

# Taking on the Double Day Housewives as a Reserve Army of Labour

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Canadian women's work is ghettoized in the home as domestic labour and in "women's jobs" in the paid labour force.<sup>1</sup> Most married women end up in both ghettos—holding down two jobs and working a double day. At home, they work long hours at very difficult, highly responsible work that receives very little social recognition and is, of course, unpaid. Within the paid labour force, they face a series of discriminatory practices, the most important of which is the low wages most women receive.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, women working the double day carry an extraordinarily heavy load and the price they pay is enormous. They work long hours and have virtually no leisure time for themselves. They are subject to high levels of stress and they get paid about half of what men receive. Given this situation, why are women with children entering the paid labour force in ever increasing numbers? Why do women take on this double day?

It is generally argued in the literature that married women take on paid work for two reasons. The primary one is economic: women do paid work because they need the money.

The secondary reason is closely related to the first. Like other workers, married women derive independence, satisfaction, sociability, and a sense of pride from their paid jobs. More recently, investigators have begun to analyse the structural imperatives that underly the work patterns of Canadian women.

In *Last Hired, First Fired* Pat Connelly addresses these questions by arguing that women in the home constitute a reserve army of labour and, as part of that analysis, she considers "the pressures that push housewives into the paid labour force." (1978:63) Connelly demonstrates the existence of underlying structural imperatives which constrain and mould women's decisions of whether or not to take on paid labour. For Connelly:

... women's participation in wage labour is not a matter of immediate situational factors but rather of prestructured alternatives which direct the decisions that women are compelled to make. (1978:76)

Most studies of women's work in Canada have concentrated, as Connelly does, on the general category "women": "This view distinguishes

women as members of a special group.” (1978:6) While such general studies are vitally important, it is also necessary that we begin to refine our analyses by distinguishing patterns specific to particular categories of women. We need to know how the large-scale “macro” social processes are translated into individual behaviour.

So, while we have studies which show that the percentage of married women in the paid labour force is steadily increasing, we do not yet know whether this means essentially the same thing for all married women or whether some women have significantly different experiences from women in other circumstances. For example, are there important differences

between married women with young children and those with no dependent children, or between married women whose husbands do not contribute to their wives’ and children’s support and those whose husbands do.

Of particular interest are those women who have young children and whose husbands have steady incomes which they contribute to supporting their wives and children. Domestic labour for these women is at its most intense and demanding. This, plus the appalling lack of adequate child care, coupled with all the social pressures which assert that women should stay home with their preschool children, exerts enormous pressure on women to do domestic labour full-time and to remain out of the paid labour force. When they have



husbands with regular incomes, the potential for them to be financially dependent is maximized. Therefore, it is particularly significant when these women take on paid labour. In addition, we need to know whether working class women have significantly different experiences from middle class women. How does women's class position both structure the alternatives available to them and affect the way they respond to the structural imperatives which impell their lives?

### The Study

This study is based on a comparison of two groups of twenty married women. At the time of the study, all forty women had been married for at least five years and had at least one preschool child at home. The first group of twenty were working class; that is, they were members of family-based households which depended, for the major portion of their income, on hourly wages earned by the men. The second group of twenty were (loosely defined) middle class; that is, they lived in family-based households which received the major portion of their income from the salaries earned by husbands in professional occupations or in business. All of these women had, for at least one year in the five years prior to the study, worked as full-time domestic labourers and had been financially dependent on their husbands. All of them had full-time paid jobs outside the home and in addition, retained primary responsibility for the domestic labour in their households.

It is important to stress at the outset the unique features of this case study.<sup>3</sup> Flin Flon, where the study was conducted, is a small, single industry, northern, working class community. While there is a middle class component to the town's population, it is relatively small, elite and in circumstances quite unlike those in which the majority of middle class Ca-

nadians live. Therefore, as I have argued elsewhere, while the working class households in Flin Flon are typical and representative of working class households elsewhere in Canada, the middle class is unique and therefore cannot be considered typical (Luxton 1980).

