

# Women's Work and Economic Crisis: Some Lessons of the Great Depression

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**ABSTRACT:** An investigation of the impact of the Great Depression on women's paid and unpaid work roles, and the implications of this for their situation in the current economic crisis. The widely accepted notion that women form a "reserve army" which is integrated into the labor market during periods of expansion and expelled with contractions is criticized. While economic expansion draws women into the labor force, it is argued, the sexual segregation of occupations creates an inflexibility in the labor market which prevents their expulsion during a crisis of contraction. Women's unpaid household work, however, is an arena where they can be forced to "take up the slack" in the economy during crises.

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## I. Introduction

Most people in this society view paid work and family life as two clearly distinct spheres of activity, as indeed they have become. In general, men are associated with work and women with the family. Though there is considerable overlap in practice — women frequently work outside the home and men often play an important role within it — American culture clearly defines men as the "breadwinners" and women as the people socially responsible for managing housework and family life. Women's production within the family, because it is not paid labor, is often not recognized as valuable, but the work done within both spheres is clearly crucial to the functioning of the economy. Unpaid houseworkers produce and socialize children and efficiently provide many important personal and social services. Paid workers produce profits and also some useful commodities.

In the course of capitalist development, women have come to play an increasingly important role in the sphere of paid labor, and yet participation in that sphere continues to be ideologically defined as

"male." This disparity between the cultural definition of women and the reality of their material situation stems from a contradiction basic to the structure of capitalism. On the one hand, there is the continuing need for the family, particularly women's unpaid labor in it, and, on the other hand, the tendency for an increasing amount of human activity to be integrated into the sphere of commodity production in the course of economic growth.

The family lost its role as the primary unit of social production with the development of industrial capitalism, but as an institution it remains central to that form of economic organization, performing many vital functions. Women have been designated as the people responsible for the execution of these functions in the home. They provide a wide variety of personal services — preparing meals, cleaning the home, providing basic health care, and so forth. This work is necessary to the maintenance of the working ability, or labor power, of adult family members, and to the preparation of a new generation of workers. Women also do most of the family's buying, and the institution is the basic unit of commodity consumption. In addition, women instill in their children and maintain in their husbands the individualistic values basic to the society, and they are responsible for emotionally and sexually maintaining their husbands. Family "life" is defined in direct opposition to work, as the one place where people can escape the "impersonal forces" of the economy. As wives and

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mothers, women are expected to absorb any tension generated by those forces. Finally, of course, they bear children, society's next generation of workers.

It is theoretically conceivable that all of the family's functions could be taken over by other institutions, and that the work involved, with the exception of childbearing, could be done by persons of either sex. However, there are a number of good reasons for preserving the present arrangement within the context of a capitalist society. First, all of the work done by women in the home retains a pre-capitalistic, wageless form, so that the costs of maintaining and reproducing its labor power are borne fully by the working class. Without families, adult men and women could probably fend for themselves, but the 24-hour-a-day job of caring for young children would be very expensive if it were transformed into wage labor. Moreover, while it may be profitable for individual capitalists to hire waged workers to produce the essential personal services otherwise supplied by women in families as a "labor of love," this is not in the interests of the capitalist class as a whole, for wages must rise to cover the cost to the worker of such necessities.

Secondly, the small nuclear family is an optimal unit of consumption, generating much larger demand for household appliances, televisions, and so forth, than would obtain if housework and family activities were socialized. In addition, assigning women the responsibility for making the family into a "haven" from the frustrations of the world of work — at least for men — is tremendously accommodative to the needs of a society in which most jobs are inherently unsatisfying.

The family is, for all of these reasons, an important component of our economic system, and this is the material basis of the cultural definition of women as primarily wives and mothers. And yet, with economic development and growth, increasing numbers of women have entered the paid labor force, in a wide range of occupations. This, in women's real lives, has meant greater opportunity to receive pay for their labor, a development which clearly threatens the culturally prescribed sexual division of labor assigning them the responsibility to work without pay to maintain their families.

There is, then, a real contradiction between the economy's need for women as unpaid family workers and its tendency to draw all available labor power, regardless of sex, into the sphere of production for profit. This creates a disjuncture between the ideology about sex roles, which continues to define women with reference to their family role, and the material reality of their increasing participation

in the "male" sphere of paid production. As a result, as Juliet Mitchell has pointed out, women who work for pay tend nevertheless to view themselves as wives and mothers, not as "workers."

Because the economic role of women is obscured (its cheapness obscures it) women workers do not have the pre-conditions of class consciousness. Their exploitation is invisible behind an ideology that masks the fact that they work at all — their work appears inessential.<sup>1</sup>

Because of this lack of class consciousness, Mitchell argues, the labor market behavior of women is easily manipulated with changing economic conditions. She and other Marxist-feminists have argued that women function as a "reserve army" of labor power, to be drawn on in periods when labor is scarce and expelled in periods of labor surplus. Ideology, in this view, plays a crucial role, both perpetuating women's lack of class consciousness over the long term and propelling them in and out of the labor force in response to changing economic conditions.

Exponents of this "reserve army" theory agree, and the historical evidence is fairly clear, that in periods of economic expansion women do tend to enter the paid workforce. In periods of contraction, however, the situation of women is more problematic. On the one hand, as Mitchell suggests, "in times of economic recession and forced labour redundancy, women form a pool of cheap labour."<sup>2</sup> Since women work for lower wages than men, one might expect them to be the last to lose their jobs in a slump. On the other hand, this would violate the basic cultural prescription which, as Mitchell so strongly emphasizes, dictates that "woman's place" is in the home, that men are the "breadwinners." Reasoning from this basis, Margaret Benston, who also characterizes women as a "reserve army," suggests that women leave the labor market in a period of contraction.

When there is less demand for labor . . . women become a surplus labor force — but one for which their husbands and not society are economically responsible. The "cult of the home" makes its reappearance during times of labor surplus and is used to channel women out of the market economy. This is relatively easy since the pervading ideology ensures that no one, man or woman, takes woman's participation in the labor force very seriously.<sup>3</sup>

This notion has gained wide currency — indeed, it has risen to the level of dogma — both in the women's movement and on the Left.

There are, then, contradictory arguments about women's labor force behavior in an economic contraction. If the Marxist concept of a "reserve army" of labor power is useful for analyzing the entrance of women into the paid workforce over the long term, Marxist-feminist applications of its converse do not tell us very much about their economic roles in a period of crisis. Those theoretical applications, moreover, are somewhat mechanistic, and are insufficiently grounded in knowledge of history. This paper is an effort to remedy that through an analysis of the experience of women, both in the labor market and as unpaid family workers, during the Great Depression, the most severe economic crisis of the twentieth century. The experience of women during the period immediately following World War II will be considered also, as a contrasting case in which the "reserve army" theory is of some use. Finally, I will consider the relationship of women to the current economic crisis.

The first part of the paper consists of a discussion of the changes in women's paid employment patterns which resulted from the 1929 crash, in which I hope to demonstrate that the sex-typing of occupations created an inflexibility in the structure of the labor market which prevented the expulsion of women from it in the manner Benston suggests. It was not because of the fact that women's labor power is cheaper than men's, but rather because women's work is so rigidly sex-typed, that women enjoyed a measure of protection from unemployment in the Great Depression. It was the case, however, that women were urged to leave the paid labor force during the 1930s. That most of them did not suggests that ideological sex role prescriptions must be viewed not as determinant of, but rather in constant interaction with behavior in analyzing women's experience during periods of economic crisis.

In the next part of the paper, the focus of the discussion shifts to the impact of the economic crisis of the 1930s on women's economic role in the family — their unpaid work in the home. It is ironic that the Marxist-feminist discussion of women and economic crises has so far ignored this dimension of their experience, for it is a basic insight of Marxist-feminist theory as a whole that both paid work outside the home and unpaid work in it are crucial to women's experience in capitalist society.

I will argue that in fact it was the work of women in the home, rather than their labor market participation, which was forced to "take up the slack" in the economy during this period of contraction.

After having considered the economic behavior of women in the 1930s, both in the labor market and in the home, and on this basis having rejected the "reserve army" theory, I will turn to a counterexample. The manner in which large numbers of women were drawn into the paid labor force during World War II, and their expulsion from it during the period of demobilization which followed, certainly seems to suggest that the "reserve army" theory does in fact have some explanatory power. I will argue, however, that the circumstances under which this occurred were highly peculiar and did not really constitute a "crisis," so that this case is by no means an adequate basis from which to generalize.

Finally, I will consider the implications of my findings on the 1930s for the situation of American women in the current economic crisis. This will necessitate some discussion of how the situation of women in relation to the economic system has changed since that time. I will argue that the basic contradiction between the continuing need for women's unpaid family work and the tendency to draw them increasingly into paid production, and the resulting disjuncture between the sex role ideology and women's actual behavior, has intensified in the period since World War II. The meaning of the experience of women in the 1930s for the contemporary period will be considered in this context. Although the need for further analysis is overwhelming, some tentative strategic conclusions will be drawn in the final part of the paper.

## **II. Unemployment of Women in the Great Depression**

The Great Depression of the 1930s was the most severe economic contraction Americans have experienced in the twentieth century to date. The official estimate of unemployment for 1933 is 25 percent <sup>4</sup> (and the actual proportion of people who experienced economic deprivation was probably much larger). Unfortunately, the only national unemployment data available for this period which are disaggregated by sex are those collected by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1930, when the percentage of all workers who had been laid off or fired and

were seeking work was only 6.5.\* These early data are in several respects highly problematic, and can by no means be assumed to be an accurate representation of the extent to which the nation's available labor power was unutilized in 1930. Nevertheless, for our purposes they are quite instructive.<sup>7</sup>

The April 1930 census found an unemployment rate of 4.7 percent for women, while that enumerated for men was 7.1 percent. There is some evidence that as the Depression deepened the relative position of women grew somewhat worse, but the available data clearly indicate that, *insofar as their paid labor force participation was concerned, women were less affected than men by the contraction.*

This is precisely the opposite of what the "reserve army" theory about the relationship of women to economic fluctuations would lead one to expect. One might turn to an alternative hypothesis, reasoning that since women's labor power is sold at a cheaper price than that of men, they are the last to be fired during a period of worsening business conditions. While this interpretation may seem satisfactory for purposes of explaining the aggregated unemployment figures, an examination of the statistics on joblessness across the occupational structure suggests an altogether different explanation.

