

Fallacies About Women In Paid Labour

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This paper addresses beliefs about the attitudes of women in paid labour. Specifically, it investigates three traditional assumptions about women: that they cannot be equally involved in both household/family and paid labour; that they have a secondary commitment to their paid labour as a result of their part-time, temporary or intermittent participation; that they derive their status from their husband's occupation.

As others have pointed out,⁴ until recently it was assumed that women had a secondary commitment to all roles other than their marriage role. Even if they worked for pay, a primary sense of identification which focused on their families necessarily excluded an intrinsic commitment to their role in the paid labour force. This secondary interest in their paid labour, it was argued, resulted from their temporary and part-time participation in that sphere. Although single women were viewed as departing somewhat from this stereotype, they still were not similar to men. Simpson and Simpson,⁵ Hall⁶ and Krause⁷ are but a few of the social scientists who tell us that these women will probably leave the paid labour force for marriage and/or child-bearing and most will not return. Mills⁸ even claims that it is only after the white collar girl "does not get her man" that love becomes secondary to her career.

Continuing interest in the area of sex roles has brought an increasing documentation of facts which question and debunk many accepted beliefs about women in our society. For example, in 1974, Labour Canada¹ reported that a substantial proportion of women in paid labour (43%) were self-supporting and that families headed by women disproportionately fell into the low income classification. Such research revealed the falsity of the assumption that women work outside the home only for "extras" and not for needed money. Similarly, Bennett and Loewe² and Hartman³ have exposed the inaccuracy of the myth that women in paid labour have higher rates of absenteeism than men.

Since women are only part-time members of the paid

labour force and do not have a primary commitment there, it was further assumed that women necessarily derived their status from their husbands' occupational status and not from their own. This assumption is vividly implemented in the stratification studies. As others have informed us⁹ these studies usually accord all members of the family the same general rank based on the occupation of the head of the household. Women working for pay who are single are classified according to their own occupation, but as soon as they are married they are classified according to their husband's occupation and their own is ignored.

These assumptions are being questioned by many today. Eichler,¹⁰ for example, argues that marriage versus paid work is a faulty dichotomy and Greenglass¹¹ argues that a woman can have a dual commitment to paid work and to family. Support for these arguments includes the fact that the increase in female participation in the paid labour force during the past few decades has been due primarily to an increase in the number of older and married women.¹² In addition, Guppy and Siltanen¹³ found that women employed in a particular occupation are accorded a higher status ranking by others than are the wives of husbands who are employed in that same occupation. These authors also report a correlation between a wife's class identification and her occupational position, after controlling for the husband's occupational position. In other words, there are both theoretical and empirical grounds for investigating the accuracy of traditional beliefs about women in paid labour.

Unlike other investigations, this study does not ask others what attitudes they hold towards or attribute to women in paid labour. Rather, it is concerned with the attitudes and beliefs of the women themselves. To ascertain this information, women themselves were questioned.

THE SAMPLE

This study is based on data collected in the summer

and fall of 1975, through extensive personal interviews with women working for pay in four occupational groups in the Metropolitan Toronto area. The total sample consisted of 174 women: 50 social workers, 47 newspaper reporters and editors, 42 fashion models and 35 privates and corporals in the Canadian Forces. These groups represent two high prestige occupations, one traditionally female and the other traditionally male, and two low prestige occupations, one traditionally female and the other traditionally male.¹⁴

The sample is not representative of all women working for pay. Since most women are not employed in high prestige occupations,¹⁵ it clearly over-represents women in the high prestige and high income occupations (median income for these women was \$13,000). Similarly, the sample under-represents the younger working woman. The highest proportion of these women fall into the 25 to 35 age group (44%) rather than the 20 to 24 age group (24%). Even the low prestige occupations are far from typical occupations. Fashion models represent the "feminine sell" in the extreme.¹⁶ Privates and corporals represent the opposite extreme, a male occupation often characterized as having a "cult of masculinity."¹⁷

Although the sample is distinctive and the results should be interpreted with caution, the findings are nevertheless relevant. The traditional assumptions about women in paid labour generally do not make exceptions for different groups of women. If, therefore, the attitudes of these women differ from the traditional assumptions, it would suggest that such assumptions are not applicable to all women and may be inappropriate for other groups as well.