### Increasing Household Income

All of the women interviewed were married to husbands who were earning a regular wage or salary, which had been, at some point in the five preceeding years, sufficient to support a non-earning wife. Nevertheless, all the women maintained that their main reason for taking on paid work was because "we need the money." This raises a very difficult question of how "need" is determined. In some cases need was apparently obvious. The household was in debt, and the husband's earnings alone would not be sufficient to sustain the household and pay off the debt. However, while the debts were indeed real, they had often been incurred for different reasons. The following two extreme examples illustrate the way class differences may be reflected in determinations of need.

In one case, the wage earning husband was injured at work and was therefore transferred to another job with lower pay rates. The result was an immediate drop in income. This household had been carrying substantial debts—a mortgage on the house and outstanding payments for their car. They also incurred heavy medical bills as a result of the injury. In contrast, another middle class household was deeply in debt because in one year they bought a new and larger house, a cabin in the country, skidoos so they could use the cabin in the winter and a trip to Europe "as an education for the children." In both cases, the women took on paid employment to pay off their household debts but obviously they were doing so under very different circumstances. These examples

are similar in appearance but are significantly different in the degree of hardship experienced by the people concerned and in the amount of real choice the individuals involved actually controlled. However, while debts incurred for country cabins and European holidays are vastly different from medical bills and loss of wages, it is very important to understand that economic needs are historically and culturally defined.

Middle class households obviously had more disposable income than working class households and thus had access to a wider range of social and material comforts. All of the households however, had an established standard of living which was, by the mid 1970s, being visibly eroded by inflation. The majority of these women, regardless of class, took on paid jobs to acquire the income necessary to sustain their households' standards.

Their class position affected the types of jobs these women got and how they experienced their paid work. Employment for women in Flin Flon is severely limited, as it is in most primary industry communities. There were many more women wanting paid work than there were jobs available. What jobs there were, were mainly traditional "working class female jobs"—sales and clerical work. While most of the working class women resented the job ghettos and wished they could break out of them, for the most part they assumed that this was the only type of work they could expect to get anywhere. Eight of the middle class women had jobs that were slightly better paying, or were higher status than most—teachers, administrative assistants, social workers. They expressed relative satisfaction with their work. In contrast, the rest of the middle class women were unable to find such jobs. They ended up in low paid, low status jobs, expressing frustration and anger at their situation. They resented being unable to use their education

and training. They felt they had been forced to take jobs "beneath my position." One middle class woman pointed out very forcefully that the "crummy job" she had proved how desperately her household needed the "pittance" she earned: "No one would do this job for this pay unless she was absolutely strapped." These differences are illustrated more clearly when we consider what impells women into the paid labour force when their households are not in a state of immediate economic crisis.

The majority of the middle class women, regardless of what type of job they had, maintained that, if they did not need the money, they would prefer to stay at home. Fourteen out of the twenty women interviewed, including six who had "good" jobs, said that they were working for money because they had to. They argued that they had entered the paid labour force when their households were in an economic crisis and they insisted that they intended to leave as soon as possible. Six middle class women, including four with "crummy" jobs, said they were working outside the home because they preferred their paid jobs to domestic labour and they maintained that they would keep their paid jobs regardless of the economic situation in their households.

For the majority of working class women, the exact opposite was the case. Thirteen of these women maintained that they had taken on paid work at a point when their households were not in crisis. They maintained that when their husbands had regular employment, the household was not seriously in debt and things were running smoothly, that was the time when it was easiest for them to take on paid work. These women made their decision to enter the paid labour force based on two assumptions. The first was that if their households were running smoothly, it was possible for them to take on the added stress of the double day. The second assumption was that while

things might be good at the moment, disaster was to be expected in the future and so they took on paid work to build up a nest egg of security for the hard times they anticipated ahead.

One woman described her understanding of this situation:

I'd take on a job either if we really needed the money real bad or if things is going good at home, then I'd get a job so we could save up a little extra. When my husband's having a rough time at work, then I like to be at home so I can take care of him.

It is difficult to determine to what extent this perception accords with their practice. For example, some of the women maintained they were entering the paid labour force when things were running smoothly at home, but in fact, they had large debts. Certainly in one household, when the husband was injured and his income reduced to the pittance doled out by workers' compensation, the wife did quit her job to stay home and care for him. However, in another similar case cited above, the woman took on paid work when her husband was injured.

