

# The Female Reserve Army of Labour

## The Argument and Some Pertinent Findings<sup>1</sup>

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Even before the evidence is examined, the term "reserve army of labour" seems an apt description of married women as workers. Women typically do work no one else wants to do, at wages no one else will accept (or without wages in the case of housework), and can be mobilized in times of war to take up jobs men normally do. Moreover, though we know differently, the work women do in the household—assuming the responsibility for meeting the family's daily subsistence needs—seems secondary to paid work. Perhaps the easy fit to married women of this commonsense meaning of "reserve army" has led to its quick acceptance and rare criticism.

Whether or not even a strict interpretation of "reserve army of labour" provides the best descriptive summary of women's position in the work force is relatively unimportant, however. Instead, the attempt to understand how the reserve army as Marx conceived it applies to women is useful primarily because of the questions it forces us to address.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there are two key questions raised by the argument that married women constitute a

reserve labour pool. First is the question of the forces moving women who are primarily domestic labourers to seek wage work outside the home, and more broadly the nature of the relationship between the domestic work sphere and the sphere of commodity production. Second is the issue of the effects, especially in terms of wage levels, of women's presence in the labour market. Consequently, instead of adding one more argument to the debate about whether women are or are not a reserve army of labour, in whatever sense that is meant, I shall review the arguments that have been made to date so as to highlight some crucial questions.<sup>3</sup> I shall then present findings which address some of these questions.

### **The Arguments**

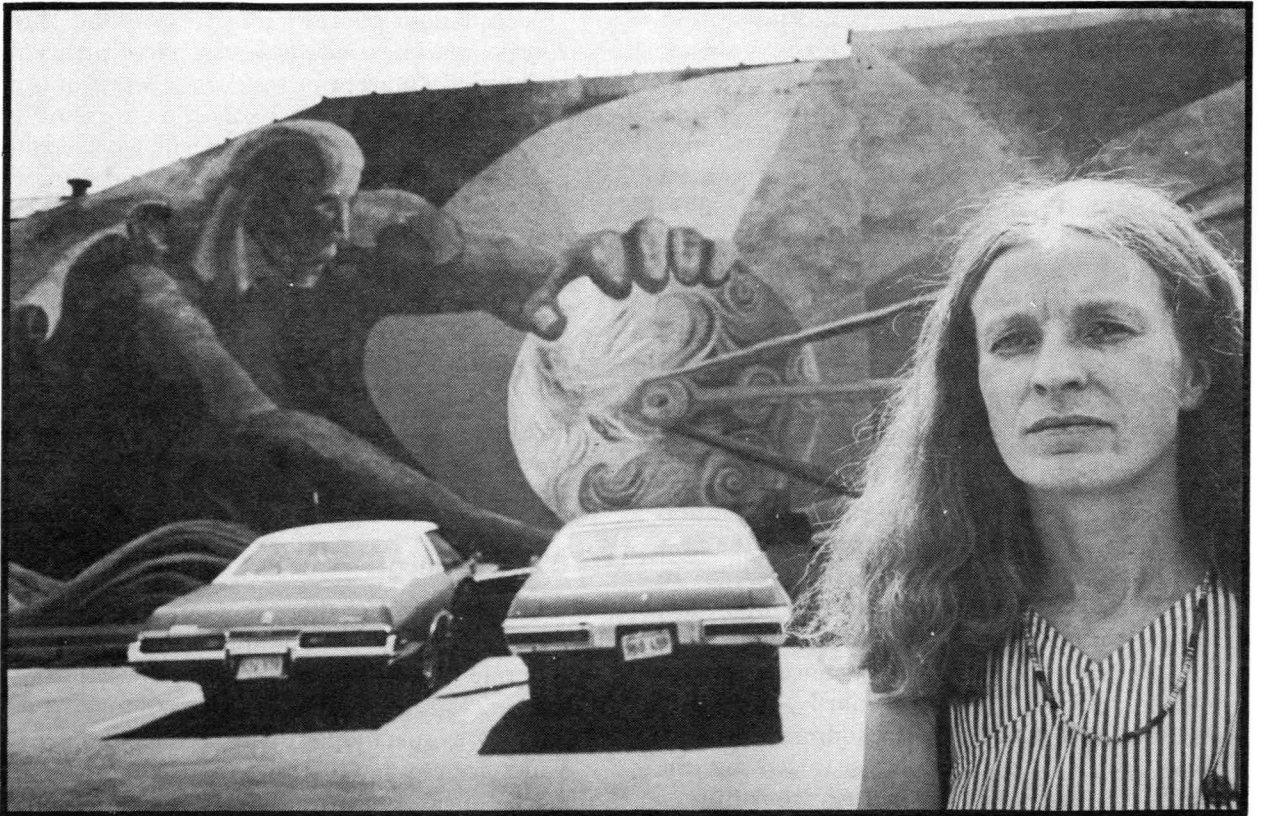
In arguing that there is a general tendency for the process of capitalist accumulation to generate a relative surplus population of workers (an "industrial reserve army"), Marx (1954) was specifying the mechanism by which wages are regulated. Just as competition in the marketplace forces the prices of commodities

