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WOMEN JUST WANT A JOB, NOT A CAREER

A Study of the Relationship Between Women's Domestic Role  
and Their Participation in the Labour Force

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ABSTRACT

During the twentieth century, the number of women in the labour force has risen dramatically. Since World War II the increase in labour force participation among married women has been particularly noticeable. However the participation of married women has fluctuated at times over the century as a result of national crises such as the World Wars and economic booms and recessions.

Two labour market theories have been used to analyse women's labour force participation. The reserve army of labour theory as developed by Marx, is based on the idea that a flexible and disposable labour force is required by capital for capital accumulation. Although Marx did not specifically describe women as a reserve labour force, recent theorists have applied his theory to women in wage labour. The dual labour market theory likewise was not developed with women in mind but has since been used to analyse their labour force participation. It has been shown that women as a group of workers display similar characteristics to those attributed to secondary sector workers in the dual labour market, such as low wages and insecure, unstable positions and poor working conditions.

Neither of the labour market theories questions why women as a group of workers comprise part of a reserve army of labour or the

secondary sector of the labour market. In particular, these theories take no account of women's domestic responsibilities which considerably limit women's labour force participation. Feminist theorists however maintain that a theory of women's wage labour must include women's domestic role.

This thesis examines how the labour market theories have been used to analyse women's participation in the labour market and reviews feminist theories which have linked women's domestic role with their position in the labour force. Employers hold a key position in the entry of women to the labour market. A survey of employers in the Manufacturing, Insurance, Finance and Business Services industrial groups in Palmerston North was undertaken to investigate employers' perceptions of the place of women in the labour force. Evidence from the study indicates that employers prefer women in positions which have traditionally been "women's work" and are reluctant to promote women because employers think the women's domestic responsibilities will preclude them from adequately carrying out their labour market obligations.

In conclusion, it is apparent that employers do not perceive women as being career oriented because they believe women's domestic responsibilities will take priority in their lives. This belief effectively limits women's participation in the labour force and contributes to the continuation of sexual divisions in the labour market.

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ABBREVIATIONS

OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SROW	Society for Research on Women
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
UE	University Entrance
AJHR	Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives

## INTRODUCTION

"It is more desirable for girls leaving school to have jobs than it is for married women to be working." (1) This statement epitomises a widely held view in New Zealand about the right of women to work. However, in reality there has been a considerable increase in the labour force participation of women since World War I. The increase among married women in employment after World War II has been particularly marked. Women now make up 34% of the total full-time workforce. Married women comprise 53% of the total female workforce, an increase of 45% since World War I. In 1981, 46% of all women were in paid work, both full-time and part-time. Over one third of these women were working full-time (New Zealand Census, 1981).

Although there has been a general increase, there have been fluctuations in women's labour force participation rate since World War I which have largely been caused by national crises, such as the wars and changes in economic growth. During the depression of the 1930's, women who were working were often pressured into leaving their jobs because many men were unemployed. The onset of World War II however, saw many women drawn into the labour force as they had been during the First World War when men departed for the war. Following World War II the economic expansion which continued through the 1960's and the early 1970's created a high demand for labour

which was largely filled by women, particularly married women with children. The rate of economic expansion has slowed down since the energy crisis in the early 1970's. Lower productivity, rising inflation and high levels of unemployment are factors associated with the downturn in the economy.

The right of women to work in the face of rising unemployment was challenged in the the 1930's and again during the current economic recession. This time that challenge has had far wider implications for women as there is now a much higher proportion of married women in employment. The 1936 census showed that only 8.3% of married women were working while in 1981 over 50% of married women were in the labour force.

However the idea of married women in employment is in conflict with the traditional role of women as financially dependent wife and mother. Therefore married women are more likely to confront criticism from a variety of sources during periods of high unemployment because it is argued that their husband provides an alternative means of support (West, 1982:4). Thompson (1981), an economist, has suggested that married women who are working are "job stealers". Support for his argument has come independently from Apthorp (1981) who called for taxation disincentives for two-income families. These attitudes have been endorsed in a continuing debate in the newspapers. Prominent public figures have contributed to the debate from time to time (2). This argument assumes a certain family structure - the nuclear family - which has been said to be the

"cornerstone of New Zealand society" (Webster and Williams, 1977:87; Koopman-Boyden, 1978:ix). The nuclear family consists of a male breadwinner and a dependent wife who will bear and care for their children. The woman thus has responsibility for the organisation of the home and family. The importance of motherhood in New Zealand infers that the domestic role is a woman's primary role (Olssen, 1980:175). Because of this primary role, it is argued that married women do not need to work and so should leave the workforce to make way for the unemployed.