FINDINGS

Although it has been assumed by many social scientists that marriage and paid labour are contradictory, that women cannot be equally involved in both, these women did not consider marriage a reason for leaving the paid labour force. When asked: "Did (are) you

plan(ning) on working after you got (get) married?" virtually everyone (159 or 91%) had planned or was planning to work after marriage. Only 15 or 9% did not. Those who were currently married or had been in the past did not differ significantly in their responses from those who had never been married (see Table 1).

Similar results were obtained when they were asked: "How has working affected your concept of or your view of yourself as a wife?" Over half (45 or 57%) responded to this open-ended question with statements revealing a perceived positive effect (such as my husband and I have more things to talk about now; I am more understanding). Another 25 or 32% reported no effects. Only 9 or 11% spoke of negative effects (such as, I feel guilty; I don't have enough time to spend with my husband). The finding that the majority of these women

reported positive effects while a third of them reported neutral effects and therefore not negative effects, indicates that women themselves do not necessarily view wife and paid work roles as contradictory, and that involvement in an occupational role need not have negative consequences for their view of themselves as wives.

Results reported by Mackie¹⁸ suggest that the women reported here do not constitute a unique sample. Using different questions for her sample of 427 couples of which 198 women were working in paid labour and 229 were not, Mackie found:

67% agreement with the statement: "Although I used to worry that my work might hurt my marriage, I finally decided that working really made me a better wife."

Table 1
PLANS FOR PAID WORK AFTER MARRIAGE
AND MARITAL STATUS

Plans	Single		Sep./Div./Wid.		Married*		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
plans to work	68	94	16	84	75	90	159	91
no plans to work	4	6	3	16	8	10	15	9
Totals	72	100	19	100	83	100	174	100

*includes those currently living with a man in a marriage relationship but not legally married.

5% agreement with the statement: "Having a working wife hurts my husband's pride."

86% agreement with the statement: "My work makes me a more interesting companion for my husband."

14% agreement with the statement: "I think my husband feels neglected."

In other words, women in paid labour, contrary to the traditional assumption (see for example Turner¹⁹) that the wife and paid labour roles are dichotomous, are more likely to express the benefits rather than any detriments of working in paid labour.

The mother or family role, however, could still be incompatible with participation in the paid labour force even though women do not believe the marriage or wife role is necessarily problematic. Walker²⁰ and Meissner *et al.*²¹ have demonstrated the additional time constraints added by children and the fact that women with younger children are less likely to work for pay than are those with older children or without any. When asked about their plans for working after having children: "Did (are) you plan(ning) on working after you (have) had children?" 70 or 40% of these women said they planned on continuing in the paid labour force. A third (62 or 36%) responded with a qualified yes (such as, at first but then I'll see how it goes). Another 15 or 9% said it would depend at the time and 26 or 15% said definitely no.

Clearly, fewer planned on staying in paid labour after having children than was true for marriage. Nevertheless, fewer said they would stop working than is the case when others are asked whether or not a woman should work after she has children. For example, in study undertaken for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women,²² it was found that 58% of technical school and university students surveyed thought a woman should stop working after the birth of her first child. Similarly, Boyd's 1970 Canadian poll²³ showed

59% believed that involvement in paid labour on the part of married women had harmful effects on family life and 80% believed women with young children should not work in the paid labour force. When women currently engaged in paid labour were themselves asked only 9% said they would definitely quit. Nevertheless, it appears that raising children is more likely to be viewed as a conflict with paid labour than is true of being married (40% vs 91% said they would definitely continue working). This is further confirmed by the relationship between number of children and plans for working after having children (see Table 2). Those with two or more children were more likely to say they planned on not working for pay.

More of these women thought working had negative effects on their concepts of themselves as mothers than was the case for their concepts of themselves as wives. When asked: "How has working affected your concept of or your view of yourself as a mother?" 12 or 24% said negatively. The majority (29 or 58%) still said it had positive effects (such as, I'm a better mother because I'm happier with myself as a person). Nine or 18% said it had no effect.²⁴ These results are similar to those reported by Mackie²⁵ for the Calgary sample, again suggesting they are not unique to the sample studied here. Mackie reports:

6% agreement with the statement: "We don't have as many children as we would like because I work."

