

# "Cramming the Workforce and Neglecting their Children"?

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Periods of economic recession and high unemployment in Australia have generally been accompanied by attacks on married women working (in paid employment) which have been reflected in and perhaps initiated by the media. As Margaret Power has shown in this journal,<sup>1</sup> the media campaign directed against working married women during the 1930s depression enabled them to be used as "scapegoats in the Depression ... women served a valuable function in de-fusing discontent and maintaining social order in a period of great economic distress" (p. 6). Similarly, in the economic recession of the 1970s, "married women and youth have become the scapegoats in the current crisis and attention has been distracted from the fact the economy cannot provide permanent jobs for all people who want to work" (p. 10).

Media attacks on married women's employment are not merely the work of a few unintelligent, sensationalist journalists, nor are they confined to the pages of the more scurrilous and less reputable Sunday tabloids. Even the more 'respectable' press has joined in the harangue. Moreover, intellectuals and academics have not been immune to such overtly ideological, 'non-scientific' printed matter. Indeed, the media's complaint that married women are pinching the jobs of apparently more worthy and needy workers has gained considerable respectability from its incorporation into the academic social sciences as a legitimate area of inquiry, particularly by economists. Although it is unlikely that academics meekly take their cues from the press, the media appears to have had a strong influence, in this case, in focusing public (including academic) attention on the negative effects of married women's employment on the employment of other groups, and on (un)employment in total.

Although the primary concern of this paper is with the media's treatment of working married women, a short critique of one academic analysis is provided by way of introduction,<sup>2</sup> accompanied by an outline of the similarities and differences between academic and media views of married women's employment. This is followed by a more detailed presentation of the media case against working married women. However, an account of the media's commentary on the subject does not in itself reveal the underlying rationale behind or cause(s) of the attacks on married women's employment. Nor, unfortunately, have feminists gone beyond essentially descriptive accounts to engage in causal analyses of the media role and function in this respect.<sup>3</sup> The most sophisticated and illuminating analyses of questions concerning the media in Australia have been those by Marxists. Hence it is the Marxist approach that we shall consider, and attempt to evaluate its relevance and explanatory value regarding the media treatment of working married women.

## Academe

The most detailed academic analysis of married women's 'displacing' effect on other workers in the labour market, in this case youth, is that by P. Sheehan and P. Stricker in The Australian Economic Review (1st Quarter 1978; hereafter referred to as the AER survey). The AER survey concludes that in the period between 1954 and 1973-74, a combination of demographic factors, youth skill imbalances and the increased employment of married women contributed to the relative rise in youth unemployment. The AER survey's claim that married women displaced youth from the labour force in the period hinges on evidence of displacement having occurred in

two industries in particular - community services and finance. The authors imply that a statistical correlation (between rising married female employment and falling youth employment in the two industries) equals a causal connection, from which they derive a more general conclusion that "the labour market does not seem to have adjusted to the rapid increase in the supply of married women entering the labour force ..., and they have to some extent displaced youth" (p. 27).

The AER survey's method and conclusion warrants several criticisms. The first concerns the simplistic device of equating a statistical correlation with a causal connection. The AER survey concedes that changes in employment shares are influenced by "other factors" (besides displacement), and that there is "no way of knowing" to what extent such factors have been influential, but the relevance of "other factors" is subsequently ignored, as is the suggestion for caution in interpretation as the survey proceeds from a statistical correlation between married women's employment and youth unemployment, to a causal connection. As a matter of interest, there is also a statistical association between Australia's postwar immigration program and youth unemployment, as there is between youth unemployment and increasing numbers of older labour force participants, due to increased longevity. Such associations would also find a basis in statistical evidence or 'fact', but would need to be accompanied by a much more solid data basis and rigorous argument before one could assert, with justification, that a statistical association does in fact equal a causal connection.

Secondly, the term 'displacement', apart from being a highly subjective one, assumes a static labour market with a fixed number of jobs, and within which structural and demographic forces influencing labour force participation and employment are either unimportant or constant. Neither of these assumptions were valid during the period. The selectivity of the evidence presented in the AER survey (that relating proportions of married women's to youth employment) is such as to obscure the relevance of structural and demographic influences on employment. Yet the combination of demographic, demand and structural factors have been substantially more important sources or 'causes' of the growth in (married) female employment than the factor of displacement.

Thirdly, the AER survey's inclusion of data on part-time employment obscures the fact that the majority of youth workers were in full-time employment, while married women were largely part-time workers. The inclusion of data on this significant reservoir of part-time workers in order to buttress the claim that married women displaced youth from the labour force leads to a considerable overstatement or magnification of the degree to which this process did in fact occur.