The argument not only ignores the right of women to work, but also assumes that married women are in jobs which unemployed people could and would do. In fact many married women are in part-time positions and make up over 80% of the part-time workers. Unemployed men and single women are more likely to seek full-time positions (OECD, 1980:36). Moreover men and women tend not to work in the same occupations. Women are more often found working in areas which are similar to domestic labour. The majority of women work in clerical, manufacturing (particularly food and clothing), teaching, nursing and service work. Men predominate in manufacturing, labouring and as transport equipment operators (Department of Labour, 1980:21-22). Further, men tend to be in positions of more authority and therefore higher status in the labour force even in areas where there is a larger number of women working, e.g., teaching, managerial and administrative positions. Because women work in a different labour market from men, it is therefore unlikely that if all married women

left the labour force unemployed men and single women would move into their jobs (Mabbett, 1981).

This thesis aims to:

1. critically examine the labour market theories which have been used to analyse women's labour force participation;
2. develop a theory which will provide a more adequate analysis of women's labour force participation;
3. examine the attitudes of employers towards the participation of women in the labour force today and
4. examine the issues concerning the right of women to work.

Chapter One describes the reserve army of labour theory and examines the extent to which women make up part of a reserve army of labour in the New Zealand labour force. The subject of Chapter Two will be the dual labour market theory which has also been used to investigate the situation of women in the labour force. Marx developed the reserve army of labour as a tool to examine the position of the poor members of the proletariat who were employed or discarded from work according to the needs of capitalism. The dual labour market theory was developed around the experiences of black workers in the United States of America, who it was found, were in low paid, unstable, insecure positions in the labour force. Statistics have shown that women tend to occupy a similar position to those men.

Both these theories were developed to analyse the employment patterns of men. Neither can therefore adequately explain women's labour force participation because they do not take into account the domestic role of women. Feminist theorists maintain that because the domestic role is the primary role for women it is crucial to any consideration of women's position in the labour force (Beechey, 1978; Bland et al, 1978; Barrett, 1980; Freeman, 1982). Chapter Three will examine this theoretical position.

Although there are a number of legal and structural barriers to women's unemployment, the role of employers in determining women's position in the labour force is crucial. In 1969 a survey by the Society for Research on Women examined employers' attitudes towards the employment of women (SROW, 1973). This study was undertaken after a lengthy period of full employment and a considerable increase in the numbers of women in employment. The findings of this study indicated that employers were prepared to make flexible arrangements so that married women with children could be accommodated. However it was clear that employers would have preferred not to consider women's domestic role but that they needed women's labour.

After a decade during which the economic situation deteriorated, I surveyed a group of employers in Palmerston North to see how the economic situation had affected the employment of married women. I was interested in such areas as recruitment, promotion and redundancy policies, as well as the attitudes of employers towards women with dependent children. Their attitudes concerning legislative changes

such as equal pay and maternity leave were also investigated. Chapter Four will analyse the results of this survey and make relevant comparisons with previous studies which disclose the effect of economic fluctuations on women's employment patterns. The conclusions of this study will be discussed in Chapter Five.

#### NOTES

1. Hon. R.D. Muldoon, reported in The Dominion, 12 December, 1983.
2. Bruce Beetham MP, A survey conducted by the Women's Electoral Lobby (Palmerston North branch), November 1981.  
R Bell MP, The Dominion, 23 April, 1983.  
Letters to the Editor, Evening Standard, 9 October, 1981; 19 January, 1984; 24 January, 1984.  
Letters to the Editor, The Dominion, 30 April, 1983.  
Letters to the Editor, Listener, 1 August, 1981; 15 August, 1981.