

Working Women and the State: the Case of Canada, 1889-1945*

Veronica Strong-Boag
Simon Fraser University

Until recently women have figured only marginally at best in historians' accounts of Canada. In particular their participation in waged employment has gone almost without comment. In as much as any tradition with respect to the experience of female wage-earners can be ascertained it is generally one of two types which for the purposes of this paper will be labelled 'liberal-progressive' and 'leftist.' The first, following the lead of early twentieth century reformers, distinguishes between professional employments such as teaching which could be viewed as an index of a society's advance toward greater democracy, and industrial jobs such as those in textile production which were condemned as especially exploitative and damaging to female physiology. Such admiration or condemnation, often implicit rather than explicit, is also rarely of any length, subordinated as accounts are to discussions of political and macro-economic issues in which women rarely figure. These accounts give more prominence to the vote than

to any question related to employment.¹ More left-wing commentators devote similarly little space to women's waged labour. Not surprisingly, they not only share the criticism of industrial work for females but integrate this perspective into a wider analysis of class relationships in a capitalist society. That critique does not, however, include any significant commentary on the unique aspects of female labour force participation.² Both 'traditions,' if they may be so called given the rarity of their appearance, implicitly assume women's labour to be pre-eminently and, for the most part, preferably located on a non-waged basis in the single family home. As a result even the superficial acknowledgement of the role played by female waged workers in Canada's history has been characterized by extreme ambivalence.

Such ambivalence also colours the liberal-progressive and left wing analysis of the role of the state with respect to female wage-earners. The liberal-progressives generally accept the expansion of state power as a positive good in advancing the cause of human equality. In this analysis the state emerges as a somewhat neutral, indeed inherently beneficent, authority whose place it is to intercede for the common

*This paper was originally presented to the "Women and the Canadian Labour Force Workshop," University of British Columbia, January, 1981.

good between conflicting social forces. The assumption, again usually only implicit, is that the state ought to intervene to defend women as the weaker sex from the full impact of marketplace pressures. When intervention is late or non-existent, governments are condemned. The more radical perspective of the left is inevitably rather less optimistic regarding the existence of impartial state power. It is after all the expression of a dominant class. At the same time there is some agreement—essentially paternalistic in nature—with the liberal-progressives that governments ought to have protected female wage earners in particular from the most brutal expression of industrial relations. Finally, however, both interpretations flounder for want of real interest or investigation on the part of historians of any persuasion. The result for the student of Canadian history is a necessarily vague, indeed indefinable, sense (1) that work for women is unusual; (2) that it is in most cases a bad thing; and (3) that the state has in large measure been women's real or potential ally in their struggle for greater economic equality.

With few exceptions these liberal-progressive and left wing approaches constitute the written history of Canada's female workers. Relatively recently, however, a new generation of historians, inspired frequently by feminist sympathies and the perspective of the new social history with its concern to recover the experience of the largely anonymous and forgotten majority of citizens, has turned to a much more detailed exploration of female work patterns.³ These researchers are now covering the breadth of Canadian history from the period of New France to the present. The returns from their work are as yet fragmentary and many specific topics remain unexplored. Nevertheless, the first reports differ from the more familiar approaches in a number of critical ways. Most significantly, women's ex-

perience is no longer marginal to the account. It is now of central importance. Furthermore, the liberal-progressive view is much less marked, although it remains a strong undercurrent in much work. Generally speaking, today's researchers are much less optimistic in their assessment of the entry of women into professions. Teaching and medicine are good examples of so-called 'advances' for women which are now being reconsidered.⁴ Poorer salaries, conditions and mobility relative to male candidates are all common-place observations. This shifting assessment complements rising scepticism about the significance of women's enfranchisement.⁵ In contrast, recent accounts tend to confirm earlier indictments of non-professional waged labour, especially that in industrial employments.⁶ Even here, however, there is change in emphasis with the marked attention to such workers as active, if finally relatively powerless, players rather than merely passive prisoners of marketplace forces. In addition, in a majority of investigations, women's predicament is more and more appraised as a function, in part at least, of class relationships in a capitalist economy. More than before, however, the shortcoming of the union movement and the paternalistic orientation of much working-class culture are acknowledged as major obstacles to equality.