towards their value (determined by the labour time socially necessary for their production), so too the competition of the labour market regulates wages. The crux of Marx's argument was that the supply of unemployed or underemployed labour on the market was a product not of demographic changes, as Malthus had claimed, but of the workings of the economy itself. That excess supply of labour largely determines the amount of competition in the labour market.

Marx argued that transformations in the economy created redundant populations of labour. For example, productivity increases due to the mechanization typical in times of economic expansion enlarge the supply of

unemployed workers. This increased supply checks a rising demand for labour, and prevents wage raises from encroaching upon profits.

Marx pointed out that in general the size of the unemployed labour force varies cyclically with the ups and downs of the economy, as jobs increase less rapidly or even decrease in downswings. It also varies with increases in productivity in different (backward) parts of the economy, which make some of the work force in those sectors redundant. The relative size of the unemployed and underemployed segments of the labour force, along with the demand for labour, are largely what regulate wages.<sup>4</sup>



Recent discussions of married women as a reserve army of labour have typically taken two directions. One argument is that housewives constitute a labour reserve for "women's jobs." That is, married women form a special reserve army whose inactivity is taken up with (domestic) work but whose existence exerts pressure on women's wages. The more uncertain argument is that women, whether housewives or not, whether involved in the wage labour force or not, may constitute reserves for the whole labour market. According to this position, women's varying levels of involvement in wage work exert different degrees of pressure on wages in different spheres of the economy—even those largely employing men.

In the first instance, it is assumed that because of the sexual segregation of the labour force the competitive pressure that results from the low wages paid women is restricted to "women's jobs." In the second case, sex segregation is not considered sufficient to preclude a general competitive pressure due to women's presence in the labour market. In fact, the occupational segregation of the sexes is a key reason why women consistently receive lower wages than men do (Sanborn, 1964; McNulty, 1967; McLaughlin, 1978; Oppenheimer, 1970; Connelly, 1978; Armstrong and Armstrong, 1978). And because of their low wages, there are many instances through history of women displacing men (especially in unskilled occupations), so that over short periods of time occupations that were "men's" become "women's" (Pinchbeck, 1930; Butler, 1969—originally 1911). In this process, sexual segregation is maintained. Perhaps more significantly, industrial history is also full of examples of women in job categories *different* from men threatening the jobs held by men. The most obvious example, although a bit extreme, is female machine operatives doing

work traditionally done by male craftsmen—but working in the same factory as the men (Butler, 1969).

Finally, the process of sexual segregation has often accompanied the process of the division of labour. As occupations have been broken down into more specialized jobs, women's traditionally low wages no doubt have enabled the payment of minimal wages to both men and women in unskilled jobs (Holcombe, 1973). Of course, the end result of the division of labour is a general lowering of the wages of all workers in the industry or occupational category involved, although it is not clear whether this specialization of jobs in fact maintains the relatively high wages of some men in some all-male jobs.

Despite historical evidence that sex segregation has not prohibited a general lowering of wages due to the presence of low-paid female labour, the argument that women today represent a reserve army of labour vis-à-vis the entire labour market seldom has been made. The writers who have considered it have dismissed it after only very crude empirical tests. Let us consider both arguments about "the female reserve army of labour" in turn.