Finally, the most significant of the "other factors" which the AER survey ignored was labour market segmentation, that is the division of the labour force into structurally distinct, non-competing or non-overlapping segments. This is one of the most basic characteristics of the Australian labour force, and occurs on the basis of class, race and sex. The sexual segregation of the labour force has been (and is) particularly severe, and has resulted in the compression of most female workers within a stratum of low status and poorly paid jobs at the lower end of the occupational spectrum.<sup>4</sup> The significance of this is that 'displacement' cannot occur between non-interchangeable categories of the labour market - that is, between a considerable proportion of married women and adult or junior males. (The principal area of the labour market where displacement theories may be relevant is between female adults and female youths. However, the existence of a greater reservoir of skills and experience among adult women, combined with the

poor education of many junior females, has made it effectively impossible for many members of the two groups to be interchangeable.)

In sum, the methods used in the AER survey and the conclusions reached regarding the connection between married women's employment and youth unemployment are deficient, both because of the limited nature of the evidence presented, and because much relevant evidence is omitted from consideration.

It may be said in fairness that the AER is to be commended for taking up an issue of considerable social and political concern, and for attempting an evaluation in a reasoned manner. But this begs the question of to what extent does or can the popular media 'set the pace' or influence the content of ostensibly 'scientific' analyses, in terms both of the questions asked, and of the frame of reference within which hypotheses are formulated and evidence sought. For example, both academe and the media have tended in recent years to link the marital status of women strongly with negative displacement effects on labour market trends. In contrast, the marital status of males<sup>5</sup> is not considered relevant to the displacement of youth. Yet, using similar logic, a 'displacement theory' can equally be applied to adult males in relation to youth workers, while there is some evidence that married women themselves have been displaced in at least two industries by youth workers in recent years.<sup>6</sup> The question must therefore be asked as to why these counter-examples of forms of labour-displacement are not considered significant by journalists and academics, and why it is that married women are invariably the displacers, and males and youths invariably the displaced. Before an attempt is made to answer this question, let us consider the similarities and differences between academic and media views of married women's employment, and the media presentation of the case against working married women in greater detail.

#### The Media View

There are certainly points of comparison between the academic (as presented by the AER survey) and media views on the role of working married women. Both reflect and perpetuate the view that married women are ("to some extent", AER, p. 27) responsible for the plight of the 'lost generation' - unemployed and unemployable youth. Yet there are also differences between the media and academic approaches to the question of working married women. The media is prone to sensationalism, stark headlines, emotive language, and to making strong causal associations (in this case between married women's employment and high general unemployment) in the absence of anything approaching reasonable evidence. There is a difference also of method. The media 'method' tends to be one of frontal assault, using whatever armoury is likely to elicit the maximum response from readers, and perhaps also a maximum sense of guilt among married women. Such methods often direct the public gaze away from an overview of the economic recession, and minimise the chance of reasoned debate and analysis of causes. They tend to deflect attention away from the inadequacies of orthodox economic tools and of government policies to deal with unemployment, and perhaps also divert the public gaze away from the inability of a capitalist economy to provide reasonable employment for all those who need or want to work.

The question of the right of married women to work was brought to prominence in the media in 1977 when the Rockhampton City Council terminated the employment of a female employee when she married. The case was brought before the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission by the Municipal Officers Association of Australia. As a result the Commission proscribed this form of sexual discrimination on the basis of ILO Convention 111, ratified by the Federal Labor Government in

ment in respect of employment and occupation, with a view to eliminating any discrimination in respect thereof".<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, the Commission rejected the view of the Mayor of Rockhampton (one of the employers respondent in the case), whose solution to youth unemployment was "to tip the women out".<sup>8</sup> The Commission stated: "No one doubts that youth unemployment is a serious problem, but in our view this problem cannot be solved by the forced retirement of married women workers", and it concluded that such a policy "could have no significant impact on youth unemployment levels".<sup>9</sup>