Now, too, awareness of the limitations of state action is much more evident. Governments' role in the maintenance of female inferiority in the labour market—indeed within state bureaucracies themselves—is being convincingly demonstrated. No longer are the forces which hold working women in thrall anonymous. The precise nature by which the state affirms female inferiority through recruitment into, education for and protection from the workplace is at long last coming into clear focus.⁷ Unfortunately, not all ambivalence has disappeared in the new accounts. There are



10% CANADIAN CONTENT (silkscreen) 22 1/4" x 30 1/4" 1974, Sarah Gersovitz

still traces of the assumption that if state authorities had been more active women's situation in the workforce would have improved. This faith conflicts with convincing evidence regarding the dedication of federal and provincial governments to the preservation of the nuclear family—a dedication which over-rode all concern for women themselves.

As a provocative article by Mary McIntosh has pointed out at length the capitalist state's support for "a specific form of household: the family household dependent largely upon a male wage and upon female domestic servicing"⁸ is integral to women's subordination to men both within and without the marketplace. Recent studies in Canadian women's history suggest that state policies with respect to labour recruitment, education and protective legislation, particularly in the period from 1889 to 1945, specifically illustrate McIntosh's argument. In each case governments subordinated women's independence to a view of the family in which the male wage-earner was dominant and the female supplied the domestic labour which was critical to the preservation and continuation of the private household as a producer of new recruits for the capitalist economy.

The efforts of successive Canadian governments—under the influence of middle-class householders and unable or unwilling to imagine a more fitting and safer setting for female energies—to recruit women from home and abroad into domestic service constitute the most persistent example of the subordination of specifically individual interest to the requirements of the nuclear family.⁹ While governments were customarily slow in taking responsibility for allocating job seekers to most employments, such reticence was much less evident with regard to the female servant class.

As Susannah Moodie early in the nineteenth century and a host of potential mistresses after her made abundantly clear, middle-class aspirations were much better maintained on the sturdy foundation of cheap female assistance in the home.¹⁰ Later on, various administrations, eager to promote the family farm, especially on the Canadian prairies at the beginning of the twentieth century, found still further justification for an extensive network of domestic recruitment agents in Great Britain and Europe. Support for the immigration of child paupers was justified in a similar way.¹¹ The attraction for these job seekers was the possibility, frequently illusionary, of higher wages and better work prospects in the New World. Desertion of menial and subordinate employments and the search for others began soon after arrival. For many women the ultimate goal was a good and prosperous husband with a common commitment to improving the family's lot. This ambition was generally viewed as acceptable, indeed desirable, by government planners eager to increase the population, if less so by middle-class mistresses jealous of their staff. Advocates of this type of immigrant frequently argued that servants would learn through work in respectable homes the skills and information they could later employ, presumably on a reduced scale, in the service of their own families. The operating premise was of a constant pool of young female job seekers who would replenish losses due to marriage. Until the time of their own marriage it was fondly hoped that girls would find the moral and physical protection in private homes that it was believed was largely absent in other kinds of industrial and commercial employments. Incidentally of course women's special responsibility for domestic maintenance would be yet again affirmed.

Another category of domestic workers was also directly encouraged by state intervention.

These were the so-called 'day workers' or charwomen, who were for the most part wives and mothers trying to juggle family responsibilities with waged labour outside the home often for a number of different customers. The Employment Service of Canada initiated in 1918 with federal-provincial cooperation, like many of its earlier municipal and private counterparts, effectively served this female clientele, many of whom were older women, as a domestic service placement agency. Such guidance suited middle-class householders who found domestic help in short supply but it helped undercut the trend to women's participation in a wider range of occupational categories which the First World War had in a minor way encouraged. Clearly the employment policies of the ESC answered the fears of those who wanted good jobs of every kind saved for Canada's veterans and the nation's homes preserved for patriarchal values.