The different motivations that women have in taking on paid work may be related to the fact that proportionately, the amount that working class women contributed to their household incomes was considerably greater than the amount contributed by middle class women. Again it is important to reiterate here the point that the middle class women of this study may not be typical. It would be useful to examine household incomes for women who hold professional jobs to see whether such income discrepancies occur for their households as well. The average earnings of the working class husbands was \$11,375.000 and of the

wives \$5,275.00. By taking on paid work, these women increased their household incomes by 32%. In contrast, middle class husbands earned an average of \$29,568.00 while their wives earned an average of \$7,456.00. Thus, while the middle class women earned on an average 29% more than the working class women, their contribution increased their household incomes by only 20%.

These relative differences were clearly expressed in the attitudes the two groups of women held toward the significance of their earning power. Among the middle class women, out of the six who maintained they were employed because they liked their work, five said that their earnings were not absolutely essential to the household income. They argued that the money they earned paid for extras, like family holidays or special treats. In a particularly important discrepancy between perception and practice, I discovered that at least in two cases the women's income actually went to domestic essentials—grocery shopping and paying utilities. What happened in these households was that when the women assumed financial responsibility for these items, their husbands were able to use their money for holidays. While the rest acknowledged that their earnings were important in sustaining the household, they all expressed the hope that such a situation was temporary and that eventually they would no longer need to earn money. While I have not yet conducted a formal follow-up study, I do know that five years later, at least eleven are still holding full-time paid jobs even though some of them have had another child.

All of the working class women felt that their earnings were an essential part of the household income and most of them expected that they would probably have paid jobs for most of their lives. Even those who anticipated leaving the paid labour force at various periods knew

that such absences were only temporary and that what they were earning at the time was necessary.

It may be that there is a correlation between the type of increasing expenses a household is forced to offset and the women's decision to take on paid work.<sup>4</sup> In other words, when household expenses increase in those areas where it is possible for housewives to intensify their own labour, women may choose to work harder at home, rather than take on the double day. So, for example, when food and clothing costs increase, women may offset those expenses by shopping more carefully, making more from scratch and mending more often. However, when household expenses increase in areas where women cannot intensify their labour, they often have no choice but to earn money so that the household has the necessary finances to meet the increased costs. For example, when the cost of home heating increased dramatically in the mid 1970s, most women had no way of intensifying their domestic labour to meet increased oil costs. In one exceptional case, the family installed a wood-burning stove and the housewife added chopping wood and stoking the fire to her domestic labour. This is not an option readily available to most households who must instead find more money to pay the oil bills.

Similarly, housing costs, such as rents, mortgage rates and taxes, have all increased dramatically in recent years. Again, there is very little that women can do inside the home to reduce these costs. In seven of the working class households and five of the middle class households, the women maintained that the increased costs of maintaining their home (heating, taxes, mortgage payments or rent) were a major factor in their decision to take on paid work. It would be very useful to assemble figures on household expenditures through time which show the proportion of income

spent on items such as food and clothing where women can substitute their labour for cash as compared to those items such as taxes, heat and transportation where women cannot intensify their domestic labour to offset the costs. It would be very significant if it were then possible to show that there is a correspondence between increased costs of the latter type and the movement of married women into the paid labour force.<sup>5</sup>

While all the women involved acknowledged that they took on paid labour to increase their household's income, they also discovered that, in taking on paid work they incurred expenses that they would not have had if they were not working outside the home. As a result, when married women take on paid work, their household's income does not automatically increase by the amount they are earning. In a few cases, the increased costs consumed such a significant proportion of the woman's earnings that it was almost not worth her while keeping the job. In one middle class household the first year that the women had a paid job, the household actually lost money. The second year the couple obtained the advice of a tax consultant who was able to show them ways of increasing their allowable deductions such that they ended up ahead. In a working class household, the woman's work related expenses were less than her earnings until a second child was born. At that point, the child care costs pushed her work related expenses higher than her earnings. She finally quit work until the oldest child started school, thereby reducing their child care costs once again. The most notable expenses incurred included child care, transportation, clothing and taxes. But there were also many more hidden costs as well. Most of the women indicated that their families ate more meals in restaurants after the women started working outside the home. They also spent more on prepared foods, paying for services they did not have time to perform. On an

average, working class women estimated that these expenses used up 27% of their take home pay while middle class women estimated that their expenses took up 36% of their take home pay.