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\* In fact, the only reliable national data of any sort which exist for the entire period are those in the 1930 and 1940 censuses. The 1933 figure cited here and the other official annual unemployment statistics<sup>4</sup> are interpolations made using the decennial census figures as "benchmarks." Moreover, unemployment is calculated as a residual, that is, the difference between the estimated size of the civilian labor force and that of the employed population. Nor were data for these items collected directly in the decade of the 1930s. Rather, they were estimated later with the use of a variety of sources.<sup>5</sup> (Adjustments were made in the 1930 Census data to make them comparable with those collected on a monthly basis by the Bureau of Labor Statistics beginning in the 1940s; the official revised figure for 1930 is 8.7 percent.)

The situation in regard to data on sex differences in unemployment is even worse. Because the nature of the relationship of female labor force participation to economic fluctuations is even today only dimly understood, it is impossible to interpolate from the decennial census data that are available. This is of course a severe limitation to the present study.

Annual data on sex differences in unemployment was collected for a small number of states. Most of this information is unpublished, however, although it is described in a few published sources,<sup>6</sup> and will be used to support the argument made here.

Table 1 shows sex differences in the 1930 unemployment rates for the broad set of occupational groups used by the Census Bureau at the time, and for a small selection of specific occupational groups characterized by high concentrations of workers of one sex. The table suggests that the female unemployment rate was lower than the male rate in 1930 *because the occupations in which women were concentrated, occupations sex-typed "female," contracted less than those in which men were concentrated.*

Indeed, there is substantial evidence that, accompanying the dramatic increases in the proportion of women in the paid workforce over the course of the twentieth century,\* there has been a consistent pattern of labor market segregation by sex. Everyone "knows," of course, that typists and nurses are women, while steelworkers and truck-drivers — and bosses — are men. Statistically, sexual segregation is an extraordinarily stable feature of the occupational structure. An analysis of the detailed occupational data in the decennial censuses taken between 1900 and 1960 has shown that the amount of job segregation by sex varies remarkably little, showing no fluctuations related to the fact that decennial censuses occurred at many different points in the business cycle. In any of these seven census years, about two-thirds of the women in the paid labor force would have had to change their occupation in order for their distribution in the paid labor force to approximate that of men.<sup>3</sup>

This extraordinary phenomenon results from the fact that the increasing participation of women in the "male" sphere of paid work outside the home has been carefully delimited by an ideology linking that activity to their sex. The vast majority of women work in "women's jobs," occupations which frequently have some structural resemblance to their family role. They work in industries which produce commodities formerly manufactured by women in the home, such as clothing and processed food. In white collar occupations, as secretaries, teachers, waitresses, nurses, and so forth, women perform such wifely and motherly functions as schedule management, ego-building, child socialization, cleaning up, caring for the ill, and serving as a sexual object. Even in instances where such

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\* Twenty percent of all women 14 years and older were in the paid labor force in 1900, and by 1970 this figure had risen to 40 percent. Increasing female labor force participation is a secular trend, which registered little variation in response to the contraction of the 1930s.

TABLE 1:

**EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT,  
BY SEX AND OCCUPATIONAL GROUP, U.S., 1930**

OCCUPATIONAL  
GROUP

<i>General Division of Occupations (U.S. Census Series)</i>	SIZE <sup>a</sup> thousands	% of all				Unemployment Rate <sup>b</sup>		
		% of total	female workers	male workers	females as % of total	total	female	male
All Occupations	48,830	100.0	100.0	100.0	22.0	6.5	4.7	7.1
Agriculture	10,472	21.4	8.5	25.1	8.7	1.4	1.2	1.4
Forestry & Fishing	250	0.5	0.0	0.7	0.1	10.4	10.3	10.4
Extraction of Minerals	984	2.0	0.0	2.6	0.1	17.8	13.8	17.8
Manufacturing & Mechanical Industry	14,111	28.9	17.5	32.1	13.4	12.8	9.7	13.2
Transportation and Communication	3,843	7.9	2.6	9.4	7.3	7.3	2.5	7.7
Trade	6,081	12.5	9.0	13.4	15.8	3.7	4.4	3.6
Public Service	856	1.8	0.2	2.2	2.1	3.5	1.6	3.5
Professional Service	2,254	6.7	14.2	4.5	46.9	2.8	2.4	3.1
Domestic & Personal Services	4,952	10.1	29.6	4.7	64.2	4.9	4.6	5.5
Clerical Occupations	4,025	8.2	18.5	5.4	49.4	4.3	3.8	4.7
<i>Selected "pure" sex-typed occupational groups<sup>c</sup></i>								
Stenographers & Typists	811	1.7	7.2	0.1	95.6	4.7	4.6	7.2
Laundresses & Launderers <sup>d</sup>	361	0.7	3.3	0.0+	98.7	3.0	2.9	8.0
Trained Nurses	294	0.6	2.7	0.0+	98.1	4.2	4.1	8.9
Housekeepers & Stewards	257	0.5	2.2	0.1	92.1	3.1	2.8	7.1
Telephone Operators	249	0.5	2.2	0.0+	94.6	2.5	2.5	2.7
Dressmakers & Seamstresses <sup>e</sup>	158	0.3	1.5	0.0+	99.7	3.6	3.6	8.2
Midwives & Nurses (not trained)	157	0.3	1.3	0.0+	91.2	12.0	12.4	7.4
Iron and Steel Industries <sup>f</sup>	1,314	2.7	0.7	3.3	5.4	12.9	8.9	13.1
Chauffeurs & Truck & Tractor Drivers	972	2.0	0.0+	2.5	0.2	8.5	7.7	8.5
Carpenters	929	1.9	0.0+	2.4	0.0+	18.9	12.0	18.9
Machinists, Millwrights & Toolmakers	761	1.6	0.0+	2.0	0.0+	9.0	5.0	9.0
Laborers, Railroad	481	1.0	0.0+	1.3	0.7	8.9	4.0	8.9
Laborers, Road & Street	307	0.6	0.0+	0.8	0.0	13.4	12.8	13.5
Technical Engineers	226	0.5	0.0+	0.6	0.0	3.6	2.7	3.6

a. These data on the number of gainful workers in each occupational group, although collected after the onset of the Depression, approximate conditions before its onset, since people were asked to report their "normal" occupations to the Census taker.

b. This includes those workers enumerated in Unemployment Classes A and B as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Class A includes "Persons out of a job, able to work, and looking for a job." Class B includes "Persons having jobs but on layoff without pay, excluding those sick or voluntarily idle." These two classes include almost all of the people counted as unemployed in the 1930 Census.

c. These occupational groups were selected by the author from those in the most detailed occupational breakdown used in the 1930 Census of Unemployment, a breakdown comprised of approximately 300 occupational groups. The selection was made according to two criteria: (1) a high degree (90 percent or more) of concentration of workers in the occupational group were members of one sex; (2) the occupational group included at least one percent of all workers of that sex which predominated in it. All of the occupational groups sex-typed female and meeting these criteria are included in the table, and the seven largest of those sex-typed male were selected from a slightly larger set of occupational groups meeting these criteria.

d. This occupational group *excludes* laundresses and launderers working in commercial laundries.

e. This occupational group *excludes* dressmakers and seamstresses working in factories.

f. Operatives and laborers (in iron and steel industries) have been aggregated here, although they are listed separately in the Census table from which this one was made. This is appropriate since both occupational groups are overwhelmingly male in composition and both were similarly affected by the contraction.

SOURCE: *15th Census of the U.S., 1930. Unemployment, Vol. II, pp. 13-18.* (Totals and percentages were computed by the author.)

structural resemblance to the traditional female role is absent, more often than not women's paid labor activity is sex-typed and set apart from that of men. The mere fact that a woman traditionally does a certain job is usually sufficient to stigmatize it as "women's work," to which members of the female sex are supposed to be "naturally" suited.\* Occupations in the "female labor market" are also characterized by low status and pay relative to men's jobs,<sup>9</sup> reflecting the sexual inequality rooted in the family and basic to the organization of American society.\*\*

The sex-typing of occupations does, in part, represent a cultural acknowledgement of the existence of wage-earning "women workers," and yet "workers" are clearly distinguished as a separate, male species. This helps to mediate the contradiction between the continuing need for women's unpaid work in the family and the tendency for women's work to be increasingly integrated into the sphere of paid production for profit. Sex-typing is an ideological mechanism which denies the existence of any conflict between women's family role and their role in paid labor, blithely labelling both "women's work."

But the contradiction has been reproduced in a new form in the workplace as more and more women have entered paid employment: occupational segregation along sex lines conflicts with the ideal of a fluid labor market which can be "rationally" shaped by the laws of supply and demand.

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\*It is virtually impossible to determine precisely what proportion of the jobs women hold are sex-typed in this manner. It seems reasonable to assume that occupations with extremely high concentrations of workers of one sex (such as those in the lower half of Table 1) are of this character. But since the government's occupational statistics are not designed for the purpose of facilitating analysis of this dimension of the occupational structure, even the most detailed breakdowns offered by them frequently group together two or more occupations which are sex-typed differently. Thus while it is likely that the degree to which the labor market is sexually segregated is even greater than the study of the 1900-1960 decennial census data cited above indicates, it is not possible to gauge the actual extent of sex-typing from currently available data.