State efforts to recruit wage-earning women were constrained similarly during the Great Depression. Fears of depriving the main bread-winner of job opportunities or of giving some families the 'unfair' advantage of two wage-earners in 'good' jobs, together with a spectacular lack of imagination by thrifty planners, finally led to solutions aimed again at shunting 'excess' female workers into domestic service.¹² Work camps for single males and private homes for their female counterparts were ultimately designed to counter critical threats to the industrial capitalist system: undisciplined males and homeless females. Women were effectively coerced by necessity and state power into seeking protection within a family, albeit someone else's.

There Canada's female workers were expected to rest or rather labour, in varying degrees of discomfort, until a national crisis necessitated their transformation from a

reserve into an immediate army of labour. World War Two saw government planners make elaborate provision to draw previously 'redundant' females into new varieties of waged employment.¹³ Here state officials had to combat assumptions which they and their predecessors had previously fostered: in particular the idea that involvement in industrial, military and non-traditional tasks of all kinds posed a serious threat to respectable and attractive femininity. State agencies responded with a massive publicity campaign which celebrated the femininity and, in effect, morality of women serving their country as radar technicians, aircraft engineers, bomb assemblers and the like. More practically, a limited but significant effort was made to establish day care facilities for the workers' young children. The needs of a country at war were cited as justification for this radical shift in state policy. But even before the Second World War had ended state bureaucrats were eagerly planning to shift women's eyes again from the paywicket to the home fires which must be properly laid for Canada's male veterans of battle, field and factory. A careful policy of disincentives such as closure of state day care facilities relentlessly returned women to the home. The urgency of state discouragement in 1944-45 was fueled by fears of a postwar recession modelled on that which followed the First World War. Talk of women's right to a wider variety of well-paying jobs vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. The fact that civil servants suffered along side employees of private enterprise indicates how very far from being an equal opportunity employer the Canadian state was.

State involvement in education is another area where systematic discrimination in favour of the female domestic worker, both waged and unwaged, occurred. In the first place the subtle and not-so-subtle directives of school texts operated to reduce every schoolgirl's horizons:

ideal men were heroic, women maternal. Should a female student reject such disincentives she soon encountered programmes financed by public money which routinely discriminated against her candidature for so-called male employment reserves. The reluctant admission of girls in nineteenth century Canada to the Latin classes which until very recently were a prerequisite for a professional career was typical.¹⁴ So also was the establishment for boys but not for girls of government sponsored apprenticeship programmes after the First World War.

The most blatant example of discrimination in education now being detailed by historians was the introduction of separate programmes in domestic science for girls and manual training for boys by the end of the nineteenth century. Lessons in cooking, laundry, sewing and childcare spent scarce education dollars while they directed girls' energies to a very specific and finally subordinate place in the national as well as the domestic economy.¹⁵ The fact that financing for household economics from the elementary through to the university level was hailed and in some quarters decried as a progressive, indeed feminist, achievement suggests how deeply ingrained inequality in education for boys and girls was.

The other major innovation for girl students reflected similar attitudes. The introduction of training in secretarial skills, culminating in a degree programme in secretarial science at the University of Western Ontario as early as 1926 was consciously and carefully designed to direct females to employment vacancies which were suitable and, not incidentally, usually subordinate to male bosses. The fact that this educational provision occurred at a time when white collar clerical employments, in banks for example, were rapidly declining in status and losing their traditional masculine makeup in

personnel, helped camouflage the continuation of female inferiority in employment. Clean hands (except those perhaps dirtied by a typewriter ribbon or figures in a ledger) did not, as those who supervised female civil servants could have told you, mean equal opportunity for advancement and challenge with male rivals.¹⁶

