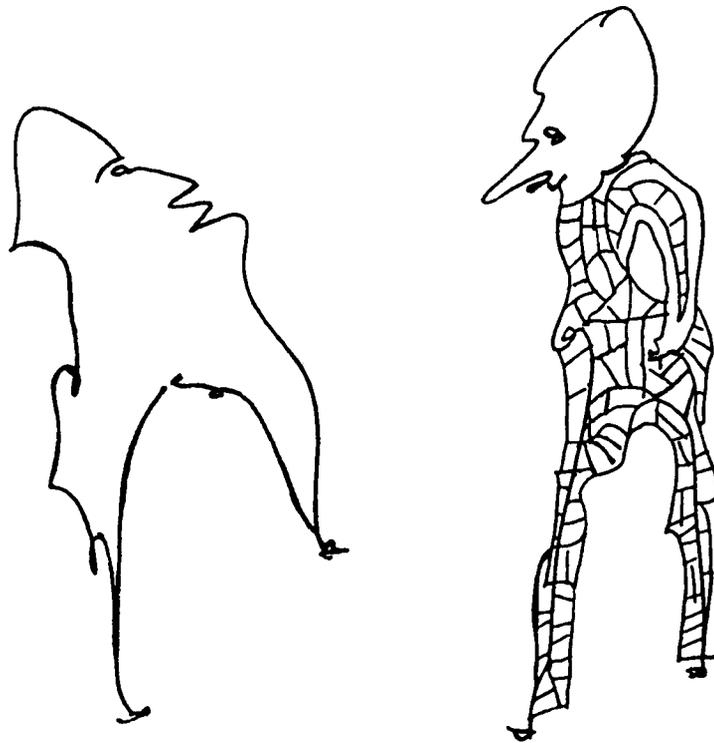


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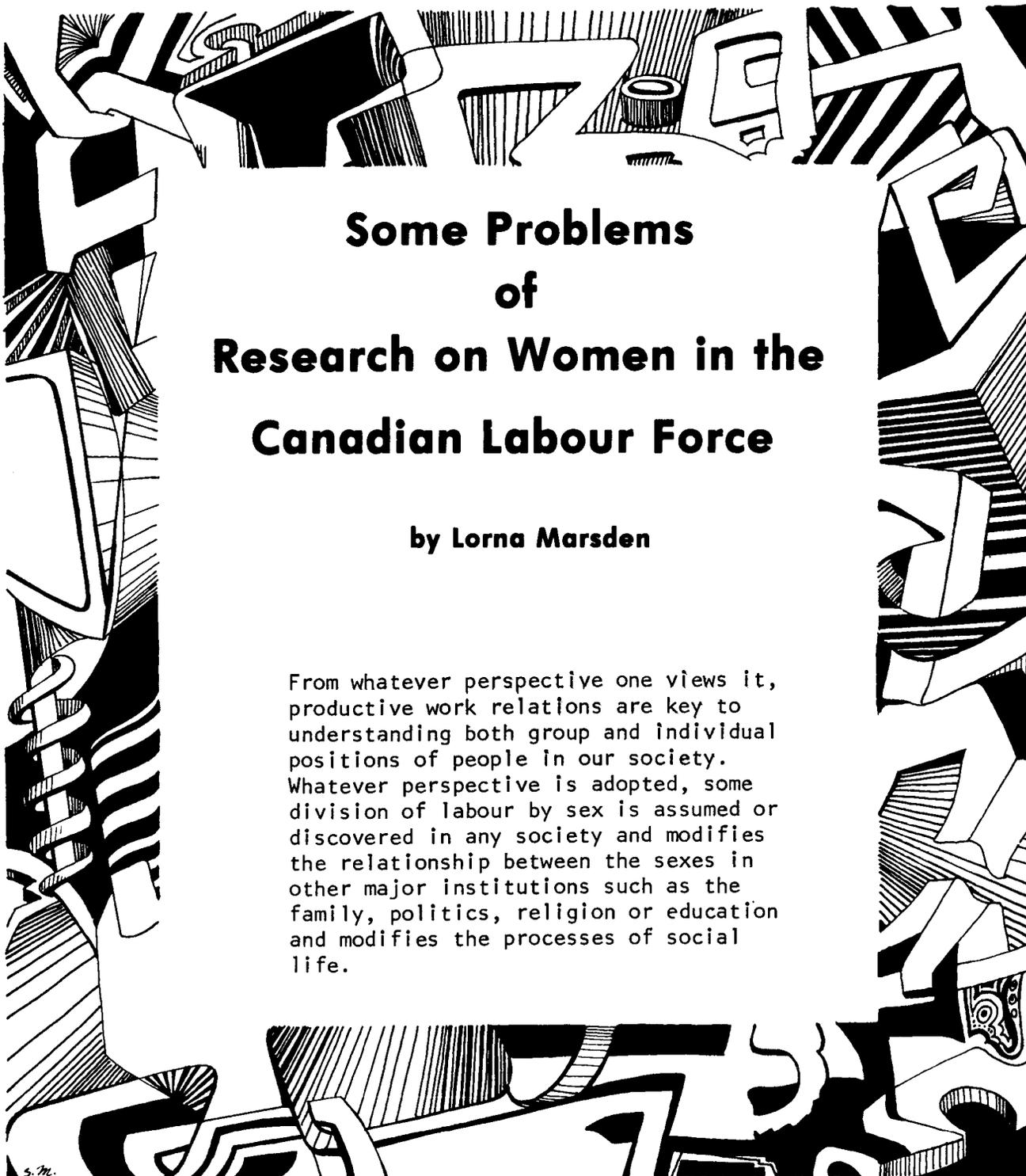
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Some Problems of Research on Women in the Canadian Labour Force