\*\*Even in the relatively infrequent cases where women do the same jobs as men, they almost invariably receive less pay. A study by the U.S. Bureau of Labor found only 800 cases, in a 1895-96 sample of 150,000 workers, in which men and women were in the same job classifications. In 600 of these cases the men earned more, by an average of about a third.<sup>10</sup> Cases of "equal work" are still quite rare, but the most cursory examination of earnings by sex across the decennial Census' detailed occupational

It is this caste-like character of the female labor force which, ironically enough, prevented the automatic expulsion of women from the labor market during the economic contraction of the 1930s — despite the emergence of an ideology prescribing precisely that to ameliorate the unemployment situation. This dimension of women's role in paid labor, sex as caste, is a twist in the interaction of capitalism and patriarchy which the "reserve army" fails to capture in its full significance. And yet, sex-typing is the very essence of the blunting of women's consciousness of themselves as workers which is the starting point of the "reserve army" theory.

Because of the rigidity of sex-typing, the occupational distribution of women before the 1929 crash (shown in the upper left portion of Table 1) proved to be of great importance in determining the impact on women workers of the severe unemployment which followed. The "white collar" clerical, trade, and service occupations provided employment to more than half of all the women in the paid labor force at this time, while men predominated in the manufacturing sector. The "white collar" group was comprised of the very occupations whose rapid expansion in the early part of the twentieth century had drawn many women into the paid labor force; their growth accounted for 85 percent of the rise in female labor force participation during the period between 1890 and 1930.<sup>16</sup> As women entered them, the new clerical,

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classification shows that women still earn much less than men when they do equivalent work. Male sociologists, for example, earned 65 percent more than their female counterparts in 1970.<sup>11</sup> The gap in status and pay between men and women has actually been widening in recent decades.<sup>12</sup>

It is often suggested that economic discrimination of this type and differential treatment generally (including sex-typing) are justifiable because of differences in the "costs" of hiring men and women. Studies which control for such cost differentials, however, clearly show that only a fraction of the earnings gap can be so accounted for.<sup>13</sup> There are some sex differences in absenteeism and turnover rates in aggregated data, but if one examines instead the rates for men and women with similar occupational characteristics, the differences almost completely disappear.<sup>14</sup> Absenteeism seems to be a result of discrimination and not a cause. It is closely associated with lack of qualifications, which in turn is related to lack of responsibilities at work, absence of promotion prospects and low wages.<sup>15</sup> These are typical characteristics of occupations which are sex-typed "female." A skilled woman worker with responsibility on the job, however, does not stay away from it any more often than a man in a similar position.

trade, and service occupations were typed "women's work," and became an essentially permanent part of the *female* labor market.<sup>17</sup> During the Great Depression, for reasons outside the scope of the present study, these predominantly "female" occupations declined less, and later, than the predominantly male manufacturing occupations. As a result, women suffered less than men from unemployment.

The examples of "pure" sex-typed occupational groups in the lower half of the table further illustrate the way in which sex-typing protected women from differential unemployment. Although these occupations are in no way strictly representative of the labor market as a whole, they do hint at the structure of sexual segregation at a somewhat greater level of detail than that offered in the broad occupational groupings, and offer further support for the argument being made here.

It should be observed, however, that even in occupational groups sex-typed male, the unemployment rates of women are lower than those of men in the same occupation. This suggests that the overall gap between the male and female rates may have been somewhat less wide in actuality than the data indicate. One reason for this is that women were probably undercounted in the Census of Unemployment. To be counted as "unemployed" one must either have been temporarily laid off or have lost her/his job and be actively seeking another one. Young single women and, even more so, widows and divorced women would be those most likely to be self-supporting, and therefore most likely to continue seeking work in spite of any difficulties. This would also be true of the majority of men in the labor force. Married women, in contrast, might be more easily discouraged if their husbands were employed, and as a result undercounted in the official unemployment statistics. Indeed, those data indicate that women under twenty suffered the highest unemployment rates, and that there was a general decrease in frequency of unemployment with increasing age.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the recorded unemployment rate of married women was slightly lower than that of single women, while that of widowed and divorced women was highest of all.<sup>19</sup>

There are other factors as well which suggest that the gap in male and female unemployment rates may have been somewhat less wide than the data indicate. Women workers, both in hard times and in the best of times, suffer various forms of discrimination which increase the likelihood that

they will be underemployed. They frequently work in highly seasonal industries, and therefore have only irregular employment, being hired and fired in response to *short-term* industrial fluctuations.<sup>20</sup> Also, women work part-time more frequently than men.\* Thus there is characteristically a substantial amount of unrecorded underemployment among women, even in good times, and under depressed industrial conditions one would expect some increase in its frequency. To the extent that this was true in the 1930s, one might conclude that the "reserve army" theory is applicable to some sectors of the female labor market, but this was the case only because the "women's jobs" involved were volatile, *not because men replaced women in them.*\*\*

There does seem to have been a gradual deterioration of women's situation relative to men's as the depression deepened, however. Data collected in some States on an annual basis clearly indicate a relative worsening of women's position,<sup>23</sup> although when this change occurred and what its implications were for women in particular occupations cannot be gauged with any precision, since the federal government did not regularly collect unemployment data by sex in the 1930s.

The earliest set of reliable national data on sex differences in unemployment after 1930 is that in the U.S. Census of 1940.† The recovery that would accompany World War II had only begun, and 8.3 percent of the experienced labor force were

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\* The extent to which this may have been ignored in unemployment statistics is phenomenal. One study found that, in 1932, only 4 percent of the women surveyed in South Bend, Indiana — 95 percent of whom were "normally" employed full time in manufacturing jobs — had full-time work. However, almost three-fifths of them were reported as "employed" in the Indiana unemployment statistics.<sup>21</sup>

\*\*It is possible that in some "mixed" occupations men actually did replace women to some extent. Given the high degree of sex-typing evident even in the poor data that are available (as discussed above), however, it seems likely that such replacement was the exception rather than the rule. A few studies of the question done during the 1930s reflected an understanding of this.<sup>22</sup>

We can understand this intuitively by noting that even unemployed men would tend to be extremely reluctant to take a job as a secretary — "that's women's work." Nor will the average secretary be likely to voluntarily give up her job in a time of economic hardship.

† The U.S. Census Bureau did conduct a *Census of Partial Employment, Unemployment and Occupations* in 1937. It found a *higher* unemployment rate for women

still seeking work.\* Another 4.9 percent were employed in public emergency work. The female unemployment rate was still lower than that of men, but the gap had narrowed somewhat. 8.6 percent of the experienced male labor force were unemployed in 1940, and 7.5 percent of the experienced female labor force were seeking work. The male unemployment rate was thus only 15 percent greater than the female unemployment rate, as compared with a differential of 49 percent in 1930. This is partly explained by the sex differential in public emergency work, which occupied 5.2 percent of the experienced male labor force but only 3.6 percent of the experienced female labor force in 1940. But even if persons doing public emergency work are counted as unemployed, the resulting male unemployment rate is only 24 percent above the female rate. 26

One explanation for the deterioration of women's relative position in the unemployment rolls might be that large numbers of women previously engaged only in unpaid housework were forced to seek paid work during the depression, in efforts to compensate for the decline in family income resulting from the unemployment of male family members. Indeed, total female labor force participation rose in the period from 1930 to 1940 more than in any previous decade in the twentieth century. There were, moreover, declines in the participation of teenaged females and older women during this period so that the increased participation of women between 20 and 65 years old was even

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than for men, 14.9 percent and 13.9 percent respectively. Registration of unemployment status was voluntary in this enumeration, intensifying the general tendency for women to be undercounted. A special "Enumerative Check Census" was conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in the same year for a smaller sample in an effort to correct for this. It found that actually the unemployment rates of both men and women were much higher than the original data indicated, although women were undercounted to a greater extent than men. The revised figures were 18.6 percent for men and 24.6 percent for women.

However, both the first enumeration and the revisions have been widely discredited. Stanley Lebergott of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in an extensive retrospective analysis of all the available data on unemployment in the 1930s (the analysis upon which the current official government figures are based), found that the 1937 Census data were methodologically unsound and noted that they were inconsistent with virtually all other available evidence in their findings on sex differences in unemployment. 24

\* This differs from what is now the official unemployment figure for 1940, which is 14.6 percent (includ-

greater than the aggregated figures suggest.\* There is also a vast amount of qualitative evidence supporting the hypothesis that many married women sought paid employment to compensate for their husbands' unemployment. 28

If correct, this suggests that the fact that the unemployment rate of men was higher than that of women had only an indirect effect on the unemployment rate of women, insofar as the wives and daughters of unemployed men could find jobs more easily than they, and were thus drawn into the labor market because of their declining family income. There is no evidence of any mobility from the male to the female labor market in the course of the depression decade,\*\* and the deterioration of women's relative position in the labor market seems to have been due primarily to increased competition among women for jobs in the female labor market. In fact, the degree of sex segregation within the occupational structure actually increased slightly between 1930 and 1940. 30

Because the data on unemployment are so poor and so problematic, it is not possible to learn from them exactly what the relation of women to the labor market was in the Great Depression. But it is clear that the "reserve army" theory is not very useful for this purpose, and that sex-typing is an extremely important factor.

Perhaps one reason that the "reserve army" theory has so seldom been questioned is that on the ideological level, it was in fact the case that women were urged to return to the home during the 1930s. Male unionists and others frequently suggested that women were taking "men's jobs." Their entrance into the paid labor force in the previous

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ing public emergency workers). As in the case of the 1930 census data, adjustments were made in the 1940 Census data to render them comparable with the unemployment statistics collected on a monthly basis by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics beginning in the mid-1940s. 25

\* Male labor force participation declined between 1930 and 1940, but this was largely due to decreases in the participation of teenaged and retirement-aged males. The labor force participation rate of males aged 25 to 64 changed insignificantly. 27

\*\*There is substantial evidence, on the other hand, of widespread downward mobility *within* the female labor market. Women who were unemployed were evidently willing, after a certain point, to seek work in an occupation different from their former one, even when this meant a cut in status and/or pay. 29 Men probably experienced a similar pattern of downward mobility in the 1930s, and in light of this it is all the more surprising that they did not replace women to any significant extent.



years, these men argued, had produced a scarcity of jobs for men.<sup>31</sup> Disapproval of married women who worked was particularly fervent. The executive council of the AF of L urged that "married women whose husbands have permanent positions. . . should be discriminated against in the hiring of employees."<sup>32</sup> A 1936 Gallup poll indicated that most Americans agreed, 82 percent of those polled.<sup>33</sup>

Nor were these totally idle arguments. Discriminatory practices against married women were actually instituted in a number of cases. Many states reactivated old laws by means of which teachers and other female civil servants were dismissed upon marrying.<sup>34</sup> And yet, more and more married women were being forced into the labor market as unemployment struck their families. It was clearly better, in spite of the cultural sanctions which had emerged, to have what little income a woman could earn than no income at all in a household in which the male "breadwinner" was unemployed. As a result, it was not possible for ideological forces to successfully push women out of the labor market. Such behavior was in direct opposition to their material interests.