If the cost of work related expenses is subtracted from the amount of money women earn, the result gives some indication of the real contribution women's earnings make to the household income. On an average, the earnings of working class women increase their total household income by 34%. In contrast, because their husbands' incomes are so much higher, the earnings of middle class women, on an average, increase their household's income by just 16%. The implication of these figures is that, proportionately, working class women are able to make a larger economic contribution to the subsistence of their households. It may be that there is a correlation between the relative importance of a woman's economic contribution and the respect and value that she and her husband attribute to her paid work.

### **Reduced Domestic Labour**

When a woman takes on paid work, she usually does not relinquish her domestic labour. However the amount of time and energy she has available for domestic labour is sharply reduced. Various time budget studies have suggested that married women working at two jobs in fact do less domestic labour than full time housewives. However, when their paid work time and their domestic labour time are added together, the woman doing both jobs puts in about 12 hours more than full time housewives each week.<sup>6</sup>

In comparing the way time was allocated by the two groups of women, a number of interesting observations emerged. On an average, the working class women worked about 2.4 hours more than full time housewives on a

typical work day and about the same amount of time on weekends. In other words, this group correspond to the findings of comparative time budget studies by working about 12 hours more than full time housewives each week. In contrast, the middle class women worked about 3.7 hours more than full time middle class housewives on a typical work day and they worked 2.2 hours more on weekends. Thus these women were putting in about 22.9 hours per week more than full time housewives or 10.9 hours more than working class women!

There appears to be three factors which contribute to this significant difference. The first is that one aspect of women's domestic labour involves creating the face that the household presents to the world. The majority of working class women expressed the opinion that as long as their house was neat and tidy, they were fulfilling their necessary obligations. Some women regretted that they did not have more time available to improve their houses by doing such tasks as making new curtains, re-covering old furniture or repainting different rooms. For the most part they accepted the limitations imposed on their time by the fact they held down two jobs and they considered such household improvements as basically luxuries they were forced to give up.

On the other hand, all the middle class women felt very strongly that they had to continue improving the quality of their houses through activities which required their own labour. Where working class women recognized that they could not keep up their former standards, middle class women felt compelled to do so.

The second factor which contributes to the increased labour time of middle class women is the extent to which husbands contribute to domestic labour. Cross class time budget studies have shown that husbands rarely in-

crease the amount of time they spend doing domestic labour when their wives take on paid work. In this case, the working class men did not increase the amount of time they spent on domestic labour on work days but on weekends they did half an hour more, spread over two days. In contrast, with one notable exception, the middle class men actually reduced the amount of time they spent on domestic labour when their wives took on paid work!<sup>7</sup> Time budget studies suggest that these men spent about one hour per work day and about two hours on weekends when their wives did full time domestic labour but the men reduced the amount of work day domestic labour to almost nothing when their wives got paid jobs. On weekends men halved their contribution to about one hour. In other words, they reduced their domestic labour time by about seven hours each week. These men seemed to feel that no matter what else she was doing, domestic labour was the woman's responsibility. They also implied that if the woman had enough "free time" to take on paid work, then she could obviously handle her domestic labour as well. This attitude apparently underlies the third factor which contributes to the increased labour time of middle class women.

One of the requirements of professional and commercial work is that a considerable amount of entertaining and social life must go on within the family household. Wives of professional and business men subsidize their husbands' jobs by maintaining an appropriately furnished home, by producing acceptable social events such as dinner parties, and by accompanying the husband to social occasions organized by others. This conspicuous consumption and display behaviour is an essential part of maintaining social status. Regardless of what the wives may be doing elsewhere, they are expected to continue playing hostess for their husbands. In one household, for example, the husband owned a

small contracting company and he did a lot of negotiating for contracts over dinner parties in his home. He expected his wife to provide the meals, to arrange the house and to act as social convenor to impress his prospective clients. She had done so willingly for several years until she took on a paid job as a teacher. Her work not only required a great deal of her time both at work during school hours and at home afterwards for preparatory work, but it was also emotionally very demanding and draining as she was working with emotionally disturbed children. Her husband, however, expected that she would continue in her role as hostess and he precipitated several nasty and unresolved fights over the issue.