Harry Braverman (1974), in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, asserts that the growing presence of married women in the wage labour force—available because of the progressive redundancy of much domestic labour and attracted by the expansion of service sectors of the economy—represents the recent creation of a reserve labour pool for "women's jobs." That is, women released from full-time domestic labour, and seeking wage work, represent to Braverman a redundant labour force similar to that of unemployed men. Extending Braverman's logic, Patricia Connelly (1978) argues that all married women (or housewives)—even those not directly seeking

jobs—constitute a labour reserve “institutionalized” in the household.

First, Connelly argues, married women were institutionalized as a labour force outside the chief sphere of production as a result of the historic removal of most subsistence production from the household. Consequently, they represented a potential labour pool for commodity production. They became an actual labour pool as the household was mechanized.

Second, married women embody *cheap* labour power because they are socially defined to be housewives, or unpaid workers dependent on a man’s wage. Their housework earns them no market equivalent because it involves no commodity production. When they do wage work, those wages need only support one individual since men are now assumed to be responsible for family subsistence.

Third, the female labour reserve constitutes *competition* for *women’s* jobs: women’s low wages result from pressures by housewives for a relatively limited number of jobs. However, Connelly concludes, the segregation of women in the wage labour force indicates that there are two distinct labour markets and that women probably do not compete with men for jobs. Connelly suggests that women may exert an indirect competitive threat on men’s jobs, and pressure on their wages, since jobs can be relabelled “women’s.”

Connelly’s argument raises a host of questions. No doubt, it was meant to. One of the obvious questions it gives rise to—though her argument seems to rule it out—is whether the presence of cheap female labour power in the labour market exerts competitive pressure on men’s (as well as women’s) wages. Before addressing this question, however, let me discuss the work from which it follows most directly,

namely discussions of the notion that women (and not just married women) constitute a special reserve army vis-à-vis the entire labour market.

Clearly, during the two World Wars, women in Canada were mobilized as a reserve army of labour. Especially during World War II, the state provided a range of incentives and support programs to lure married women into wage jobs and, simultaneously, to protect the absent males from losing their jobs or suffering wage reductions (Department of Labour, 1942, Connelly, 1978). At the end of the labour shortage, one could argue, the state made attempts to entice women to return to the domestic sphere (Schulz, 1978).

Veronica Beechey (1977) offers a contradictory explanation of “why in theory married women might have become a preferred source of the industrial reserve army.” First, she argues that when capital employs two family members rather than one the costs of family subsistence are spread over two workers’ wages. At the same time, capital obtains the labour of two workers rather than one. Marx (1954, 373) pointed out this consequence of the employment of married women. However, it is unacceptable to posit this *effect* of women’s employment as one of its *causes* (Anthias, 1980). Moreover, it is problematic to assume capital to be a unified and plotting force—even though it must, as a class, pay the costs of working-class subsistence. “Capital,” as an actor, in fact consists of many individual capitalists, all of whom must act in their own interests.

Second, Beechey argues that female labour power has a value lower than that of male labour power, and thus by definition would warrant a lower wage. Additionally, according to Beechey, female labour power can be more

easily paid a wage below its (relatively low) value. This is so, Beechey argues, because married women “are dependent upon the family for part of the costs of producing and reproducing their labour power,” that is upon the man’s wage. Here her assumption about capital seems to be directly opposite her first: she assumes that capital consists of isolated capitalists, some of whom could benefit in their hiring of women by virtue of the fact that others are paying men wages that will cover many of the costs of family living. If not that assumption, then she is implying that the household has some means of support of unemployed workers—means of support independent of wages. Instead, of course, the capitalist class must pay wages that will cover family subsistence, either to one or to more members of the household.<sup>5</sup>

Altogether, only one part of Beechey’s argument or the other can be correct. Furthermore, as Floya Anthias (1980) points out, both of Beechey’s reasons why capital might desire to hire women (the fact that married women are cheap wage workers and the advantage of getting two workers from each household) argue that women would always be preferable to men, as an *activated* labour force, and not as a labour *reserve*.

The significance of Beechey’s article derives from the crucial questions she raises, and the historical analyses she calls for. For example, she describes an industry in which women were used as agents in the process of the division of labour and downgrading of many jobs. Unfortunately, it appears that research on this practice has not been undertaken since Beechey’s article. Beechey also calls for examinations of the role of the state in constituting and reconstituting the reserve army. Again, this issue has only begun to be addressed.