Nevertheless, the ideological condemnation of women's paid work did serve to diffuse people's discontent in the early 1930s. To the extent that women could be blamed for the economic crisis, attention was distracted from analyses which found its roots in the workings of capitalism. The number of people who actually thought that women had "caused" the crisis was in any case quite small, and yet women were not considered equally entitled to paid employment by large numbers of people. This was a less effective outlet for discontent, but not altogether unlike what might have occurred if women had in fact transferred their jobs to men. Had that been the case, as the "reserve army" theory suggests, women would have "taken up the slack" in the economy quite directly. As it was, they generally retained their jobs, while on the cultural level some anger was directed at them rather than at those who controlled the society that now could not provide jobs for those who sought them.

### III. *Making Ends Meet: The Unpaid Work of Women in the Great Depression*

Perhaps the most important reason for the inadequacy of the "reserve army" theory is its failure to comprehend the primary importance of women's economic role in the family. Indeed, it is the eco-

nomic need for their unpaid work in the home from which the caste-like structure of the female labor force, which is so basic to the experience of women during a crisis in their role as paid workers, first emerges. Even for this reason alone, it would be foolhardy to overlook the impact of economic crises on women's family role.

The productive activity of women in the home is accorded lower social status than any other occupation.\* housework is a "labor of love" in a society whose universal standard of value is money. Because it is not remunerated with a wage, housework does not directly produce surplus value. However, it does maintain and reproduce the ability of family members to work productively, their labor power, which they sell in the labor market for a wage.

The work involved in providing personal services has been greatly influenced by technological developments in the course of capitalist expansion, just as various productive activities which once engaged housewives — food processing, clothing manufacture, and so forth, have been increasingly integrated into the sphere of paid labor. Paralleling this process of the socialization of production is the transformation of the family from a unit of production into a unit of consumption. At the same time, other institutions have taken over some of the functions the family used to perform, like vocational training and the care of the aged. As this occurs, there is also a tendency toward nuclearization of the institution. All of these changes were well underway by 1930.

Within this general tendency for housework to become increasingly dependent on commodity production, at any one point in time there is a great deal of flexibility in the allocation of work between the home and the industrial workplace. During the Great Depression, the long-term trends reversed themselves, and women's unpaid household production became more important than it had been in earlier years. In a sense, the family "took up the slack" in the economy during the 1930s.

People who were unemployed naturally turned to their families for support. The work of women in physically and psychologically maintaining their families became tremendously difficult as family incomes declined and the psychological stresses attending unemployment took their toll. Women

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\* The status of a housewife is, of course, partly dependent on the occupational and social status of her husband. A ruling class housewife has more status than a garbage collector in most contexts.

showed amazing resourcefulness in coping with the crisis on the family level. They used a wide variety of strategies, generally turning back toward "traditional" forms of family organization.

The most immediate problem facing the family struck by unemployment was the material hardship created by their lowered income. Women cut back family expenditures in many areas. Typical strategies were moving to quarters with lower rent, having telephones removed, and denying themselves many purchased goods and services to which they had become accustomed in the prosperity of earlier years.<sup>35</sup> Clothing, prepared meals, domestic service, automobiles, magazine subscriptions and amusements were among the many products and services which suffered declines in sales as optimists heralded the "live at home movement."<sup>36</sup>

Many women managed to approximate their families' prior standard of living despite lowered incomes by substituting their own labor for goods and services they had formerly purchased in the marketplace, reversing the trend toward increased consumption in the preceding decades. Home canning was so widespread that glass jar sales were greater in 1931 than at any other point in the preceding eleven years. There was a corresponding drop in sales of canned goods, which had doubled in the decade from 1919-29.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the 1930s saw a revival of home sewing. People who had never sewed before attended night school classes to learn how to sew and remodel garments.<sup>38</sup>

Women's efforts to cut back family expenses by substituting their own labor for purchasable commodities represented only one set of alternatives in the struggle to make ends meet.\* Many women engaged themselves in paid work in attempts to compensate for a reduction in family income. There was a revival of domestic industry: women took in laundry, ironing, and dressmaking; they baked cakes to sell; they took in boarders.<sup>40</sup> Everywhere there were signs in yards advertising household beauty parlors, cleaning and pressing

\* Another strategy was that of going back to the land. Actually, most farmers had lived in poverty even during the "prosperous" 1920s, but this fact was evidently not widely appreciated, for in the early 1930s, the flow of people from farms to cities slowed and then actually reversed itself for the first time since records of internal migration had been kept. By 1935, 2 million people were living on farms who had not been there five years before.<sup>39</sup> This strategy had an understandable appeal at a time when fear of starvation was realistic and widespread.

enterprises, grocery stores, and the like.<sup>41</sup>

Women also sought paid jobs outside their home to increase the family income. They did this despite the strong cultural sanctions against married women working, sanctions which were strongly reinforced with the onset of mass unemployment. Women who thus defied the cultural prescription frequently justified their behavior as a response to the family emergency created by the unemployment of their husbands, and they generally planned to stop working for pay as soon as the situation improved.<sup>42</sup> The following case is representative:

Until 1930 Mr. Fetter was able to support the family. After that date his earnings from irregular work were supplemented by his wife's earnings of \$9.00 per week in a restaurant. Both husband and wife disliked to have the wife work, but there seemed no other solution of the economic problem.<sup>43</sup>

The last resort of families for whom none of these strategies succeeded — and there were many — was to go "on relief." Accepting this alternative, however, was widely viewed as an admission of failure of the family. Mr. Fetter's "reaction to the idea of relief was violent."<sup>44</sup> In another case study, a husband and wife expressed their reluctance to accept any government assistance: "We are able people; we must keep on our feet."<sup>45</sup> And in cases where the relief strategy was pursued, a great deal of resentment toward the social service agencies was expressed. Experienced wives and mothers often felt, not without reason, that the social workers they dealt with were too young and naive to understand the costs involved in raising a large family.<sup>46</sup>

Added to the difficulties in maintaining families on a reduced income were the demands placed on the institution to reabsorb members who had been independent during the better times before the crash. Not only did unemployed husbands spend more time around the house, but old people, who frequently suffered from discrimination in employment, tended to "double up" with their sons' and daughters' families.<sup>47</sup> The younger generation was likely to be relatively better off in terms of employment, but were less likely to have a securely owned dwelling. This strategy of pooling the resources of two generations represented a clear break with the long-term trend toward nuclearization.

Youth, who also faced discrimination in the labor market, returned home during the Depres-

sion.\* The dependence of this generation on the previous one caused delays, sometimes permanent ones, in new family formation. The marriage rate dropped sharply, from 10.1 marriages per thousand people in 1929 to 7.9, the low point in 1932. <sup>49</sup> In 1938 it was estimated that 1.5 million people had been forced to postpone marriage because of the economic depression. <sup>50</sup> Cohort data on ever-married rates reveals that many of these "postponements" were permanent. The proportion of single women (never married by 1970) aged 25-30 in 1935 is about 30 percent higher than the proportion in the cohort five years younger. <sup>51</sup> One spinster of this generation recalls:

There were young men around when we were young. But they were supporting mothers.

It wasn't that we didn't have a chance. I was going with someone when the Depression hit. We probably would have gotten married. He was a commercial artist and had been doing very well. I remember the night he said, "They just laid off quite a few of the boys." It never occurred to him that he would be next. He was older than most of the others and very sure of himself. This was not the sort of thing that was going to happen to him. Suddenly he was laid off. It hit him like a ton of bricks. And he just disappeared. <sup>52</sup>

The material tasks of family maintenance became extraordinarily challenging during the 1930s, as women struggled to stretch a decreased income to maintain the members of their nuclear family and, in many cases, the younger and older generations as well. However, this was but one aspect of the increased importance of women's unpaid labor in the home during the depression. The task of psychological maintenance was also made much more difficult in families affected by unemployment. The concrete fact of idleness, the declassament in the community which generally accompa-

nied it, and a multitude of side effects associated with the various strategies pursued to maintain the family materially placed enormous strains on the family as an emotional support system, and on women's role in its maintenance.

Since his role as wage-earner is often the basis of the father's status within the family, that status tends to be lowered by his unemployment. The man without a job in the 1930s often felt superfluous and frustrated, "because in his own estimation he fails to fulfill what is the central duty of his life, the very touchstone of his manhood — the role of family provider." <sup>53</sup> The strain attending unemployment was exacerbated in cases where other family members were earning money. A woman who replaced her husband as the "breadwinner" during the Depression recalls:

In 1930, it was slack time. He didn't have a job, my husband. Even now, the painter's work is seasonal. So I went to work those times when he wasn't working, and he took care of the boy.

Yah. He said he's walking upside down, if you know what that means. (Laughs.) You start walking on the floor, and then you put yourself upside down, how you feel. Because he couldn't provide for his family. Because when we got married, he actually said, "You're not gonna work." <sup>54</sup>

To say that the unemployed father lost status in the family would seem to imply that women who assumed the role of "provider" gained somehow. But such a role reversal was not a simple exchange of power. Women's responsibility for providing emotional support to family members was not diminished during this period. On the contrary, the reversal of roles made this task much more difficult, for an unemployed husband demanded more support than ever before. If there was any increased recognition of woman's economic role in the family, it did not represent a gain in status, for no one was comfortable with the new state of affairs, and the reversal of roles was resented by everyone involved.