68% agreement with the statement: "Working makes me a better mother because I'm not bored."

85% agreement with the statement: "Much as I love my children, I enjoy being away from them for a while."

In sum, when these women were asked their plans to remain in the paid labour force after marriage and after having children, as well as the effects they thought working in paid labour had on their concepts of themselves as wives and mothers, they tended not to view their

Table 2
NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND
PLANS FOR WORKING
NUMBER OF CHILDREN

Plans	None		One		Two or More	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	54	44	12	57	4	14
qualified yes	47	38	4	19	11	39
no	23	19	5	24	13	46
Totals	124	101	21	100	28*	99

*No answer N = 1

marriage and family roles as contradictory to or even separate from their occupational roles. More did, however, consider the wife role to be positively affected by working for pay than was true for the mother role.

The second assumption follows somewhat from the first. Given an assumption of incompatibility between wife/mother and occupational roles, it is not surprising to find women's part-time and temporary involvement in the occupational role interpreted as a contributory factor to their lack of commitment to or interest in the occupational role. Said another way, their temporary and part-time participation in the paid labour force is con-

sidered evidence of their lack of intrinsic interest in that sphere. These women, however, did not view themselves in this way. While all 174 or 100% of these women had had work interruptions in the past, 161 or 93% of them left with the intention of returning. Only 13 or 7% left not intending to return. In other words, although these women do experience periodic exits from the paid labour force, it may be the time which they spend *outside* of paid labour which they themselves consider temporary and intermittent. It may be objected that these responses reflect a biased sample of women currently working for pay and who, if they had left in the past, did indeed return to work. While this is true, the data nevertheless

suggest more involvement in the work role for at least some women than is evident in the traditional interpretation of women's temporary and intermittent involvement in paid labour.

An overwhelming majority also failed to indicate support for the assumption that they derive their status from their husband's occupation. Nearly all (167 or 96%) failed to mention their husband's job when asked the open-ended question: "On what basis do you assess your own social standing?" Only 7 or 4% mentioned their husband's job as a consideration. When they were then asked directly: "In determining your social class, would you say that your occupation is (would be) more important than your husband's, his more important than yours, or are they equally important? Why?" their responses remained the same. Such a response pattern supports the suggestions of others²⁶ that women may well derive their own status from sources other than their husbands. At minimum, it suggests that women themselves do not perceive their husband's occupation as important as some social scientists claim, although it is possible that others do not assess them in the same way they assess themselves. It says nothing, of course, about sources of status of women working in unpaid labour.

CONCLUSIONS

These women, all of whom were working for pay, did not see themselves as many have claimed. Clearly, most and in some instances all, did not: view marriage as a time for leaving the paid labour force; plan to quit the labour force after having children; perceive an incompatibility between paid work and wife, mother or woman roles; consider any time spent out of paid labour as a permanent exit; or consider their husband's occupation as a criterion for judging their own social standing.

While further research is obviously needed to assess the generalizability of these findings for other women in paid work, Mackie's Calgary sample suggests their ap-

plicability to other groups. The significance of such results, of course, lies in their exposure of the fallacies about women which are commonly accepted as true. Of equal importance, they highlight the necessity of studying women's views of themselves rather than accepting other's views as accurate. Whether they indicate a misleading characterization of women in the past, or a substantial change on the part of at least some women in the last few years, they suggest traditional assumptions do not apply to all women in the present.