The history of public education in Canada regularly evidences discrimination against female students. Classes in domestic and secretarial science like formal or informal exclusion from alternate male-oriented programmes supplemented more explicit state recruitment of domestic servants while offering the prospect of better, if still female-typed, jobs to the more talented and more fortunate of job-hunters. The same function was served by government assistance to teaching and, more rarely, nursing programmes. No equivalent sums were available to expand the job opportunities available to girls. Their cheap labour was an essential component of the evolving state and corporate bureaucracies of the twentieth century. The result, as one 1920 study of Toronto school-leavers makes clear, left many girls with limited and, not surprisingly, more readily attainable employment ambitions than their brothers.¹⁷ Over the short term this brought economic reward but within a few short years boys with comparable years of schooling were reporting substantially better wages. Such easily discernible differences in reward no doubt helped female wage-earners look for domestic rather than occupational satisfaction and achievement.¹⁸

A third area in which state policy in Canada's past has been regularly characterized by support for the patriarchal nuclear family is protective legislation. The liberal-progressive and left traditions in Canadian historical writing were, as has been noted, generally

favourable to this form of intervention. Laws providing for limited hours and minimum wages for women, like those barring women from certain types of employment such as underground mining, were, however, for all the benefits they might have offered individual women, rooted in assumptions of female inferiority. The world of wage-earning was widely conceived as intrinsically foreign to females who remained unnatural interlopers for whom special, essentially humanitarian, provision had to be made. A fundamental refusal to come to terms with the legitimacy of working women's real and potential maternity coloured most legislation and fed bureaucratic preference for the compartmentalization of the worlds of work and family. Thus special legislative provision for women with its underlying assumption of female unsuitability for waged labour went hand in hand with widespread agreement that men should not allow familial concerns to intrude into the workplace, as for example with daycare.

Canada's first laws for working women excluded them from mining underground in Nova Scotia and in the 1880s established minimum wage and maximum hour restrictions in Quebec and Ontario in certain industrial occupations. Women, either as workers or as informed observers, had little influence in establishing these initiatives.¹⁹ Humanitarian sentiments joined with anxiety about the potential threat to female morality and maternity, concern about the bad press being received by private industry, fear that female competitors might drive down male wages and politicians' hopes to win the working class vote to prompt state action. There was little, if any, thought of confirming an industrial role for working women. As the 1889 Report of the Royal Commission on the Relations between Capital and Labour makes clear women's presence was acknowledged, reluc-

tantly, as an unfortunate corollary of industrial expansion.²⁰

The same kind of ambivalence characterized the expansion of protective legislation into the twentieth century. Any growth in women's economic roles was, except in instances of national emergency, such as war, a development which won little enthusiasm. Prominent too was the worry lest 'excessive' state action make the labour market too attractive for female recruits—as with the passage of laws relating to maternity leave and equal wages for equal work proposed by the League of Nations after the First World War. None of this often admirable legislation came into force in any Canadian province, although British Columbia in fact placed such legislation on its books. That government announced itself willing to implement these laws if other jurisdictions did likewise so as not to place the Pacific province at a competitive disadvantage. None did so.²¹

Labour legislation regarding women was deficient in a number of ways at the point of origin. Domestic servants, farm labourers and bank employees (the latter under federal jurisdiction while protective laws were in the provincial realm) were routinely excluded from consideration. While bank workers, much to the pleasure of the Canadian Bankers' Association, were a special case, state intervention on the part of the first two groups was specifically avoided on all occasions because of its possible impact on the operations of the nuclear family and, especially in the case of farm labourers, because of the powerful farm lobby. Female white collar and professional workers were regularly excluded as were men in these areas, not only because of antagonistic lobbyists, but because their situation was not believed to be especially difficult and because the majority were assumed to have alternatives other than the workplace. Particularly in-

sidious was the notion of 'pin money' which tended to inform any discussion of female clerks, teachers and librarians. The fact that most female wage-earners depended, as often did their families, on their income for sustenance was routinely ignored. One typical result was either the exclusion or the demotion of married women civil servants after the First World War. As ever, women's problems, economic or otherwise, were not Ottawa's major concern.