In contrast, the majority of working class households, regardless of whether or not the woman was employed outside the home, did very little entertaining at home. Most of their social activities occurred outside the home and the fact that the women were earning money meant that it was possible for them to increase the amount of socializing they did. Several of these women noted that by taking on paid work they were able to spend more money on organized leisure activities and therefore were able to do more.

Before I had a job I couldn't afford to get a sitter and go drinking. Now I can get out at least once a week.

### Child Care

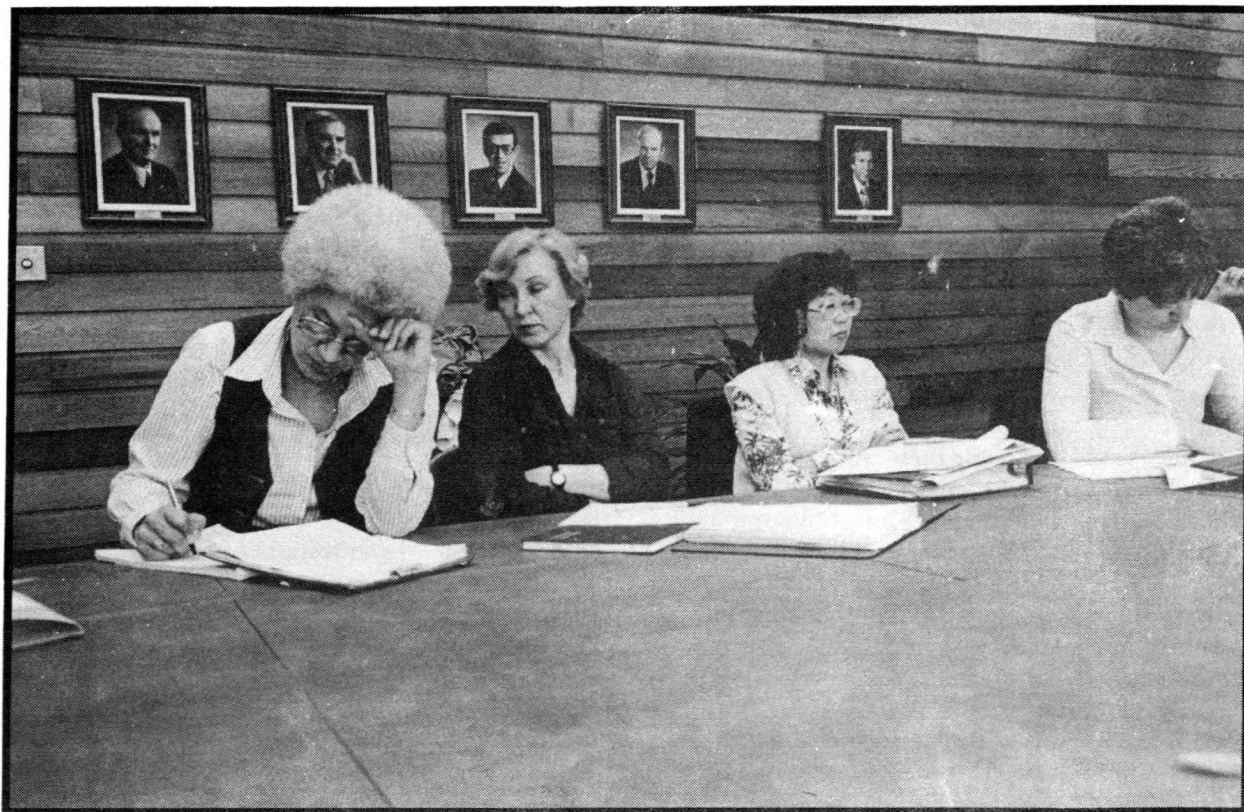
Central to the question of the relationship between domestic labour and paid labour is the issue of child care. The vast majority of fulltime housewives do domestic labour because they have, or plan to have, or have had, dependent children. A key deciding factor for many women about whether to take on paid labour hinges on whether or not they can find adequate care for their children.<sup>8</sup>