Besides Anthias, Ruth Milkman (1976) and

Al Szymanski (1976) criticize the notion that women constitute a reserve army of labour. Both researchers judge the worthiness of the concept according to its most extreme version, that is the argument that women are a reserve army for the male part of the labour market as well as the female part. At the same time, they limit the notion of reserve army to only one of the three forms outlined by Marx (i.e., the “floating,” the “latent,” and the “stagnant”).

Milkman and Szymanski both confine the concept of reserve army to that group of unemployed workers that Marx labelled “floating,” namely those workers moving in and out of work with the fluctuations of the economic cycle. They therefore assume that greater fluctuation in the rates of women’s involvement in wage work than men’s involvement are essential before women can be termed a reserve army. Additionally, following from the assumption that if the reserve army concept applies to women it must indicate that women are a reserve for all jobs and not just those predominantly female, Milkman seeks evidence of one sex replacing the other in specific jobs.<sup>6</sup>

Milkman’s empirical test is confined to an investigation of static data—although she implies information on changes over time. She finds that women’s unemployment rates were lower than men’s during the Depression, at least in 1930 and 1940 in the United States. For Milkman, these rates are evidence that women were not released from the labour force during this downturn in the economy. Furthermore, according to Milkman, there is no evidence that during the Depression men took over any jobs previously held by women. Milkman therefore rejects the validity of the label “reserve army” for women. She does so despite the tremendous problems (which she acknowledges) involved in using unemploy-

ment rates for women and despite some evidence (which she also mentions) that some women's jobs were in fact more "volatile" during the 1930s than men's jobs!

More to the point than Milkman, Al Szymanski looks at the fluctuations in unemployment rates between 1947 and 1974 in the United States. Unfortunately, his statistical analyses are highly problematic.<sup>7</sup> He concludes that women's labour force involvement has fluctuated no more than men's, and that women have not been released from wage work in economic downturns. Assuming that the notion of reserve army implies marginality, Szymanski concludes that women are not marginal to the labour market; they are central to it. (As central, we might add, as the reserve army of labour is to the labour market.)

Milkman concludes her discussion of women's work during the Depression by noting that what is significant is the fact that women "took up the slack" in the economy by intensifying their labour in the home. Milkman then faults the reserve army concept for ignoring women's domestic labour. In response, we might ask why a concept relating to an aspect of women's role in the labour market should highlight their role in the home. Milkman's criticism arises from a misguided attempt to use the concept to describe and summarize the essence and totality of women's position as workers. I suggest that such a theoretical concept, and the general law it arises from, is useful descriptively to the extent that it captures something important about women's position. It would, however, be foolhardy to substitute complacency with this descriptive label for analyses of women's domestic labour, their involvement in wage work and the relation between the two. For example, use of the reserve army concept raises the question whether the forces that move housewives to take on wage work assume

or could assume a periodic character synchronized with the economic cycle, and whether these forces are directly related to the economy's ups and downs. Before research can address this question (which is outside our purpose here), the forces moving housewives into wage work must be understood.

### Some Findings

In many households, the man's low wage is the mechanism prompting the housewife to take on wage work. Armstrong and Armstrong (1978) have shown that the *relative* wages of part of the population of individual wage earners have fallen since World War II. Since there has not been a similar increase in the inequality of the income distribution for families, Armstrong and Armstrong conclude that married women's increasing entry into the wage labour force has been necessary to maintain the relative income position of families. But has there been also an absolute income need for married women to earn a wage?

There is strong evidence that a sizeable proportion of Canadian households requires a second wage. When estimates of the earnings of male household heads, for 1951, 1961, and 1971 were compared with estimates of the "poverty-level" income standard for households of different sizes in those years, we see that at least 25 percent of Canadian households with three people did not receive income sufficient for subsistence from the man's earnings alone. The comparisons are necessarily very crude. Nevertheless, it is clear that the payment of low wages to part of the male labour force results in the creation of a pool of female labour.