The relatively dispassionate approach of the Arbitration Commission and of academic economists to the question of working married women is in strong contrast to that of the media, in some sections of which the criticisms of working married women have been of such frequency and intensity that they bear the hallmarks of a 'campaign'. However, not all newspapers have conducted their 'campaign' with as much fervour and rabidity as The Australian and the Melbourne-based Sunday Press, for example, which tend to be in the vanguard in this respect. Some newspapers - for example The Age and the Australian Financial Review<sup>10</sup> (hereafter referred to as the AFR) - cannot be criticised for launching an organised attack as newspapers, but some of their journalists and feature writers have imbibed and regurgitated some highly coloured and prejudiced views regarding 'woman's role', and in doing so are fortifying pre-existing prejudices against married women working. The seminal piece of press propaganda occurred in The Australian (14-15 Jan. 1978). In an article entitled 'If Mum Quit Work There'd be Jobs for the Boys (and Girls)', a title which presaged the highly emotive contents, a picture was painted of modern youth meandering around, idling and thieving, while "their mothers are at work, depriving the young ones of a job". The cause of the 'problem' (i.e. married women working) is not, apparently, to be found in the reasons either of economic need or job satisfaction, but is due to the malleability and vulnerability of married women in the face of their ('liberated') female peers, who "say that being tied to a kitchen sink is tantamount to bludging". In a similar vein, Douglas Wilkie, writing in the Sunday Press (5 February 1978) advocated a financial 'inducement' (\$50 a week) to working mothers to go home, after having been "blarneyed by Women's Lib. ... cramming the workforce and neglecting their children". In the pages of The Age, sweet reason replaced rancour, yet reached essentially similar conclusions via the pen of Claude Forell (19 Oct. 1978): "There is some validity in the argument raised by Mr. B.A. Santamaria (the one and only!) that the social and economic value of a woman's work in the home and her contribution to the stability of the family has been discounted in our materialistic society". Forell concluded by endorsing the Victorian Chamber of Manufacturers' suggestion to changes in the tax structure to favour families with non-working wives (i.e. to discriminate against families with working wives). Forell also suggested a cosmetic modification to this proposal in order to make it more socially and politically palatable, namely, that such penalties "should be seen not so much as a penalty on married women in the workforce as a ... rational expression of social priorities".

Although these criticisms occurred in 1978 they appear to be fairly representative of the changes in media attitudes to married women working since the onset of the economic recession. Recently there has been a slight strengthening and hardening of resolve. For example, The Australian has injected into its editorial content the prejudices and views which were originally more the domain of 'feature writers'. In May 1979, an editorial in The Australian was devoted to linking (just released statistics on) youth unemployment with selfish people "searching for a second job in the family ... wives wishing to rejoin the workforce, in particular"

(14 May 1979). The editorial's prefatory comment that it did not, of course, intend to deny the right or need of married women to work was followed with the somewhat incompatible assertion that working married women's "frustration is not comparable with that suffered by young people in search of their first jobs. Neither is the social damage of equal significance". The editorial implied that the feminist demand for (married) women's right to paid employment is no longer warranted, and that past acceptance of this was a short-term function of a booming economy, when married women's labour was in great demand. "The priorities of yesteryear no longer apply." According to this media view, economic rights are a function of the changing needs of employers in the context of a crisis-prone economy.

### The Marxist View of the Media

The strength of the Marxist analysis of the media lies in its 'contextual' approach (i.e. locating the media in its socio-economic and historical context), and in its analysis of the way in which the media transmits and propagates views and an underlying value system which accord with those of the owners of capital and employers of labour. However, Marxist analyses of the Australian media rarely consider the media's representation of women's roles and lives. We must extrapolate from the general Marxist analysis of the media to its potential application to the media criticisms of married women's employment. The central question is whether contemporary Marxism has relevance in understanding or explaining the media campaign against working married women.

Humphrey McQueen's Australia's Media Monopolies<sup>11</sup> represents the most significant Marxist attempt to describe and analyse the role and functions of the mass media in Australia. According to McQueen: "The media are seen in the context of monopoly capitalism, and are analysed in terms of the requirements of a system based on class exploitation." (p. 1). Not only do the Australian media uphold the interests of monopoly capitalism, they are examples of monopoly capitalism: "It is often said that the media are on the side of big business. This is not so. The media are big business." (p. 39). Moreover, the personality characteristics of journalists - integrity, honest reporting, etc. - are not at issue and do little to offset the basic structural dominance of media proprietors in representing their class interests. "Even if all the media were completely honest, accurate and unbiased in all their political comment and reports, they would still uphold the interests of monopoly capitalism." (p. 183)

Unfortunately, McQueen's analysis of the media does not extend to the media's attitudes to and portrayal of Australian women, except in an entirely cursory way, but his theory of how the media work in Australia, and in whose interests, may perhaps be extended to apply to the role of (married) women workers. We may presume that Marxism, as represented by McQueen, would consider the recent media criticisms of married women working as expressive of capitalism's interests - be they economic or ideological - in either confining married women to an essentially domestic unpaid role or, alternatively, in attaching considerable social stigma and shame to married women brazen or needy enough to brave the media-sponsored storm and seek paid employment. The questions to be asked are firstly, whether married women's role as the chief purchaser of consumer goods for the family is threatened by their stepping beyond the domestic sphere into public employment; second, whether married women's employment threatens the nuclear family, and with it women's role as child-breeders and child-raisers; and third, whether the media criticisms are less a response to a (perceived) threat to the sexual division of labour, within and beyond the family, than an attempt to 'keep the lid on' class conflict by replacing it with sex hostilities.