NOTES

1. Labour Canada, *Women in the Labour Force* (Ottawa 1974a); Labour Canada, Women's Bureau, *Fact Sheets* (Ottawa 1974b).
2. J.E. Bennett and P.M. Loewe, *Women in Business, A Shocking Waste of Human Resources* (Toronto: Maclean-Hunter 1975), pp. 52-54.
3. G. Hartman, "Women and the Unions," *Women in the Canadian Mosaic*, ed., G. Matheson (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1976), pp. 243-255.
4. K. Sacks, "Social Bases for Sexual Equality: A Comparative View," *Sisterhood is Powerful, An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. R. Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 455-469; M.R. Haug, "Social Class Measurement and Women's Occupational Roles," *Social Forces*, 52 (1973), pp. 86-98; D.B. Lynn, "Determinants of Intellectual Growth in Women," *School Review*, 80 (1972), pp. 241-260.
5. R.L. Simpson and I.H. Simpson, "Women and Bureaucracy in the Semi-Professions," *The Semi-Professions and their Organization: Teachers, Nurses, Social Workers*, ed. A. Etzioni (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 196-265.
6. R.H. Hall, *Occupations and the Social Structure* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969), p. 328.
7. E.A. Krause, *The Sociology of Occupations* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 121.
8. C.W. Mills, *White Collar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 203.
9. W.B. Watson and E.A.T. Barth, "Questionable Assumptions in the Theory of Social Stratification," *Pacific Sociological Review*, 7 (1964), pp. 10-16; J. Acker, "Women and Social Stratification: A Case of Intellectual Sexism," *American Journal of Sociology*, 78 (1973), pp. 936-945; Haug, *op. cit.*
10. M. Eichler, "Women as Personal Dependents: A Critique of Theories of the Stratification of the Sexes and an Alternative Approach," *Women in Canada*, ed. M. Stephenson (Toronto: New Press, 1973), pp. 36-56.
11. E. Greenglass, "The Psychology of Women, Or, the High Cost of Achievement," Stephenson, *op. cit.* pp. 108-119.
12. S. Ostry, *The Occupational Composition of the Canadian Labour Force* (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1967), pp. 33-39; Labour Canada, *Women in the Labour Force* (Ottawa, 1975).

13. L.N. Guppy and J.L. Siltanen, "A Comparison of Male and Female Occupational Prestige," unpublished paper from the Department of Sociology, University of Waterloo, 1976.
14. The data presented here are from a larger study, N.L. Chappell, "Work, Commitment to Work and Self-Identity among Women," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University, 1978. The social workers and newspaper reporters were classified as high prestige occupations and the fashion models and privates and corporals as low prestige occupations. At the time of the study no socio-economic scale existed for women, so the Blisshen scores for men were used. Data on the formal education and income of women in these occupations confirmed this distinction. The social workers and fashion models were classified as traditionally female occupations and the newspaper reporters and the privates and corporals were classified as traditionally male occupations, on the basis of the proportion of each sex engaged in that occupation.
15. H. Holter, *Sex Roles and Social Structure* (Oslo: Universitets forhget, 1970), p. 117.
16. M. Lalonde, "The Media Image," an address by the minister responsible for the status of women to the Ottawa Women's Canadian Club (Ottawa: Health and Welfare, 1975).
17. P.J. Thomas, *Utilization of Enlisted Women in the Military* (California: Navy Personnel Research and Development Center, Technical Note, 1976).
18. M. Mackie, "The Role Constraints of Working Wives," paper presented at the symposium on *The Working Sexes*, University of British Columbia, 1976.
19. R.H. Turner, *Family Interaction* (New York: John Wiley, 1970).
20. K.E. Walker, "Homemaking Still Takes Time," *Journal of Home Economics*, 61 (1969), pp. 621-624.
21. M. Meissner, E.W. Humphreys, S.M. Meis and W.J. Scheu, "No Exit for Wives: Sexual Division of Labour and the Cumulation of Household Demands," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 12, Part 1 (1975), pp. 424-439.
22. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1970), p. 16.
23. M. Boyd, "English-Canadian and French-Canadian Attitudes toward Women: Results of the Canadian Gallup Polls," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 6 (1975), pp. 153-169.
24. These women also reported positive effects on their self-conception as a woman. They were asked: "How has working affected your concept of or your view of yourself as a woman?" None perceived negative effects. Most (133 or 76%) reported positive effects and 41 (24%) reported no effects. These women, at least, did not see themselves as "less of a woman" because they worked in paid labour. See, M. Komarovsky, "Cultural Contradictions and Sex Roles," *American Journal of Sociology*, 52 (1946), pp. 182-189; M.M. Kimball, "Socialization of Women: A Study in Conflict," *Marriage, Family and Society*, ed., P. Wakil, (Toronto: Butterworth, 1975), pp. 189-201; D. Baumrind, "From each According to her Ability," *School Review*, 80 (1972), pp. 161-198. On the contrary, they felt "more of a woman."
25. Mackie, *op. cit.*
26. L.B. Nilson, "The Occupational and Sex Related Components of Social Standing," *Sociology and Social Research*, 60 (1976), pp. 328-336.