The shortcomings of the 'protective' impulse itself were and are numerous but just as imperfect were the attempts at implementation. Factory inspectors across the country documented the near impossibility of enforcing legislation which seemed riddled with loopholes and for which they had inadequate amounts of time, money and staff to superintend.²² Working women had little cause to thank governments for assistance; indeed there is evidence that many had never even heard of what limited protection they were supposedly guaranteed.²³

The twentieth century legislation which was the most marked feminist achievement, other than the vote, was mothers' allowances.²⁴ While this was not labour legislation in the strict sense of the term, it was conceived as a way of influencing the labour market participation of a certain category of women: the mothers of dependent children whose husbands were dead and, in some cases, otherwise incapacitated from earning a regular income. State allowances were designed to enable these sole support mothers to stay home and care for their children. Without the maternal presence such disadvantaged families were believed to pose a substantial threat to social peace and morality. In fact, ironically enough, allowances were rarely sufficient to permit a woman's complete withdrawal from the paid workforce. Too many officials feared that generosity on their part would undermine

family self-sufficiency and motivation permanently. In effect, like the husband's wage in many families, allowances subsidized part-time labour. Thus even the wages of married women who lacked male support were tied to the notion of wage-earning that was supplemental not essential to family survival. Not surprisingly, many of these first clients of the welfare state were charwomen and domestic workers. The maturation of the children and the withdrawal of government aid left most applicants equipped to pursue only the most poorly paid and menial jobs in the economy as a means of supporting themselves. In this way state wages for mothers, while offering some immediate succour to the desperate, helped confirm women's over-riding responsibility for the survival of the domestic institution and offered very few long term benefits for the women themselves.

This brief review of state practices with respect to job recruitment, education and protective legislation indicates the close linkage that historians are beginning to document between notions of ideal family structures and state policies affecting female wage earners. In every case women's rights as individuals were sacrificed in order to preserve an idealized patriarchal family. Authorities were rarely reluctant to admit this bias; indeed many found it a matter of some pride. The survival of this type of domestic institution was critical to their conception of Canada. In this faith they were joined by a majority of the articulate public in Canada, including most feminists until at least 1945.²⁵ Unfortunately, these policies together with their implications have been largely ignored by modern commentators too often obsessed with the notion of an impartial state bureaucracy. In fact, a closer look at the state and wage earning women suggests that the former has worked very comfortably with other institutions in society in confining women to a narrow sphere of endeavour.

What are the policy implications of these conclusions? They are, I believe, quite straight-forward. First they suggest that fresh government initiatives should be scrutinized in much the same way as 'Greeks bearing gifts.' Secondly, we need to examine especially closely policies which seem to promise obvious immediate benefits, as with mothers' allowances, for their long term repercussions. Finally, these first investigations suggest that only a more precise understanding of the mechanisms by which women's inferior place in the workforce was and is secured can combat the modern successors of the policies described in this paper. Historians have much work to do.