## Understanding the Media Criticisms

### (a) Women's Role as Consumers within Capitalism

The main Marxist analyses of the Australian mass media emphasise its role in promoting consumption (or 'consumerism'). Thus the conventional wisdom that the media provide information and entertainment which is paid for by advertising is reversed. According to this view, the media's role is to deliver the consumer into the hands of capitalist producers: "The mass media controllers are in fact marketing not merely marketing power itself, but also the services of a socially automated persuasive machine for operating drastically upon the individual's scale of economic preferences so as to distort his pattern of wants in the interests of corporate capitalist profitability".<sup>12</sup> Whether or not this is the case, and whether advertising works and is worth the vast corporate expenditure<sup>13</sup> is not of prime concern here. The concern is with the economic role of women, particularly married women, as consumers (a role which is obscured by the male-specific language employed in the above quotation). This economic role of married women may be an explanation of the media 'push' against married women working, given that Australian women are responsible for more than 80% of consumer spending decisions,<sup>14</sup> and that 'homemaking' therefore represents an important economic role. Does the recognition of this lie at the basis of media criticisms of working married women?

As already noted, the press does not present one united bulwark of opposition to working married women. The principal media opponent of such criticisms is the Australian Financial Review which, in a remarkable editorial,<sup>15</sup> strongly condemned The Australian's article entitled 'If Mum Quit Work There'd be Jobs for the Boys (and Girls)'.<sup>16</sup> Partly motivated by a concern to dissociate itself from a debate which was "largely sponsored by the Murdoch press",<sup>17</sup> the AFR believed that the large circulation of The Australian and the political clout of Rupert Murdoch made it important to counter the paper's statement on married women's employment. Refuting The Australian's argument that married women were displacing youth workers from the labour market, it argued forcefully: "One could as easily single out or invent other sections of the workforce, say all the over 55s, or all the sons of migrants, or even all the redheads, and advance the proposition that if they were forced out of the workforce there would be more jobs available for the unemployed". According to the AFR, the principal economic benefit of married women working lies in their earnings. (That is, postwar consumption expenditure has been much higher than it would have been had married women not entered the labour force.) The AFR warned against the damage done to mass consumption patterns with the loss of married women's earning power, should they be 'tipped out' of the labour force. According to the AFR, the principal function or effect of married women's employment, that of boosting aggregate consumption levels, gains more importance in the present context of 'underconsumption' associated with the recession (i.e. an excessively high savings ratio, and unused productive capacity due to deficient aggregate demand). According to the commercially oriented logic of the AFR, the interests of the system are better served by married women working, if they wish, than by structurally and politically impracticable attempts to eject them from the labour force.

In America, Betty Friedan<sup>18</sup> has written on the cultivation by the U.S. media and advertising industries of the 'feminine mystique' (the glorification of woman's role as home-maker and family-tender), in terms of which the function of media advertising is to inculcate women with the notion that maximum family consumption expenditure is inextricably bound up with good home-making and loving motherhood. "... the perpetuation of housewifery ... makes sense (and dollars) when one

realises that women are the chief customers of American business. Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives." (And): "It would take a clever economist to figure out what would keep our affluent economy going if the housewife market began to fall off ..." (pp. 181-2) Offering further evidence of her claim that women fulfil a vital economic function within capitalism in their capacity as full-time home-makers and consumers, Friedan cites an interview she conducted with an advertising executive who directed motivational research into the housewife market: "In a free enterprise economy we have to develop the need for new products. And to do that we have to liberate (sic!) women to desire these new products. We help them to rediscover that homemaking is more creative than to compete with men. This can be manipulated ... The woman has to want to stay in the kitchen ... and we show him (the manufacturer) how to do it the right way. If he tells her that all she can be is a wife and mother, she will spit in his face." (pp. 199-200)

In additional support of Friedan's claim regarding the economic value of full-time home-making, there is evidence that some sections of capital (those associated with domestic goods and home appliances) regard the 'Career Woman or Would-Be Career Woman' as the most dangerous to its interests.<sup>19</sup> And there is probably truth in Betty Friedan's argument that it is not merely a time-factor (i.e. full-time domestic work) which is required to maintain women's role as consumers, but an ideological factor. Her argument is that by propagating the view that the apogee of woman's role and her true worth lies in full-time home-making, child-minding and maximum consumption for the family's welfare and comfort, the media is ensuring that the full-time housewife fulfils an important economic function.