The tension unemployment produced within the family was intensified by the general declassament accompanying lowered family income. As the status of the family in the community dropped there appeared alongside the tendency for families to strengthen their ties with relatives a general decrease in social contacts outside the family circle. Lacking appropriate clothing and money for dues

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\* As far as I am aware, data on school retention rates for the 1930s are not available by sex. However, a recent study based on data on the postwar business cycles, found that teenage boys accelerate their school-leaving in times of prosperity, while girls tend to do so in times of depression. Since girls are more productive at home in hard times, the logic runs, they leave school and devote their energy to helping their mothers to carry the increased burden of housework in depressions. Boys, in contrast, decide when to leave school according to their opportunities for paid employment, and thus go to school longer during hard times. It seems plausible that this would hold for the 1930s also. <sup>48</sup>

or donations, many families stopped attending church and dropped their club memberships. In addition, many had sacrificed their telephones and there was little money for carfare, so it was more difficult to socialize with friends.<sup>55</sup> People were ashamed of their lowered standard of living and hence reluctant to invite guests into their homes.<sup>56</sup>

Further pressures on the psychological balance of the family were exerted by the various strategies women pursued to maintain its members materially. The simple fact of decreased income increased family discord over financial matters,<sup>57</sup> and the crowding resulting from "doubling up," moving to less expensive quarters, or being unable to heat all the rooms in a house during the winter, produced much friction among family members.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, they saw much more of each other than before, whether they wished to or not, simply because they were unemployed and spent more time at home.

Women in families affected by unemployment, then, were under incredible pressure from all sides. Their responsibility to maintain their families materially and psychologically became much more difficult to fulfill. Sociologists who studied the impact of the depression on families at the time noted that these strains generally resulted in an initial period of disorientation, which was ultimately resolved either through adjustment or "disintegration" of the family.<sup>59</sup> Whether or not a family was able to adjust to the new situation depended on a variety of factors, but on the whole, these studies showed that the impact of the crisis was to exaggerate previous family patterns. "Well-organized" families became more unified, while the problems of unstable families were accentuated.

Families which survived the crisis intact certainly were more "unified" in the sense that they spent more time together than before, but it is not clear that this choice was freely made or that families were newly prized by their members. Indeed, the Lynds reported that "Each family seems to wish wistfully that the depression had not happened to it, while at the same time feeling that the depression has in a vague general way 'been good for family life.' " <sup>60</sup> Families which broke under the strain did not always fall apart visibly. Although the frequency of desertion, the "poor man's divorce," rose, legal divorce was expensive, and its rate declined.<sup>61</sup>

There is scattered evidence that in some families the strain was manifested in a decline in sexual

activity. The most common reason given for such declines was fear of unwanted pregnancy.\* In a number of instances, however, women reported that they had lost respect for their unemployed husbands, and could no longer love them as before.<sup>63</sup> A psychiatrist observed of a group of long-term unemployed miners:

They hung around street corners and in groups. They gave each other solace. They were loath to go home because they were indicted, as if it were their fault for being unemployed. A jobless man was a lazy good-for-nothing. The women punished the men for not bringing home the bacon, by withholding themselves sexually. . . . These men suffered from depression. They felt despised, they were ashamed of themselves. They cringed, they comforted one another. They avoided home.<sup>64</sup>

There must have been many cases like these, in which the family simply could not cope with all the strains which converged on it. The emergence of social services on a large scale during the later 1930s probably represented, at least in part, a response to these family failures, and supplied a bolster to the institution. But what is really more remarkable than the record of failures is the amazing extent to which families were able to successfully absorb all the new strains placed upon them.

In some cases there was organized resistance to the agents of dispossession. In the country, there were "ten cent sales" in which neighbors would bid ridiculously low prices for a farmer's property that was being auctioned off by creditors trying to collect on a mortgage, and then return it all to the original owner.<sup>65</sup> In the city, people would move the furniture of an evicted family back into the tenement as soon as it had been put out in the street, to the despair of the landlord.<sup>66</sup>

While actions like these must often have represented the difference between survival and disintegration of a family, most families seem to have depended even more on their internal strengths. It was, to a great extent, women who took up the increased burdens involved in maintaining the family — indeed, this was their traditional responsibility. The importance of their contribution to family maintenance during the crisis was probably only

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\* The birth rate dropped from 21.3 live births per thousand population in 1930 to 18.4 in 1933.<sup>62</sup>

seldom recognized. In Tillie Olsen's fictional portrayal of a family's efforts to cope with the crisis, for example, the husband only appreciates his wife's contribution after she is taken sick. "You useta be so smart with money — make it stretch like rubber. Now it's rent week and not a red cent in the house. I tell you we gotta make what I'm getting do..."<sup>67</sup>

Some women were revitalized by the increased responsibility they acquired during the Depression. One woman's hypochondria disappeared with the crisis: "Now her mind is taken up with the problems of stretching her kitchen dollar further than ever and keeping the home up-to-date and clean without new furnishings and the help of a cleaning woman."<sup>68</sup> Another woman, a daughter, who would never have looked for paid work if not for the decline in her once wealthy family's income, developed a whole new sense of self-respect from her experience as a wage-earner. She recalls:

Now it was necessary for me to make some money because the stepfather was drunk all the time and the father was pretending it hadn't happened. Having gone to a proper lady's finishing school, I didn't know how to do anything. I spoke a little bad French, and I knew enough to stand up when an older person came into the room. As far as anything else was concerned, I was unequipped.

I heard there was a call for swimmers for a picture called *Footlight Parade*. At Warner Brothers. The first big aquacade picture. I went, terrified, tried out on the high diving thing and won. I couldn't have been more stunned. I truly think this is where I got a life-long point of view: respect for those who *did*, no respect for those who *had*... just because their father had done something and they were sitting around.

I loved the chorus girls who worked. I hated the extras who sat around and were paid while we were endangering our lives. I had a ball. It was the first time I was better than anybody at something. I gained a self-respect I'd never had.<sup>69</sup>

This kind of depression experience was, of course, limited to women of privileged social groups, those who would otherwise have spent their lives as more or less leisured symbols of their father's or husband's status. Hard work was nothing new to working class women, and their in-

creased responsibilities could not have been welcomed so eagerly. For these women and their families, the experience of sex-role-reversal — either a complete shifting of responsibility for earning money from husband to wife, or simply an increased reliance on the wife's unpaid work and her strategies for survival — was a part of a very painful period in the family's history. The deviation from traditional sex roles was thus, to say the least, negatively reinforced by the accompanying experience of economic deprivation for most families.\* It did not generally mean that the husband-wife relationship became more egalitarian in the long run, rather the impact of the crisis was to define women in terms of the traditional female role even more rigidly than before.

Women "took up the slack" in the economy during the Great Depression, then, not by withdrawing from the paid labor force, as the "reserve army" theory suggests, but in their family role. There was an increased economic dependence on their unpaid household labor, reversing the pre-Depression trend toward increased use of consumer goods. The process of nuclearization, similarly, reversed itself, as the unemployed turned to their kin for help. The family's role in maintaining people psychologically also became more difficult for women to fulfill.

The traditional family role of women was reinforced because of its increased material importance during the 1930s, then, although women did not "return to the home" in the way the "reserve army" theory suggests. On the contrary, role reversals between husband and wife were common, and precisely because of the *negative* reinforcement given to sex role reversal which resulted from its origin in economic deprivation, traditional sex roles were reinforced.

#### IV. Woman's Place in the World War II Emergency

The Great Depression ended with a boom in the early 1940s, when U.S. involvement in the

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\* This inference is supported by Elder's finding that females who were adolescents during the depression years (born 1920-21) were more likely to marry early if their families of orientation experienced deprivation (defined as a 35 percent or greater loss in family income) during the 1930s. These women also showed a marked

Second World War stimulated a tremendous amount of investment in war-related industrial production. The labor surplus of the Depression years rapidly disappeared, and soon the problem of unemployment was replaced by a severe shortage of labor power. All of this happened very fast, so that it is appropriate to describe the situation as a "crisis of expansion," a truly extraordinary kind of economic recovery.

Huge numbers of women were drawn out of their homes and into the paid labor force to meet the demand for workers. Many of them took "war jobs" in industries which produced military equipment or other war-related items, so that when the war ended, so did their jobs. Thus the "reserve army" theory, which, as we have seen, is quite inadequate for analyzing the experience of women during the contraction of the 1930s, fits their situation during the period of demobilization in the late 1940s rather well. Women were drawn into war production "for the duration," in many cases losing their jobs immediately upon the conclusion of hostilities. Most of them eventually found employment in the postwar years in traditional "women's jobs," so that their expulsion from the paid labor force was only temporary. Nevertheless, the war experience did demonstrate that women could, albeit under rather peculiar circumstances, function as a "reserve army" which was pulled in and then pushed out of the labor force in the way the usual formulation of the concept suggests.