NOTES

1. See, for example, P.B. Waite, *Canada 1874-1896* (Toronto and Montreal: 1971).
2. See, for example, Charles Upton, *The Trade Union Movement of Canada* (Montreal: 1967).
3. See, for example, Joan Sangster, "The 1907 Bell Telephone Strike: Organizing Working Women," *Labour/Le Travailleur* (henceforth LT), 3, 1978, pp. 109-30; Marie Lavigne and Jennifer Stoddart, "Les travailleuses Montréalaises entre les deux guerres," *LT*, 2, 1977, pp. 170-83; V. Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day: Canadian Working Women in the 1920s," *LT*, 4, 1979, pp. 131-64; and Michelle Lapointe, "Le syndicat catholique des allumetières de Hull, 1919-1924," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française (RHAF)*, 32 (4), mars 1979, pp. 603-28.
4. See A. Prentice, "The Feminization of Teaching," in *The Neglected Majority*, ed. S.M. Trofimenkoff and A. Prentice (Toronto: 1977) and V. Strong-Boag, "Canada's Women Doctors: Feminism Constrained," in *A Not Unreasonable Claim*, ed. L. Kealey (Toronto: 1980).
5. See, for example, Strong-Boag, "Canadian Feminism in the 1920's: The Case of Nellie L. McClung," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 12 (4), Summer 1977, pp. 58-68.
6. See, for example, Michelle Lapointe, "Le syndicat catholique des allumetières de Hull, 1919-1924."
7. For a recent bibliographic guide to this material see B. Light and V. Strong-Boag, *True Daughters of the North: Canadian Women's History: An Annotated Bibliography* (Toronto: 1980).
8. Mary McIntosh, "The State and the Oppression of Women," in *Feminism and Materialism*, ed. Annette Kulm and Ann Marie Wolpe (London: 1978), p. 255.
9. See, for example, W.B. Turner, "'80 Stout and Healthy Looking Girls," *Canada. An Historical Magazine*, 3 (2), December 1975, pp. 37-49; Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day"; Stoddart and Strong-Boag, "... And Things Were Going Wrong at Home," *Atlantis*, 1 (1) Fall 1975, pp. 38-44; G. Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920," in *Women at Work. Ontario 1850-1930* (Toronto: 1974); and Barbara Roberts, "Sex Politics and Religion: Controversies in Female Immigration Reform Work in Montreal, 1881-1919," *Atlantis* 6 (1), Autumn 1980, pp. 25-38.
10. S. Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush* (Toronto: 1962): passim; Stoddart and Strong-Boag, "... And Things Were Going Wrong at Home."
11. See Joy Parr, *Labouring Children* (London: 1980).
12. For a useful assessment of these discriminatory policies see Marjorie Cohen, "Women at Work in Canada during the Depression," Paper presented at the Blue Collar Workers Conference, University of Windsor, May, 1979.
13. See Ruth Roach Pierson, "Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Canadian Labour Force in World War II," in *The Neglected Majority*.
14. See Marion Royce, "Arguments Over the Education of Girls—Their Admission to Grammar Schools in this Province," *Ontario History*, 67, March 1975, pp. 1-13.
15. See Lucien Lemieux, "La fondation de l'école menagere St. Pascal, 1905-1909," *RHAF*, May 1972, pp. 552-57 and R. Stamp, "Teaching Girls Their 'God Given Place in Life: the Introduction of Home Economics in the Schools,'" *Atlantis*, 2 (2), Part I, Spring 1977, pp. 18-34.
16. See Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day."
17. E.A. Bott, "Studies in Industrial Psychology. II. Juvenile Employment in Relation to Public Schools and Industries in Toronto," *University of Toronto Studies, Psychological Series*, 1920.
18. For a provocative discussion regarding female attitudes to home and work see Patricia Branca, "A New Perspective on Women's Work: A Comparative Typology," *Journal of Social History*, 9 (2), Winter 1975, pp. 129-53.
19. See S.M. Trofimenkoff, "One Hundred and One Muffled Voices: Canada's Industrial Women in the 1880's," *Atlantis*, Fall 1977, pp. 66-82.
20. See the testimony in G. Kealey, ed., *Canada Investigates Industrialism* (Toronto: 1973).
21. See the *Labour Gazette* for the 1920s and 1930s for provincial efforts, or rather lack of such, in this regard. This remains the best source.
22. See T. Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty* (Toronto: 1974) and Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day."
23. See, for example, the comments of the female factory hand before the Royal Commission on Price Spreads in 1935 cited in Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day," p. 163.
24. Strong-Boag, "'Wages for Housework': Mothers' Allowances and the Beginnings of Social Security in Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Spring 1979.
25. See Strong-Boag, "Canadian Feminism in the 1920s," and W. Roberts, "'Rocking the Cradle for the World.: the New Woman and Maternal Feminism, Toronto, 1877-1914,'" in *A Not Unreasonable Claim*.