We need not necessarily accept Humphrey McQueen's belief that U.S. imperialism has got to the hearts, minds and hip-pockets of Australian people in order to accept the likelihood that the Australian media and advertising industries work in ways quite similar to those of their American counterparts (or owners), that they have similar motives, and share similar interests. Thus the above process, that of "the subversion of women's lives in America to the ends of business",<sup>20</sup> probably works to a similar extent in Australia. The question at issue is whether this requires (married) women to be full-time home-makers as Friedan suggests, whether the increased labour force participation of married women in recent years has threatened this process, and whether the present media campaign in Australia reflects this threat, and represents an attempt to demobilise working wives and mothers.

Generally speaking, the feminist perspective is that capitalist economic imperatives dictate that women optimize their value to capitalism by their domestic and consumer roles, while according to one recent Marxist analysis,<sup>21</sup> women's role as consumers within capitalism does not necessitate the full-time domestication of (working-class) women. "... while capital may need domestic labour, there is no reason why this should be a full-time activity."<sup>22</sup> There is also evidence that private consumption is higher in two-income families than in families with one (male) breadwinner.<sup>23</sup> In consequence, women's role as chief consumers may actually be facilitated by (married) women working, rather than impeded or challenged as Friedan suggests. It is undoubtedly this which prompted the AFR's recognition and endorsement of married women's employment, as a factor essential to maintain aggregate demand.

Moreover, it appears unlikely that 'the interests of capital' can be best and only served by a complete sexual division of labour which relegates (married) women to a full-time domestic, consuming role, even though it is undoubtedly true that a sexual division of labour is extremely economically useful in enabling domestic work to be performed gratis in the name of 'love', and for married women to provide the "last of the industrial cannon fodder" at cheap wage-rates in occupations which Australian and migrant males and Australian youths shun, despite unemployment.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it is unlikely that a single, monolithic body representing 'the interests of capitalism' exists. It is more probable that a division of interests exists within the capitalist class in relation to the ideal 'woman's role', and that the media reflect this division of interests. Offsetting the need to perpetuate the role of married women as full-time unpaid domestic workers has been the need to promote (or at least not discourage) the increased labour force participation of (married) women, in the context of reasonably full employment up to the recession of the 1970s.

In sum, it is unlikely that the media campaign against married women working can be explained in terms of married women's role as consumers, and the challenge to this represented by their working. The commercially oriented logic of the AFR supports the conclusion that the media criticisms of working married women do not spring from the threat to consumption patterns posed by their working.

(b) Married Women's Employment Weakens the Nuclear Family

A second prong of the Marxist analysis of married women's domestic role<sup>25</sup> is that it is one which strengthens and sustains the nuclear family, which itself acts as a conserver and stabiliser of capitalist values and institutions. This is partly a function of time, in that the more time married women spend in the labour force, the less time they spent at home child-breeding and child-minding. Yet, as already noted, the increasing labour force participation of married women has been a largely part-time phenomenon, while paid employment is very much a secondary job, built around the primary demands imposed on married women by their domestic and child-minding roles. For example, in 1978 married women comprised two-thirds (62.3%) of all part-time workers, while nearly a half of all married women in the labour force (42.5%) worked in part-time jobs.<sup>26</sup> The Child Care Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1973 showed the effects of dependent children on the nature of employment sought by women. About half of all women with a child below the age of 12 years who were employed were engaged in part-time work (less than 35 hours a week). And while 81.2% of women workers with no children worked full-time, only 45.1% of women workers with two or more children under 12 years worked full-time.<sup>27</sup>

The so-called 'sexual revolution' has not really challenged or undermined the notion that women and only women are responsible for the care of children. The consequence has been that married women's employment is generally adapted to the requirements of the family, rather than the family adapting itself to the structure of the labour process. In this sense therefore, married women's employment has not seriously weakened or undermined the sexual division of labour within the family.<sup>28</sup>

However, it may be that the media criticisms are based less on a specific demand that women continue to bear prime responsibility for children, than on a more general ideological premise. This is, that the institution of 'the family' is threatened by married women completely abandoning the sphere of reproduction for that of production, and is sustained by ensuring that they continue to perceive their primary role as domestic and familial, rather than public and productive.