The reasons why so many married women from higher-income households are in the labour force are less easy to uncover.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, however, the behaviour of a female reserve

TABLE 1

**Incomes Necessary to Achieve the Senate  
"Poverty Line" Level of 1969: 1951,  
1961, 1971**

FAMILY SIZE	YEARS			
	BASE YEAR	1951	1961	1971
	1969			
1	\$2,140	\$1,503	\$1,707	\$2,278
2	\$3,570	\$2,504	\$2,846	\$3,796
3	\$4,290	\$3,005	\$3,415	\$4,556
4	\$5,000	\$3,506	\$3,984	\$5,315
5	\$5,710	\$4,007	\$4,553	\$6,074
6	\$6,430	\$4,508	\$5,122	\$6,833

source: Johnson (1974:21).

(e.g., mechanisms mobilizing it) should be different in different income groups. Therefore, instead of speaking of *the* female reserve army, in the future we must consider income and even class divisions within the female population and explain how these affect the nature of women's involvement in wage labour.

Housewives in lower-income households embody a labour reserve that should respond to changes in the demand for female labour. Investigations into the responsiveness of female labour to the economic cycle should, at minimum, separate that labour pool into lower-income and higher-income groups.<sup>9</sup>

It is unfortunate that the fluidity of the supply of female labour always must be conflated with the volatility of women's jobs (i.e., the supply of jobs, or demand for labour), given the way labour force figures are gathered. In fact, the question whether women's jobs them-

TABLE 2

**Earnings of Male Heads of Households: 1941, 1951, 1961, and 1971**

YEAR	HOUSEHOLDS AT THE FIRST QUARTILE OF THE POPULATION	HOUSEHOLDS AT THE SECOND QUARTILE OF THE POPULATION	HOUSEHOLDS AT THE THIRD QUARTILE OF THE POPULATION
1941	\$680	\$1200	\$1625
1951	\$1688	\$2367	\$2962
1961	\$2726	\$4116	\$7131
1971	\$4349	\$7039	\$9723

source: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1943. **1941 Census**, vol. V, pp. 178, 544; Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1953. **1951 Census**, vol. III, pp. 128-1, 136-1; Statistics Canada, 1963, **1961 Census**, vol. IV, part 1, pp. 2-1, 2-2; Statistics Canada, 1975. **1971 Census**, vol. II, part 2, p. 104-1.

selves fluctuate with the economic cycle is a different question from that of a responsive female labour supply. It is indeed a legitimate question, one directly raised by the concept of a reserve army of labour, and one scarcely addressed to date.

Most interesting about the notion that women might be a special reserve army, is the implication that their participation in wage labour exerts competitive pressure on men's wages. Studies of the labour market in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicate that women were central to the process of the detailed division of labour and deskilling of work, which lowered men's wages in many industries (Pinchbeck, 1930; Holcombe, 1973; Abbott, 1910). That male trade unionists typically responded to the competitive threat posed by women workers either by attempting to exclude them from the industry in question, or by segregating them occupationally is thus understandable, though terribly shortsighted and ultimately ineffective (Foner, 1979).

In Canada, Armstrong and Armstrong (1978) show that in 1971 there is a consistent negative relationship between the proportions of female workers and the average wages in eight major industrial categories. They note further that between 1961 and 1971, for a few largely female occupations, women's involvement increased in low-paid occupations (e.g., waiters, janitors) and men's increased in the higher-paid occupations (e.g., teaching). They would probably argue, then, that competition is not as influential over time as a simple intensification of sex segregation: negative relationships between percentage female and wages result from women's tendency to end up in lower-paid jobs.

Several American studies have statistically investigated the possibility that women work-

ers exert pressure on men's wages. Statistical evidence of a negative relationship between the proportion female and men's wages in different occupations is available (Hodge and Hodge, 1965). Moreover, an attempt to separate statistically the consequences of competition from those of segregation over time, that is to determine whether women's presence in certain occupations resulted in a lowering of men's wages or rather that women were allowed into only those occupations with low wages, indicated that sex *competition* was at work in most occupational categories (Snyder and Hudis, 1976).

Examination of the Canadian labour force shows that it is dramatically sex-segregated. In 1971, when 35 percent of the wage work force was female, 30 percent of women wage earners were in occupations at least 90 percent female, while 77 percent of women wage earners were in occupations at least half female. In the same year, 56 percent of male wage earners were in occupations at least 90 percent male, and 88 percent were in occupations at least half male (Fox and Fox, 1981).

As is commonly known, women earn much less than their male counterparts. The median ratio of male to female wages was 1.83 for the 389 1971 Census occupations containing both men and women (Fox and Fox, 1981). It is this wage differential which lends credibility to the reserve army hypothesis that female labour force participation might systematically exert downward pressure on men's wages.