For the women interviewed in this study, actually finding child care was not a major issue as there were many women eager to earn extra money by caring for children in their homes. The issue for them was not whether or not child care was available, but the quality of the care. On this issue, different personal attitudes towards children and different values about child rearing were very important. The most striking thing was that one of the key factors affecting parents attitudes towards child care was the type of care they had received as children. Those people who, as children, had been raised primarily by their mothers and whose mothers had worked fulltime at home consistently expressed the opinion that mothers are the best and most important rearers of children. In

contrast, those who had been raised by several people, those who had lived in large households with several adults who cared for the children, or those who had spent long periods of time living with adults other than their parents, were quite prepared to assume that other, "non-mother" adults could provide quality child care.

Among the middle class parents (female and male) 36 had been raised predominantly by their mothers. All of these people felt very strongly that full time mother care was the best kind of care for children. They all expressed a great deal of concern when they were unable to provide such care for their children and they did their best to ensure that the care they ar-



ranged approximated mother care as closely as possible.

We believe children should be cared for by their mother. While I am working, we have hired a sitter. She comes into our home and I tell her exactly how I want my child cared for. While it's not as good, it's as close as possible to being like having me at home.

Four of the middle class parents had, as children, been cared for by adults other than their mothers. Each of them felt that their experience demonstrated that what matters is the quality of care, not the relationship between the adult care given and the child. In one case, two such people were married to each other. They shared this perspective and were active proponents of day care. In two other cases, such adults were married to adults who preferred mother care. In both these families, there was considerable tension between the adults about how to care for their children.

Among the working class families, the situation was reversed. The majority of them, 29, had grown up in some type of collective child care situation. One person, for example, had grown up on a farm with six older siblings, two aunts, an uncle, a grandmother and both her parents. Another had lived with several different relatives and two different neighbours while her mother had left the region in search of work. All but two of these people felt that collective child care was acceptable. Some of them were keen advocates of day care; others were involved in regular, but casual child care exchanges with friends and neighbours. Of the 11 individuals who had been raised by their mother, 9 felt strongly that this was the best care available while 2 had no strong opinions either way.

What this data suggests is that there is a

correspondence between people's childhood experiences and their attitudes towards their own children. While this is individually learned as part of a particular family cycle, there are certain patterns common to certain types of families. In this instance, a dominant pattern appears to be based on class. This is another area which warrants further investigation.

### Conclusions

The case study that I have presented here is very small and the class-based comparisons I have drawn may not be typical for Canada as a whole. What the study does show is that while many women may experience a similar process, the content of their experience may well be very different depending on their class background and current class position.

While it is important to understand the general underlying patterns of women's work and to untangle the implications of the sexual division of labour for women as a whole, it is also important to understand how women, as a group are stratified. While structurally all married women constitute a reserve army of labour, we need to conduct further, indepth studies to determine how this is experienced by different types of women.

### NOTES

1. Pat Armstrong and Pat Connelly both read a draft of this paper and gave me very useful comments and criticisms. I really appreciate their help.
2. Pat Connelly *Last Hired, First Fired*; Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong *The Double Ghetto*.
3. The research on which this paper is based was carried out in Flin Flon, Manitoba. An extended analysis of the working class material is presented in Meg Luxton *More Than a Labour of Love*. I have just begun to analyse the middle class data and this is the first time I have presented it.
4. I would like to thank Pat Armstrong for suggesting this line of research.
5. Clair Vickery "Women's Economic Contribution to the Family" has made an initial attempt of this sort using USA data.

6. See Luxton 1980 chapter 6 for a discussion of time budget studies.
7. The exception to this pattern occurred in one household where the couple were profoundly influenced by feminism. In this case, the husband did almost half of the domestic labour and the woman estimated that she did about six hours a week more than the working class women but about 4.9 hours less than other middle class women. In this household, both the wife and husband believed that when the woman worked outside the home, the domestic labour should be shared by both of them. The husband argued that such a system was only "fair."
8. Ronnie Leah "Political Economy of Women's Labour Force Participation and Day Care Cutbacks in Ontario" shows the relationship between government policies on day care and the need for female labour.

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