In this vein, Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle's analysis of the pressure "to push women right out the workforce back into the home"<sup>29</sup> suggests that the media campaign represents at its root an ideological push. Its aim is to shore up the monogamous nuclear family (and the accompanying sexual division of labour), which is perceived by the media as crumbling under the combined weight of increasing numbers of married women working outside the home, increasing divorces, and declining marriage and birth rates.

A further aspect of married women's role within the family in periods of economic crisis has been eloquently expressed by the Italian Marxist-feminist, Mariarosa Dalla Costa: "... women are of service not only because they carry out domestic labour without a wage and without going on strike, but because they always receive back into the home all those who are periodically expelled from their jobs by economic crisis. The family, this maternal cradle always ready to help and protect in time of need, has been in fact the best guarantee that the unemployed do not immediately become a horde of disruptive outsiders".<sup>30</sup> This is undoubtedly true; families with 'loving mums' act as buffers, comforters, and probably as counters to rising frustration and dissent by unemployed family members. The media may therefore be responding to a (perceived) threat posed by married women working outside the home, to their supportive and nurturant role within the family, particularly in periods of economic crisis. This concern would appear to underlie Claude Forell's comments in The Age (19 Jan. 1978), and might suggest that the media's concern is as much with the stability of the nuclear family as with employment itself. However, against this must be weighed the AFR's argument that denying married women the right to paid employment actually weakens the traditional family unit, by "imposing a financial penalty on marriage" (16 Jan. 1978). The AFR at least is none too taken with the view that married women's paid employment threatens the interests and values of capitalism by destroying the family.

(c) Attacking Working Married Women Weakens the Working Class

A further extension of the Marxist analysis of the media in its application to the subject is the possibility that the criticisms of married women working may be quite 'rational' (according to the logic of capitalism), in that they promote divisions and discontent within the working class, thereby enabling class conflict and resentment of exploitation to be sublimated and displaced by sex hostilities. The result is a weakened class struggle, lesser remuneration for labour and more profits for bosses.

According to McQueen: "The media try to divide and demoralise the working class because a confident, united working class is one of the last things that the capitalists want to face" (p. 43). This makes sense. While McQueen did not address himself to the principal means by which this is achieved, Margaret Power has advanced a coherent explanation of the media criticisms of working married women in Marxist terms. As already noted, in both the 1930s and the current economic recession, the media attacks on married women working served to divert and obscure underlying causes of economic depression and misery by the relocation of blame. "Widespread hostility toward women as the 'cause' of unemployment distracted attention from an analysis which would find the source of the crisis in the economic system, in the imperatives of profit."<sup>31</sup> Advancing a similar explanation, Keith Windschuttle noted the media criticisms of working married women, and explained the media's role in terms of "a finely balanced act of social control".<sup>32</sup> "Workers could be divided on the basis of their sex and one side led to blame the other for the faults of their employers' economic system."<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusions

The media campaign against working married women has been conducted despite the impracticality of attempts to force married women out of the labour force. As already noted, this is the case due to the sexually segmented nature of the labour market and the non-substitutability of different categories of workers, including generally of adult (married) women by junior females. For example, out of work plumbers are 'ill-equipped' to become typists, while junior shop assistants do not (without considerable training) make competent librarians and nurses. Given the economic value of married women's employment, and given the compatibility between married women's paid employment and their role as principal consumers and child-minders within the family, it is unlikely that the media criticisms of working married women represent a response to a real economic threat to either aggregate consumption patterns or to the nuclear family itself. Given the apparent contradiction between married women's important economic functions and the media campaign against their working, it is probable that the criticisms represent an ideological exercise - that of searching for scapegoats for what is obviously an immense problem in contemporary capitalism (high unemployment). The effects are two-fold. Firstly, the nature of the system which has generated the problem is obscured, and attention is deflected away from more radical (and feasible) solutions than that of denying married women the right to work. Secondly, in as much as sections of the working class believe what the media tell them about working married women, the working class is divided, and its economic and political power reduced.

Additionally, such criticisms may fulfil a further economic function in reinforcing a sexual division of labour, in which married women's primary role is to perform unpaid domestic labour, serve the labour force, and reproduce labour power in their capacity as wives and mothers, while their secondary role is to provide a reservoir of cheap and malleable labour in the paid labour force.<sup>34</sup> As suggested above, the marital status of males is generally considered unimportant when analysing unemployment, while 'displacement theories' in relation to unemployment are not applied to males, nor youth, but principally to married women. Additionally, the 'lost generation' of unemployed youth is generally regarded as of cardinal concern, while the 'discouraged worker effect' among married women who withdraw from a gloomy labour market, is not. The basis of the differential in media and academic treatments of male and female workers<sup>35</sup> is rooted in certain assumptions about 'woman's role' - that it is, or should be, a dependent role and, in relation to labour force participation and paid employment, a secondary role. The assumption that most women are dependents of men (and the corresponding refusal to accept married women as having either a basic right or economic need<sup>36</sup> to support some households, particularly those where there is a male adult) is one means of maintaining and legitimising the view that married women are 'displacing' other categories of workers, i.e. males and 'youth', from their presumed prior rights of occupancy in the labour market.

