, to relate the parts to the whole, do so. Only an integrated and sex-conscious analysis can be the basis for the development of strategies for a future that will work for women and for men.

Footnotes

1. At least in Canada, these developments have been consecutive rather than concurrent, as the state share of jobs ceased to grow in the early 1970's (Armstrong, 1977), just as de-industrialisation started to take hold notably in the textiles and clothing industries (Mahon, 1984).
2. In Canada, the prices of prepared foods (e.g. bakery products) have in recent years been rising less quickly than have the prices of basic ingredients (e.g. flour). Unlike the prices of such food, whether prepared or not, those of restaurant meals and of ready-made clothes, have been rising more slowly than has the Consumer Price Index in general (Armstrong, 1984:104). To cope with inflation by making meals and clothes from scratch is thus a more costly and less viable strategy. Intensifying domestic labour increasingly means shopping more carefully.
3. According to one study (Boulet and Lavallee, 1984:39), 44% of Canadian single-parent families are below the poverty line, while the Australian figure may be as high as 60% (Edwards, et. al., 1985:18).
4. Among full-year, mainly full-time labour force workers in Canada, women now earn 64% of what men earn (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1984:43), while in Australia the full-year, full-time figure is 78% (Power et. al., 1985:58). Yet as Power and her associates go on to argue, this full-year (mainly) full-time focus is misleading, reflecting as it does the non-participation of men in household work and childcare. Both in Australia (Jones, 1984) and in Canada, 'By far the largest factor in explaining women's low wages is their concentration in low-wage occupations' (Ornstein, 1983:46).

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© Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, *Australian-Canadian Studies: A Multidisciplinary Review*, Vol. 3, January 1985.

This is a revised version of the Phillip Law Lecture, presented on 1 May, 1985 at the Phillip Institute of Technology, Bundoora, Victoria, Australia. Hugh Armstrong acknowledges the support provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through a Post-Doctoral Fellowship.