In fact, research using 1971 Census data reveals that in the 14 broad occupational sectors that have significant variation in sex composition, examining detailed occupations and controlling statistically for education, men's wages decrease significantly with increases in the percent of the workers who are female (see Fox and Fox, 1981 for the description of the



analysis). As well, the effect of increases in the female portion of the labour force on women's wages is negative and significant.

FIGURE 1

Impact of Increment on Percent Female on Relative Wages, by Sex, Controlling for Sector and Education

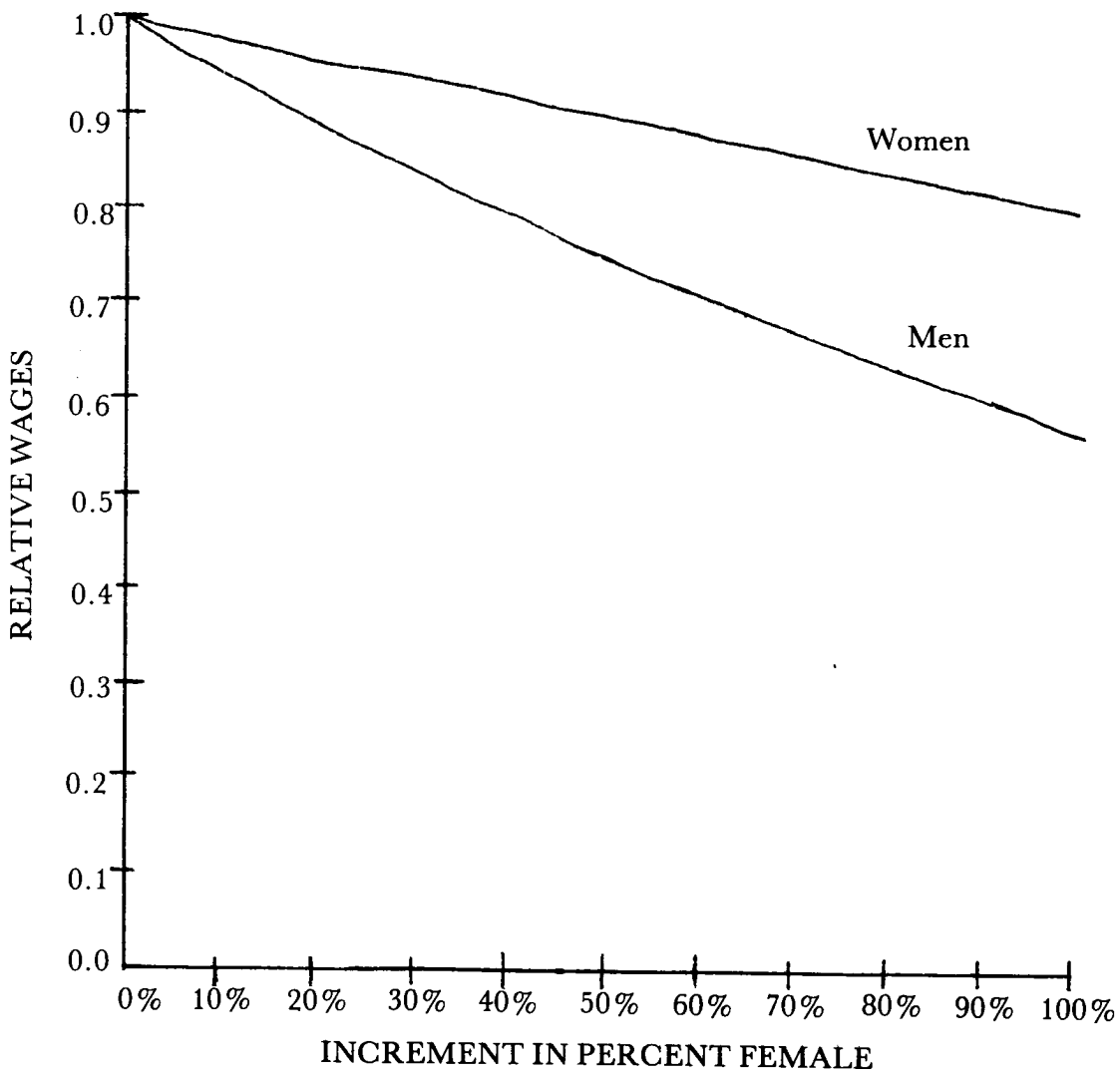


Figure 1 summarizes these results. Suppose, for example, that we compare two occupations in the same sector that have identical levels of average education but that differ in percent female; imagine that the first occupation contains 10 percent women, and that the second contains 90 percent women. Since the occupations differ by 80 percent in sex composition, according to Figure 1 expected men's wages in the second occupation are about two-thirds of those of men in the first occupation, while women's expected wages in the second occupation are about ten percent less than those of women in the first. In interpreting these results, remember that although the relative decrease is greater for men than for women, the absolute level of women's wages is much lower on average than that of men's.

While analysis of changes over time is essential before we can conclude that competition is at work here—and not simply segregation, whereby women enter occupations with already low wages for men and women—the results are suggestive. They imply that the demand that women receive equal pay for work of equal value is a political imperative for men as well as for women. Because women workers' presence in the labour market appears to generally lower workers' wages, it is the capitalist class that is the primary beneficiary of sex competition in the marketplace. While it is clearly women workers who suffer most because of their low wages, all male workers in occupations not exclusively male seem to take a loss in pay because women are discriminated against in wages. More importantly, from the vantage point of total family income, it must be remembered that many married women contribute essential income to the household. As we saw above, much of the influx of married women into the labour force since World War II was due to an absolute need on the part of many households

for a second wage. For the rest of the population, housewives have become decreasingly able over time to contribute to family subsistence by any other work (e.g., home production).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, men—even those in a privileged position because they work in an exclusively male occupation—suffer when their wives earn less than they might.