The underlying premise behind such media comment was expressed by Douglas Wilkie of the Sunday Press: "As more and more people want jobs, more and more can't exercise their 'right to work'".<sup>37</sup> Such a view is based on what one economist<sup>3</sup> humorously calls the "malleable putty" view of the labour market, according to which one category of workers - married women - can readily be ejected to accommodate others - youths and adult males. Left unchallenged is the assertion that the first to lose the right to paid employment are or should be married women, and unquestioned is the structure and nature of a production process within which employment for some is at the expense of unemployment for others. Obviously, the principal unquestioned and obscured aspect of the above media views (and also of

he academic analysis) concerns the justice, equity and efficiency of such an economic system which requires or allows overemployment (eg. two jobs or forced over-time), underemployment (eg. casual work, part-time work in lieu of full-time employment being available), unemployment, and the periodic rejection of basic economic rights for many people in order to maintain and promote private profit for a select few, including media owners.

#### NOTES

M. Power, 'Women and Economic Crisis: The 1930s Depression and the Present Crisis', The Journal of Australian Political Economy, No. 4, March 1979.

A more detailed analysis is presented by this writer in The Australian Economic Review, 3rd Quarter 1979. ('Married Women's Employment and its Relation to Youth (Un)Employment')

eg. P. Edgar and H. McPhee (eds), Media She (Melbourne, 1974); sections on women and the media in G. Major (ed.), Mass Media in Australia. Proceedings of the 41st Summer School of the Australian Institute of Political Science (Australia, 1976). In this article, 'media' refers chiefly to the mass circulation daily metropolitan newspapers, as it is this section of the media which has been the main vehicle in the last two years for criticising married women working.

K. Alford, op.cit., pp. 44-45; M. Power, 'The Making of a Woman's Occupation', Hecate, Volume 1, no. 2 (1975) pp. 25-27.

It is significant that the marital status of males was an important consideration in yesteryear's wage determinations. It is no longer significant or meaningful, due to the abandonment of the 'family wage' (and the extension of the minimum wage to females) - the institutional keypin of the 'male as breadwinner' claim. Yet the category "married females" lingers on in economic analysis. This suggests that the continued use of the category derives more from its historical value than from any contemporary predictive value. In economic terms, probably the more useful participation variable for females today, as for males, is age rather than marital status. However in ideological terms, reference to statistics on "married females" still obviously serves a function.

K. Alford, op.cit., p. 40; P. Sheehan and P. Stricker, op.cit., pp. 21-22.

Cited in the Commission's decision, transcript, 24 April 1978, p. 4.

Reported in the National Times, 5 June 1978. The media have subsequently reported the plethora of charges levelled against working mothers by the Mayor of Rockhampton. They include increased drug-taking, venereal disease, juvenile delinquency, complaining men, the impending extinction of the white race, youth unemployment, and, bringing the matter to a head (if the pun may be excused), "a world-wide outbreak of head-lice". (The Age, 19 Sept. 1978)

op.cit., pp. 5-6.

The AFR generally tends to elevate itself above the more sensationalist, street-corner or gutter-level of some of its media competitors. Its general

line is that the campaign to 'tip the women out' of the labour force is illogical and impractical, and that there are economic benefits, both to two-income families and to capitalism itself, derived from the additional consumption expenditure of married working women (eg. 16 Jan. 1978). Significantly, the AFR's advertising motto is "Reaching Business is Our Business".