by Lorna Marsden

From whatever perspective one views it, productive work relations are key to understanding both group and individual positions of people in our society. Whatever perspective is adopted, some division of labour by sex is assumed or discovered in any society and modifies the relationship between the sexes in other major institutions such as the family, politics, religion or education and modifies the processes of social life.

By labour force participation, most studies carried out in Canada have referred to the paid labour force participation of women (the gainfully employed) rather than the division of labour by sex and the more broadly based concern of how production is organized and with what end in view. For the most part, this is because the perspective of neoclassical economics has predominated in studies of labour force participation with the full set of assumptions about the nature of economic relations (maximizing) and of production. There are other important theoretical questions which require examination from the sociologist's point of view (as opposed to that of either the economist or the historian) if we are to understand the relationship of women to production in this former colony which has moved from agrarian to industrial modes of production over the past two hundred years. Unless we look at this perspective on production, that is, the perspective of women, we will fail to understand the nature and processes of Canadian society as a whole. Such sociological concerns have not been ignored (for example, Dorothy Smith, 1973; Oswald Hall, 1966) but the development of these basic ideas has been neither systematic nor substantiated.

In attempting to carry on with an examination of the nature of labour force participation as outlined above there are some major barriers: one is to focus upon the key theoretical problems; second is to overcome the problems of

data gaps and forms in order to substantiate the theoretical propositions for investigation; the third is to find the labour, time and dollars to do the research and to legitimate this type of research.

The arguments presented hereafter are neither particularly original nor exhaustive. Not that there is a lack of recent literature on the topic. There has been work of economic, sociological and historical significance on the theoretical and empirical issues of female labour force participation. There have been critiques of a structuralist, functionalist and neo-Marxist perspective. There have been Royal Commissions, case studies, reviews of union, management and government records on working women. The pages of the Canadian Newsletter of Research on Women (CNRW) are rich with theses, studies in progress and reviews of this literature. But the unsatisfactory feeling upon reviewing it is that while there has been much that is worthwhile and while we have come a long way from the less developed but still valuable discussions of Marxism vs feminism as explanations for women's work for pay; from the straight description accounts of nineteenth-century female workers; from down-right undocumented complaints about oppression which failed to define the term or extend the analysis--while much of that is behind us, we nonetheless have not satisfactorily resolved the problems of women workers in this society. Partly this is because we are still reacting to a literature which deals with the United

States or European experience and diverts attention from the particular circumstances of industrialization in Canada; and partly because we have not resolved the problem of melding official statistics with case materials and observations in a satisfying way to resolve our theoretical problems. Indeed, I argue that we have failed to identify the major theoretical problems which have to be resolved because we are insufficiently aware of our own history and circumstances.

The Nature of the Issue

Until fairly recently the majority of researchers have accepted two broad assumptions about women in the paid labour force. First, most have seen women as secondary workers in relation to men and to the forms of economic production in the society, and second, the primacy of childrearing has been assumed, confusing the discussion of the desirability or rationality of paid labour. Much literature then goes on to fuss, more or less elegantly and systematically, with the details of how the characteristics of women and the labour markets operate and what induces women in or out of paid labour, what types of women remain (as "good bets") and what this means for training, childcare and labour force stability. (Connelly, 1974).