Sex segregation of the labour force is one of the key immediate causes of women's low wages, in that many women compete with each other for relatively few jobs. It is, then, in the interests of male workers as well as women to struggle for a breakdown of barriers on women's entry into many occupations. Indeed, a strategy on the part of male unionists to protect their positions by promoting or even allowing sex labelling of jobs cannot work in the long run, since workers do not have ultimate control over their work. Thus, for a number of reasons men and women workers must unite to protect their common interests.

### Conclusion

Applying the "reserve army of labour" concept to women highlights an important finding: women's presence in the labour market appears to exert downward pressure on wages, men's as well as women's. That the capitalist class should benefit so clearly from sexism is disheartening. What we must determine next is how, in detail, this competition between the sexes in the labour market and in the workplace occurs.

### NOTES

1. I thank John Fox, Pat Connelly and an anonymous reviewer. Any weaknesses that remain in the paper are my responsibility and not theirs.
2. The distinction I am making here, between description and implication (or suggested hypotheses), is largely one of a difference in emphasis rather than a difference in kind. On the one hand, the goal seems to be articulating the key features of women's work role which mirror the defining

elements of Marx's "industrial reserve army." Validation of the concept itself appears to be primary. On the other hand, the concept of reserve army and the model that gives rise to it are used to formulate questions with the aim of understanding women's position.

3. One very fine article, which makes a convincing argument that the reserve army concept makes sense of women's involvement in wage work, and supports the argument with empirical evidence, is Simeral's (1978). The fact that her work is not reviewed below should not be taken as a judgment of its insignificance. Surprisingly, Simeral does not examine the question of women's competitive pressure on wages—the key issue involved in assessing the applicability for women of the reserve army concept.
4. As well, of course, historical factors such as custom, and institutional factors such as the strength of unions relative to employers affect wages.
5. One could, however, argue that the state, with revenue not only from the capitalist class but also from the working class, is a source of support of unemployed individuals which is independent of the wage of other family members.
6. The logic behind this implication is not clear. Why must women replace men? Would it not be sufficient if women entered jobs men held when there was a dearth of men, and were the first to be fired from these jobs?
7. The Feminist Theory Collective (1976) wrote a weak criticism of Szymanski, but one which pointed out the glaring weaknesses of his statistical manipulations.
8. This is the topic of a longer discussion in Fox (1980b).
9. Bowen and Finegan (1969) found the female labour supply in the United States to be more market-sensitive than the male labour supply.
10. For a longer discussion, see Fox (1980a, 1980b).

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