- 11 Australia, 1977. McQueen's views on the media appear representative of 'the Marxist view' in general. Similar views are stated by R.W. Connell: "The media ... work in such a way as to create the ideological conditions for the success of conservative politics ... this is not a matter of 'bias' or partisan reporting or conscious distortion of the truth; ... It is an outcome of the normal, regular processes by which commercial mass communications work in a capitalist system, producing and reproducing an ideological interpretation of the world". Ruling Class, Ruling Culture (U.K. 1977) p. 195. See also B. Plew, 'Controlling Media: The Australian Case', Arena, no. 43, 1976, p. 90.
- 12 D. Thompson, 'Capitalism and the Mass Media', Australian Left Review, July 1971, p. 46.
- 13 Thompson claims that advertising constitutes on average about two-thirds of the revenue of the metropolitan daily press. Ibid., p. 45.
- 14 The Patterson Report or Wooing the Australian Woman (Sydney, 1972).
- 15 16 Jan. 1978.
- 16 14-15 Jan. 1978.
- 17 AFR, op.cit.
- 18 B. Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (U.S., 1963). Friedan is not a Marxist and thus in one sense her work is beyond our concern with the relevance of Marxism. It is referred to however as it contains some illuminating research on the American media-advertising industries regarding women.
- 19 According to Friedan's interviews with U.S. marketing personnel, the 'True Housewife' and the 'Balanced Homemaker' prefer to have sufficient household appliances and to do the housework themselves, while the 'Career Woman' is less willing to do so, more likely to complain about the service they give, and is "harder to sell", ibid., pp. 184-5.
- 20 ibid., p. 181.
- 21 T. Brennan, 'Women and Work', The Journal of Australian Political Economy, no. 1, 1977.
- 22 ibid., p. 35.
- 23 R. Williams, 'Wants and Working Wives: Household Demand and Saving in Australia', Economic Record, April 1978, p. 35.
- 24 Policies for Development of Manufacturing Industry (Jackson Report, Australia, 1975-76), Volume 1, pp. 2, 15, 73, 86, 126; Volume IV, pp. 8, 11, 89-94.
- 25 The spate of Marxist literature in the last ten years on "the woman question" chiefly concerns her domestic role, which is considered woman's primary role in

- capitalism. "A woman's first job is to reproduce other people's labour power, and her second is to reproduce and sell her own." M. Dalla Costa and S. James, The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community (U.K., 1975) p. 13. See also W. Secombe, 'The Housewife and her Labour under Capitalism', New Left Review, 83, 1973, pp. 3-24; J. Curthoys and J. Barbalet, 'A Discussion of the Political Economy of Housework', Selected Papers from the First Australian Political Economy Conference, Sydney, 1976.
- 26 Calculations based on ABS The Labour Force (ref. no. 6203.0) 1978 issue.
- 27 Reported in First Report of the National Population Inquiry (Borrie Report, Australia, 1975), Volume 1, pp. 369-71.
- 28 Jan Harper and Lyn Richards' interviews with married women and their husbands, in two studies commissioned by the Royal Commission on Human Relationships (Mothers and Working Mothers, Australia, 1979), substantiate the above evidence and argument. Particularly important is their finding that while wage-labour is no longer regarded as unacceptable or undesirable for married women in general, women with young children who work outside the home are subject to considerable criticism. "Working, it would seem, is no longer socially defined as deviant behaviour for a mother. It may, in fact, be approved and expected behaviour. But working before children are at school age or, afterwards, working hours that preclude being home when they return from school, is clearly still widely regarded as deviant." (p. 35)
- 29 'The Making of the Australian Family', Intervention, no. 12, p. 82.
- 30 M. Dalla Costa and S. James, *op.cit.*, p. 34, original emphasis.
- 29 'The Making of the Australian Family' Intervention No. 12 p. 82.
- 30 M. Dalla Costa and S. James, *op.cit.*, p. 34, original emphasis.
- 31 M. Power, *op.cit.*, p. 6.
- 32 K. Windschuttle, Unemployment. A Social and Political Analysis of the Economic Crisis in Australia (Australia, 1979) p. 170.
- 33 *ibid.*, p. 140.
- 34 This does not endorse the 'reserve army' thesis in relation to married women's employment (see T. Brennan, *op.cit.*, pp. 43-44), but refers to the relative cheapness of women's labour throughout the twentieth century, as well as to their concentration in areas of part-time and dispensable employment. See R. Gregory and R. Duncan, 'The Relevance of Segmented Labour Market Theories', Seventh Conference of Economists, Sydney, 1978; OECD Study, The Role of Women in the Economy (Australia, 1974) p. 59.
- 35 We must remember that 'youth' is a sex-differentiated category, and that the large majority of female youths mature and marry [87% by the age of 30, and 94% by the age of 50; P. McDonald, Marriage in Australia (Australia, 1975) p. 219]. Thus the effective concern with the negative effects of married women's employment is with female employment in total. In this light, 'youth' is not in fact a separate category, and the criticisms are effectively directed at ensuring that 'work' remains primarily a male domain.
- 36 The Australian Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty provides evidence regarding numbers of fatherless and female-headed families, two-income families, and families who are not poor only because the mothers work. (First Main Report, 1975), pp. 198-205.
- 37 5 Feb. 1978, emphasis added.
- 38 Evan Jones, in Nation Review, 23 Feb. 1978.

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