The demand for female labor power created by the expansion of the American economy during World War II was of unprecedented magnitude. Between 1940 and the peak of war employment in 1944, the number of women in the paid labor force increased by more than 6 million, or 50 percent. The largest demand came from manufacturing industries, in which the number of women workers increased by 140 percent from 1940 to 1944, as can be seen in Table 2. In industries producing directly for war purposes it rose by 460 percent. The female clerical labor force experienced a doubling in the same period. The only occupational group to experience a decrease in the number of women

workers was domestic service.\*

Sixty percent of the women who entered the labor market between 1940 and 1944 were 35 years old or more, and more than half of them were or had been married.<sup>76</sup> Although many of these women worked full time, the labor shortage also stimulated substantial efforts to provide part-time employment for women with heavy family responsibilities.<sup>77</sup> The first large scale child care programs were set up (although these never met the huge demand). Lighting and other workplace amenities were improved in many plants as well, and employers redesigned the work process of many industrial jobs with women in mind, eliminating the need to lift heavy weights, for example. The motivation for all of this was, unmistakably, the need to maximize the efficiency of the new workers, who were difficult to recruit. Thus one government pamphlet distributed widely to employers, entitled *When You Hire Women*, pointed out that efficiency decreased after a point with longer hours, and that "Harrassed mothers make poor workers."<sup>78</sup>

Employers who offered women "men's" wages and working conditions could be assured of a labor supply, and during the war it was common for the

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\* This was due to the unfavorable comparison between domestic work and other occupations in which there were openings. There was a great deal of upward occupational mobility during the 1940s. Women left occupations with low status and pay like service and sales jobs for new opportunities in war industries which offered better pay and working conditions. Movement out of service employment was so pronounced that there were many shortages in provision of services. In 1942, for example, 600 laundries closed because of their inability to recruit workers.<sup>72</sup>

There was also a great deal of geographical mobility, for war production was not evenly distributed across the country but, on the contrary, centered in a relatively small number of urban areas. Many women migrated from areas outlying the war production centers in response to the spectacular demand for their labor power.<sup>73</sup>

These mobility patterns completely reversed those which had characterized the Depression years, when most occupational mobility had been forced and in a downward direction, and geographical mobility had been from urban to rural areas.<sup>74</sup> The mobility that was possible for women, moreover, was no longer limited to the female labor market, for the heavy industrial "war jobs" which accounted for the largest single part of the increased employment of women — jobs in aircraft assembly, shipbuilding, ammunition manufacturing, and steel — had traditionally been sex-typed male.<sup>75</sup>

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preference for the domestic role over any alternative one.<sup>70</sup> Aggregate cohort data shows that daughters born in the late depression years — roughly parallel to the daughters of the women in Elder's cohort — have the highest proportion "ever married" on record.<sup>71</sup>

TABLE 2:

## CHANGES IN WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT, 1940-1944

Occupational Group	Women Employed (thousands)		% change
	1940	1944	
All Occupations <sup>a</sup>	11,140 <sup>b</sup>	16,480	+48.0 <sup>b</sup>
Professional and semiprofessional	1,470	1,490	+1.2
Proprietors, managers and officials	420	650	+53.3
Clerical and kindred	2,370	4,380	+84.5
Sales	780	1,240	+58.4
Craftsmen, foremen (sic), operatives and laborers	2,250	4,920	+118.7
Domestic service	1,970	1,570	-20.4
Other service	1,260	1,650	+30.9
Farm workers	470	560	+18.6
Manufacturing, total <sup>c</sup>	2,320	5,590	+140.7
War industries — metal, chemicals, rubber	480	2,690	+462.7
Consumer industries — food, clothing, textiles, leathers	1,330	2,160	+62.6
Other industries	510	730	+42.6

a. Totals do not add due to the failure to record the occupations of some workers.

b. This takes no account of the women who in 1940 were unemployed or on emergency work, and who were thus technically part of the labor force. Their inclusion reduces the increase to about 36%.

c. This classification is part of a Census breakdown by industry, altogether separate from the occupational breakdown given in its entirety in the first half of the table.

SOURCE: Adapted from tables in U.S. Dept. of Labor, Women's Bureau, Special Bulletin No. 20, *Changes in Women's Employment During the War* (1914), pp. 9, 15.

government to assume the costs incurred in paying women high wages in war industries. Ostensibly because of the difficulties in estimating the costs of producing military items, which often underwent changes in design, government contracts often stipulated that the manufacturer would be reimbursed for all the costs of production plus a "fixed fee." The government thus took on all the risks of war production and capitalists were guaranteed a profit.<sup>79</sup>

Even where the beginning wages for women and men were equal, however, women rarely had equal opportunities for advancement.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, although women war workers often became members of unions, they frequently experienced differential treatment within the union structure. Many contracts provided that women and men be listed on separate seniority lists, and some stated outright that women's tenure in jobs previously held by men would be theirs "for the duration" only.<sup>81</sup>

This definition of women's war employment as temporary was not limited to unions, but had been explicit in all of the propaganda issued by government and industry urging women to enter the paid labor force. The thrust of the appeal, indeed, was

that women could do "their part" in the war effort by taking industrial jobs. The expectation that they would gracefully withdraw from "men's jobs" when the war ended and the rightful owners reappeared on the scene was clear from the first.

Moreover, during World War II, suddenly jobs which had previously had all the attributes of "men's work" acquired a new femininity and glamour. There was an unrelenting effort to reconcile the traditional image of women with their new role. It was suggested, for example, that an overhead crane operated "just like a gigantic clothes wringer" and that the winding of wire spools was very much like crocheting.<sup>82</sup> A pamphlet emphasizing the importance of safety caps for women machine operators to prevent industrial accidents showed pictures of pretty women dressed in the twelve available styles of head covering.<sup>83</sup> A 1943 advertisement in *Fortune* for an iron works company showed a photograph of a woman worker operating a steel-cutting machine with this caption:

Tailor-made suit cut to Axis size! . . . Skillful Van Dorn Seamstress, with scissors of oxy-acetylene, cloth of bullet-proof steel, and pattern shaped to our enemy's downfall! . . .<sup>84</sup>

The women who took war jobs were not allowed to forget their sex for a moment. They were not to be viewed as war workers, but as *women* war workers in "men's jobs" "for the duration" of the war emergency. Media images of these women almost invariably contained allusions to their sexuality. An article on "Girl Pilots" in *Life*, for example, quips:

Girls are very serious about their chance to fly for the Army at Avenger Field, even when it means giving up nail polish, beauty parlors and dates for a regimented 22½ weeks. . . . They each have on the G.I. coveralls, called zoot suits in Avenger Field lingo, that are regulation uniform for all working hours. Though suits are not very glamorous, the girls like their comfort and freedom.<sup>85</sup>

Many women war workers reported similar attitudes being expressed by their male co-workers. One personal account, for example, noted:

At times it gets to be a pain in the neck when the man who is supposed to show you work stops showing it to you because you have nicely but firmly asked him to keep his hands on his own knees; or when you have refused a date with someone and ever since then he has done everything in his power to make your work more difficult. . . . Somehow we'll have to make them understand that we are not very much interested in their strapping virility. That the display of their physique and the lure of their prowess leaves us cold. That although they have certainly convinced us that they are men and we are women, we'd really rather get on with our work.<sup>86</sup>

Women were laid off in huge numbers immediately after the war ended. As industrial plants reconverted to consumer-oriented production they returned to their pre-war male work force. In January 1946 the number of women in the labor force was 4 million less than at the 1944 peak, and only 2 million more than in 1940.<sup>87</sup> The most dramatic decline was in durable goods manufacturing, the sector where most of the high-paying "war jobs" had been located. The employment of women in these industries declined by 1.5 million between the 1944 peak and January 1946.<sup>88</sup>

Despite the fact that the nation had been well prepared for this eventuality ideologically, women themselves resisted the notion that they were

working only "for the duration." Most insisted that they would remain in the paid labor force after the war. Although at the beginning of the war polls had indicated that 95 percent of the women who were new entrants to the labor force expected to quit after the war,<sup>89</sup> the Women's Bureau's survey of 13,000 women war workers in 1944-45 found that three out of every four wanted to continue working after the war ended.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, the older women who had made up so large a portion of the new recruits to the labor force planned to stay there: 81 percent of the women who were 45 or older said that they intended to remain in the paid work force.<sup>91</sup>

Women clearly enjoyed working, and they had strong material incentives to continue to do so in a period of high inflation. The case of Alma is perhaps representative of the general feeling of women at the close of hostilities:

Alma goes to work because she wants to go to work. She wants to go now and she wants to keep going when the war is over. Alma's had a taste of LIFE. She's poked her head out into the once-man's world. . . . Of course, all the Almas haven't thought through why they want to work after the war or how it's going to be possible. But they have gone far enough to know that they can do whatever is required in a machine shop. They've had the pleasure of feeling money in their pockets — money they've earned themselves.<sup>92</sup>

And yet, the material fact of "reconversion" to peacetime production would force the withdrawal of many women from the labor force. They were eventually reintegrated into it, not in the heavy industry "war jobs" but rather in the white collar and service occupations which had been part of the female labor force before the war and which continued to expand in the postwar years. While women's penetration into "men's jobs" with high status and pay during the war years proved ephemeral, then, their increased presence in the paid labor force would be duplicated in later years.

The experience of World War II clearly demonstrated that women could function as a "reserve army" to meet the economy's needs in a crisis of expansion. Had a depression followed the war — an eventuality widely feared at the time, women would almost certainly not have re-entered the paid labor force as easily as they did in the period



of expansion that followed the initial postwar contraction. And yet, the war-induced labor shortage that drew women into paid employment was of an extraordinary type. The jobs created by the boom in industrial production for military purposes were, by definition, temporary ones, whereas in other periods of expansion the jobs women took became integral parts of the occupational structure. This difference was crucial, for it meant that in the contraction of "reconversion" which followed the war boom, the jobs women had were essentially eliminated from the occupational structure. This was most unlikely to occur in a depression following a "normal" period of economic growth, so that the demobilization experience can only be regarded as atypical.

## V. Epilogue and Conclusion

There have been numerous economic crises in the twentieth century, of which the Great Depression was of exceptional intensity. Yet, precisely for that reason, it is a particularly revealing case for the study of the impact of economic crises on women's lives. Its analysis allows us to critically evaluate the "reserve army" theory, the major focus of discussion on this question so far. More importantly, understanding the relationship of women to the mechanisms of adjustment to the crisis of the 1930s can contribute toward an analysis of the current economic situation and its meaning for women.

In order to understand the implications of the experience of women in the 1930s for the present, however, it is necessary to look more closely at the changes which have occurred in the intervening decades. The most important trends were the acceleration of the rate of increase in female labor force participation and the resulting intensification of the contradiction between this tendency and the continuing need for the family.

In 1940, 26 percent of American women of working age were in the paid labor force. By 1970, that figure had risen to 40 percent. Accompanying this dramatic increase in the size of the female labor force has been an important change in its composition. The labor force participation rate of married women rose from 15 percent to 39 percent during the same period, and that of women between 25 and 44 rose from 31 to 48 percent.<sup>93</sup> This represents a major change in the typical life cycle pattern of female labor force participation,

and a new relationship between women's family role and their role in paid labor. While in the early part of the twentieth century, the normal pattern for middle class women was to leave the labor force when they became wives and mothers, in the 1970s it is common for women of both the middle and working classes to work for pay at virtually every point in their life cycles.

Accompanying this development has been a remarkable change in the *male* labor force participation rate. As Table 3 shows, while the labor market participation of women rose in the postwar decades, there was a major *decline* in that of men. Until the late 1960s, the decline in the male rate was at least partly due to the fact that men went to school longer, but the fact that the rate for men aged between 25 and 64 also decreased, although less rapidly, indicates that this is really a more basic trend.\* Indeed, this is the age group of men most likely to be in the labor force if employment is available to them. Since this is also the age group in which female labor force participation has expanded most rapidly, the ratio of women to men in the labor force, within that age bracket alone, has increased steadily from .37 in 1950 to .54 in 1973. This is almost exactly parallel to the changes in the ratio of women to men among labor force participants of all ages, suggesting that the trend among the "hard core" of the male labor force is representative of the overall situation.

The explanation for this seems to be that the economic expansion of the post-war period has been in occupational groups that were early sex-typed "female": clerical, service and sales jobs. Once these jobs were established as "women's work," employers had little motivation to hire men to fill them. Thus the demand for labor in the postwar period was largely a demand for *female* labor power and older and married women responded to the demand.<sup>95</sup>

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\* Ginzberg pointed out the salience of the "elongation of the educational cycle" in 1968, just before the labor force participation of males aged 16 to 24 began to rise again. He also suggests that part of the decline is due to the buildup of the armed forces in the postwar period, since this would reduce the number of men in the labor force. However, the data in Table 3 include persons in the armed forces, and yet the labor force participation of men clearly decreases quite persistently.<sup>94</sup> In any case, even if the decline in male participation can be "explained" by external factors, the change in the relationship between male and female rates is a highly significant one.

TABLE 3:

**LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES,<sup>a</sup> BY SEX AND AGE,  
FOR PERSONS 16 YEARS AND OVER, SELECTED YEARS, 1950-1973**

Year	Males				Females				Female/Male x 100	
	Total	16-24	25-64	65+	Total	16-24	25-64	65+	Total	25-64
1950	86.8	79.3	94.8	45.8	33.9	44.0	35.1	9.7	39.1	37.0
1953	86.9	80.2	95.8	41.6	34.5	42.9	40.1	10.0	39.7	41.9
1956	86.3	78.9	95.8	40.0	36.9	44.5	39.9	10.9	42.8	41.6
1959	84.5	75.5	95.4	34.2	37.2	41.9	41.3	10.2	44.0	43.3
1962	82.8	73.8	94.9	30.3	38.0	43.4	42.4	9.9	45.9	44.7
1965	81.5	72.3	94.5	27.9	39.3	44.1	44.4	10.0	48.2	47.0
1968	81.2	73.0	94.0	27.3	41.6	48.6	46.8	9.6	51.2	49.8
1970	80.6	73.4	93.4	26.8	43.4	51.3	48.6	9.7	53.8	52.0
1973	79.5	74.5	91.8	22.8	44.7	55.0	49.9	8.9	56.2	54.3

a. Defined as "percent of noninstitutional population in the labor force."

Source: Computed from U.S. Departments of Labor and H.E.W., *Manpower Report of the President* (1974), pp. 254-255. This data is from the Current Population Survey, a series which has somewhat different statistics than the decennial censuses for the years involved.

Rough indicators of the demand for male and female labor power can be derived from the broad occupational groupings used by the Census bureau. Throughout the period since World War II, nearly half of all male workers were blue collar workers, while only about 15 percent of female workers were in this group. Similarly, about half of all female workers during this period were in clerical or service (other than private household) jobs, and only about 15 percent of all male workers were in these groups. Between 1958 and 1973, the proportion blue-collar workers formed of all gainfully employed persons dropped slightly, from 37 to 35 percent, while the proportion of clerical and service workers grew from 23 to 29 percent.<sup>96</sup>

Female labor force participation, for reasons that are not altogether clear, has been increasing faster than the number of available "women's jobs," so that the female labor market is "overcrowded."<sup>97</sup> The unemployment rate of women has been higher than that of men throughout the postwar period, and the gap was widening until the onset of the current crisis. In 1950 the unemployment rate of men was 5.1 percent and that of women 5.8 percent. In 1973, that of men was 4.1 percent and women's 6.0 percent.<sup>98</sup>

The accelerating integration of female labor power into paid production in the years since World War II has not left the family unaffected. Wives and mothers who work for pay have increasingly come to depend upon consumer goods and services in maintaining their families. While the much-vaunted affluence of this period has doubt-

less been disproportionately enjoyed by those women whose husbands earn enough to allow them to remain outside the labor force for most of their lives, clearly many mass-produced household "conveniences" have become widely available.

Even more striking in its effect on women's home responsibilities is the drop in the birth rate since 1957, and the tendency for women to stop bearing children at a much younger age than formerly.<sup>99</sup> The period of their lifetime devoted to maternity in relation to their life expectancy is rapidly shrinking. More than half of all American mothers have had their *last* child by the time they reach their thirtieth birthday. This is a very important change: the maternal role by which women have traditionally been defined now takes up less than a seventh of their average life-span, and presently the longest phase of the female life cycle is that which follows family completion.<sup>100</sup>

Thus as women's role in the paid labor force has come to take up a longer period of their lives, their family role has yielded more and more of its direct production functions to the sphere of commodity production, while the reproduction of children, the one commodity which this society still inevitably depends on women to produce, now takes up a much shorter period of their lives.

All of these changes, combined with the increase in female labor force participation, have made it somewhat easier for women to exist outside the institution of marriage. It is true that the family as an institution and women's work within it continues to be economically essential, as has been

emphasized repeatedly here. Also, women continue to experience discrimination in wages, and this still makes it very difficult for them to survive without having the additional source of income that accompanies marriage. And yet, the situation of women is significantly different in this regard today from what it was in the early part of the century, when the vast majority of women who worked for pay left the labor force when they married and had children, never to return. The woman in a dual-worker family, even though her contribution to family income is much less than her husband's, can, simply because she has some independent income, more easily choose to strike out on her own than her grandmother, who was totally dependent on her husband's support.

Indeed, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women who have established single person households in recent years.<sup>101</sup> The divorce rate (per thousand women under age 45) increased by a dramatic two-thirds between the mid-1950s and 1970, while the remarriage rate (per thousand divorced or widowed women under aged 55) rose by about one-third during the same period.<sup>102</sup> Clearly the family is experiencing real pressures as a result of women's dramatically increased role in paid labor, and the subordination of women to men is thus threatened.

Yet, the degree to which traditional sexually stratified family patterns have persisted is as remarkable as the signs of pressure on the family as an institution. Because women's paid employment continues to be so sex-typed, so thoroughly linked to their sexuality and to their family role in its cultural definition, their increased labor force participation has made only a slight difference in their family role. Sex-typing, based on the assumption that women's labor force role is "secondary," insures that they will earn less than men, which renders marriage to a man with greater earning power more attractive. It also tends to suppress women's consciousness of their actual power as wage workers.

It is not surprising, then, that in the years after World War II, the rapid increase in female labor force participation which represented such an unprecedented threat to the perpetuation of a family structure in which women have heavy unpaid responsibilities was accompanied by an intensification of the ideology that said that their "place" was in the home. This cultural current, which Betty Friedan called "the feminine mystique" in the 1960s,<sup>103</sup> was nothing new in the

history of America, but the extent to which it diverged from the reality and the possibility of women's lives was much greater than at any previous point. Women were working outside of their homes, and they could choose not to live the "mystique" to a greater degree than ever before.

Just as in the 1930s and 1940s, when, as we have seen, women did not passively conform to ideological forces which pressured them to enter and leave the labor force, so in the 1960s women actively resisted the revival of the mystique. The women's movement has presented a strong challenge to the system of occupational segregation and to the notion that women's primary role is that of wife and mother, and clearly represents an important force to be reckoned with.

In the years since World War II, then, female labor force participation has increased, intensifying the contradiction between women's paid work and family roles. Traditional sex role ideology has at the same time become more essential to the perpetuation of the family, and yet there has also been an increase in political resistance to that ideology. This makes the relationship of women to the current economic crisis somewhat different from what it was in the Great Depression of the 1930s.

At this writing it is unclear how long the high level of unemployment that the U.S. economy experienced in 1975 will persist. Predictions of another economic depression in the immediate future resembling that of the 1930s in its depth are plentiful, while there is some evidence to support the view that the recession may have "bottomed out." In either case, we can learn something about what today's economic crisis means for women's lives by applying our analysis of their experience in the 1930s, once allowance is made for the structural changes in their economic situation which have occurred since then.

Unemployment, as measured by the official statistics, rose steadily in the second half of 1974 and at even a faster rate in the first five months of 1975, reaching a peak of 9.2 percent in May.<sup>104</sup> Since then it has tapered off slightly, but the rate remains much higher at this writing than it was even a year ago, at 8.3 percent in December, despite the heralded "recovery."<sup>105</sup>

At the May peak, the unemployment rate of adult women was 8.6 percent, while that of adult men was 7.3 percent.<sup>106</sup> While this might at first appear to indicate that women are suffering more from the effects of the economic turndown than men, it must be recalled that the female unem-

ployment rate has been consistently higher than that of males since World War II.<sup>107</sup> In fact, with the advent of the current crisis, the ratio of male to female unemployment increased, from .67 in 1973 to .85 in May 1975.<sup>108</sup> This indicates that, just as in the 1930s, men's unemployment has risen more quickly than that of women under the impact of the economic slump — although today, unlike the 1930s, it is more difficult for a woman to find a job than it is for a man.

Again, because of the existence of a high degree of labor market segmentation by sex, what is crucial in determining the differential effects of the crisis on the two sexes is the extent to which the jobs in each labor market — “men's jobs” and “women's jobs” — have been affected. The unemployment rate of blue collar workers rose from about 5.3 percent in 1973 to 13.0 percent at the May 1975 peak,<sup>109</sup> a rise about twice as large as the increase in the total unemployment rate. This is a rough but telling indicator of the reason why men have been disproportionately affected by a crisis-induced unemployment. In fact, the data bear a remarkably close resemblance to those collected in the 1930 Census of Unemployment, once allowance is made for the fact that female unemployment rates were higher at the onset of the current crisis. In both cases, the heavy industrial production jobs were disproportionately affected, and since these were more often men's jobs than women's, the overall effect on male unemployment was stronger than that on female unemployment.

A better indication than the unemployment rates of the differential effect of the crisis on the male and female labor markets is the data on *employment*. Here, no compensations need to be introduced for “discouraged” or “additional” workers, nor for any other groups which tend to be neglected in the official counting of the unemployed. The employment data confirm the fact that the male labor market has suffered greater cuts than the female labor market in this crisis. These data are collected on a quarterly basis, and the low point in the number of employed persons was at the end of the first quarter of 1975. The number of employed adult men decreased by about 1.3 million during that quarter, while the number of employed women remained about the same.<sup>110</sup>

If the current crisis deepens into anything resembling that of the 1930s, this picture might be altered, depending on which parts of the occupational structure experience the largest cutbacks. The area in which gainfully employed women are

probably most vulnerable is the service sector, where 17 percent of them work, as opposed to 8 percent of all men.<sup>111</sup> In a prolonged crisis, it is possible that this sector would suffer severe cutbacks, and this would have a significant effect on the sex differences in unemployment. In any case, it is clear that labor market segmentation provides the key to understanding a great amount of the effect of an economic contraction on sex differences in rates of employment and unemployment as much today as forty years ago, and that women will not simply be ejected from the labor market. On the contrary, it seems likely that sex-typing would protect women from many of the effects of the crisis on their paid work role, in much the same way it did in the 1930s, since just as before they are highly concentrated in clerical occupations and poorly represented in manufacturing.

In regard to the impact of the crisis on women's paid employment, then, the current situation, whether it becomes much more severe or not, looks very much like the 1930s did. However, the meaning of sex differences in crisis-induced unemployment is quite different in the contemporary context, in which dual-worker families have become increasingly common. Cases of “role reversal,” in which the husband is unemployed while his wife is not would almost surely be more frequent in a severe crisis in the 1970s than they were in the Great Depression.

The spiraling inflation rate has affected even those families not as yet struck by unemployment. Already in 1974 buying power had decreased by nearly 5 percent for the median household from its 1973 level.<sup>112</sup> Data is not yet available for 1975, but it is certain that this trend has continued with the deepening of the recession. There is scattered evidence of shifts in consumption patterns resulting from this crunch, indicating that just as in the 1930s, women are substituting their own labor power for purchaseable commodities. Sales of high-cost dry and frozen prepared convenience foods have declined.<sup>113</sup> Americans are spending more time bargain “hunting.”<sup>114</sup> One survey found that half of all families spend most of their free time at home rather than going out because of the recession, that one in four is trying to reduce its use of frozen and prepared foods, that half are not buying new clothes, and that a third are repairing items they would have formerly discarded.<sup>115</sup>

In some ways, families today are less well-equipped to substitute their own labor power for commodities than they were in the 1930s. Many

skills that were important to that strategy, such as home sewing, have been converted into luxuries and are more fully integrated into the commodity economy. It costs more to buy the materials necessary to make a dress by hand than it does to buy a cheap, mass-produced one, and fewer people know how to sew by hand. Similarly cheap "balloon bread" is more economical than home-made bread. Homes are completely dependent on running water, electricity, and other forms of purchased energy: one can no longer choose to cook over a wood-burning fire unless one is wealthy enough to have a fireplace or a yard. Sales of a whole range of "nonfood home products" such as detergents, paper towels, light bulbs, bath soap and toilet tissue have remained at their pre-recession levels in 1975, indicating that they have become virtual "necessities" to most Americans and that substitutes are not widely perceived as viable.<sup>116</sup>

Thus the consumption strategies open to families today are in some ways more limited than they were in the 1930s. On the other hand, real incomes are considerably higher, and the existence of unemployment compensation and other social services provides a cushion today that was rarely available in the 1930s. Still, in a prolonged depression, real income would further deteriorate and existing social service provisions would be thoroughly inadequate to the task of supporting masses of long-term unemployed people. Unemployment payments are available only for limited periods of time, and, in any case, state and local government are already on the brink of insolvency in many areas. Unless social services were greatly improved, in a severe depression families would ultimately have to bear the burden of economic deprivation in much the same way as they did in the 1930s.<sup>117</sup>

Another difference between the situation today and that during the Great Depression is that there has been a relative loosening of kinship ties among large segments of the population. Today it is more difficult to establish interdependencies like those that frequently developed among multi-generational kin groups forty years ago. "Doubling up" of two generations in a single household, for example, would be more difficult for many people today. However, it seems likely that young people would return to their families again as the crunch affected them. In fact, teenagers today have the highest rates of unemployment of any age-specific group — 21.8 percent at the peak in May 1975,<sup>118</sup> and the family has probably been absorbing this

group of unemployed people in much the same way as it did in the 1930s.

It is difficult to know whether or not families today are adequately equipped to absorb the emotional strains attending unemployment in the way that they did during the Great Depression. It is certain, however, that great demands will be made on the institution in its capacity as a psychological shock-absorber. The increased frequency of role reversals between the spouses and the increased necessity of cutbacks in expenditures will surely amplify the strains. The fact that family structures have become more atomized in the years since World War II, with higher divorce rates and more women choosing to live outside the institution for more of their lives, might mean that the family has become generally less resilient as a psychological unit.

Evidence of increasing pressure on this function of the family is already abundant. A recent newspaper article, aptly entitled "If Recession Comes in the Door, Love May Fly Out the Window," reports that "Countless relationships have been reexamined and transformed after money troubles forced long-buried personal problems to the surface."<sup>119</sup> A survey by the Family Service Association of America found that the demand for family counseling is outstripping the ability of available community services to provide it due to the recession, and that there has been an "across-the-board increase in anxiety and irritability regardless of age or income bracket." The report notes further that role reversals between husband and wife are frequent sources of resentment and intra-marital conflict.<sup>120</sup> Other observers have pointed out the tendency for unemployed people to internalize blame for the crisis.<sup>121</sup>

If the current crisis deepens into one as severe as the Great Depression, then, the role of the family and women's work within it will be very problematic. The demands made upon the institution, both materially and psychologically, will in all likelihood be quite similar to those of the 1930s, but the various recent changes in housework and family structure suggest that the range of flexibility in family adjustment may have narrowed since that time. Women might "take up the slack" in the economy again in a 1970s depression, but the job will be more difficult, and they may be less willing to do it.

At this point one can only speculate about the prospects for the development of an ideology like

that which emerged in the 1930s, blaming women for causing the crisis by taking men's jobs, or some variation upon that theme. On the one hand, the existence of the women's movement may make that less likely. On the other hand, such a form of backlash is by no means inconceivable, and could even take the women's movement itself as its target. Indeed, if a burden is placed upon the work of women in the family comparable to that which they bore in the 1930s, together with all of the pressures which have converged upon it in the decades since, a strongly misogynistic ideology might well be necessary to keep women in their "place."

Of course, much depends upon what women themselves do. The strategy of the socialist-feminist movement for this coming period must be one which directly confronts capitalism's historically demonstrated use of women to absorb the shocks of economic crises. We must organize around demands that will force capitalists, not women, to pay the price of the crises endemic to the economic system from which they alone benefit.

The efforts of feminists to break down occupational segregation already have some clear organizational forms, although there have been very few actual gains. While this struggle should of course be supported, it is obviously limited by the fact that distributing women evenly through all the levels of the occupational hierarchy does not eliminate the real problem, the existence of hierarchy itself. And in the process of fighting for equal access to the male labor market, women are bound to alienate the men they displace.

This is particularly true in a period of economic contraction, when not only status, but the very fact of employment is on the line. Indeed, as the current crisis develops we can expect that there will be increasing conflict over the issue of affirmative action versus seniority. It is the responsibility of the women's movement and of the Left to provide a clear analysis of this situation, which blames neither women nor male unions, but rather points to the fact that a capitalist economy cannot provide people who want work with permanent jobs. The best demand is for "jobs for all," but this is unlikely to be a viable basis of reorganization given the Left's current disarray. Shared layoffs are one promising strategic option being tried in some places to alleviate conflicts over seniority and affirmative action.<sup>122</sup>

The fact that crises of capitalism resolve themselves through women's unpaid family labor

makes that another important arena for struggle. So far, the women's movement has spent little energy here, but there has been some discussion among socialist-feminists of building a strategy around demands for more and better social services. In addition, there are some structures already in existence which might connect with the struggle to free women from the responsibility to consume, a necessary part of the work they do in maintaining and reproducing the labor force. Food cooperatives and communal living units, for example, pose potential threats to the family's predominance as the main unit of consumption, and they make socialization and equalization of the burden of housework a more visible alternative. Such institutions are particularly easy to organize in periods of economic depression, for the immediate gains they bring are much more obviously desirable then. If pursued outside of an explicit political strategy and movement, however, such efforts could be accommodative to the system's needs in a period of crisis rather than posing a threat to it. Such efforts would best be put forth in conjunction with the development of militant community organizations.

None of the programmatic elements proposed here to resist the forces generated by the crisis can be expected to have much lasting importance in themselves. It is, indeed, tremendously important that they not be projected as struggles to improve the existing socio-economic order, but rather as tactics that are part of a larger strategy to build a qualitatively different society. Each particular struggle, in addition to extracting concessions from the ruling class, must be rooted in the context of and contribute to the growth of a broadly based movement with the larger goals of feminism and socialism.

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## NOTES

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25. For details, see Lebergott, *op. cit.*

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27. *Historical Statistics*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

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"Investigation into abstract and speculative truths, into principles and scientific axioms, and everything that tends to generalize our ideas, is not the province of women . . ."

J.J. Rousseau, *Emile*