The focus is on two assumed criteria for the examination of production: the centrality of the prime age male labour

force to the economy and the distance women find themselves from meeting the male model of labour force participation.

An example of such assumptions is to be found in a 1972 address given by Sylva Gelber then Director of the Women's Bureau, Department of Labour, Government of Canada, in which she said, ". . . the present pattern of female labour force in Canada today might well be used as the bench mark against which may be measured Canada's forward march in attaining equal opportunity for women." Such a definition of equality is one to which we are often reduced by the nature of the information available on female work and workers but it places an emphasis upon the integration of women as primary workers that is very narrow. A critical difference from such an assumption is shown in Gail Cook's recent Opportunity for Choice: A Goal for Women in Canada (1976) which is based upon similar sorts of data to that which Sylva Gelber has used in her Facts and Figures: Women in the Labour Force series. However, Cook has taken the criterion for equality much further in asserting that ". . . equal opportunity for choice would characterize Canadian society if the whole range of emotional and financial burdens and rewards of participation in society, exclusive of pregnancy and childbirth, were unrelated to one's sex" (1976:2). She goes on to discuss the reciprocal aspect of this, an expansion in the range of effective choices for

Canadians, thus labour force participation is neither defined in terms of men nor seen as the primary basis for the measurement of equality.

Cook is just one example of the current questioning of both basic assumptions about women as workers although there seems to be a vigorous debate around only the first assumption, that is, that women are secondary workers. For example, the work on segmented labour markets provides insight into the maintenance of categories of people (for example, women) as low paid workers (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1975; Connelly, 1976; Gunderson, 1976).

The second assumption, that women accept or should accept the primacy of mothering, is under attack but more often from the perspective of population based concerns or equality of domestic responsibilities than from the perspective of production studies.

Before looking at the way in which the theoretical arguments can be developed to further the critical perspective of work on women in the labour force, let us look at the major sources of research materials on the subject.

Data Sources and Problems

Sociologists working in the field of labour force participation must rely heavily on the work of economists and historians, especially economists in the government sector. The government data

collected on national or provincial samples (for example, the census, monthly labour force survey, income and special studies) which are collected at one time and often on a predictable and comparable bases provide useful indicators of work patterns, income patterns and labour markets. The problem is that they provide only evidence of the consequences of the social relations which social scientists are trying to analyse and understand. For example, in the revised monthly labour force survey we now have far more useful information about unemployment among women and the job search process--a very great improvement over the past years materials--but the analysis can not take us beyond the differentiation of rates by sex, regions, occupations and industrial groupings, age groups, etc. If we are to understand what unemployment means in the career life of a woman, the division of labour at home and at work, the social relations between employer and employee, job seeker and the community, the nature of the job search--in other words, if we are to have any understanding of how groups within our society function with respect to the production sector, we need much, much more. We need to be able to look behind the results of those survey data to study worker processes in the community (Marsden, 1976).

Historical materials and community and case studies, on the other hand, although extremely valuable as a tool for meeting just the problems outlined, and

although growing in number and range, are limited in generalizability and in linkages to the other factors influencing the production processes. For example, just as Ostry's The Female Worker in Canada doesn't tell us much about working women and their life in the society or contribution to the economy, so Women at Work: Ontario 1850-1930 provides only some brief glimpses at the forces and relations of production which would show us the history of how we have arrived at our current segmented and low paid position.

A source of data that is becoming increasingly published and useful is that of legal cases of discrimination which come before human rights commissions and labour standards branches of government (e.g. Bourne, 1976; L'Egale, 1976). Collective agreements and observations of hiring and negotiating between women and employers and women and union executives are also invaluable raw materials as I will show. The increasing number of local or regional histories (many of which are reviewed in the CNRW) and the biographies of workers provide excellent data.

But as yet we have no systematic body of materials available for interpretation. There is much hope in the Hamilton studies, studies of specific occupational and worker groups and of work and production in specific regions of the country such as the marginal work world study in Halifax. But these ongoing studies need to be linked to key theoretical is-

sues and other data from which we can draw more firmly based conclusions than are possible at present. At least for sociologists, the resolution of the theoretical questions is crucial for research.

The Theoretical Questions

Let me now focus on the three broad questions which I believe need to be resolved in the study of female labour force participation as a prelude to answering the related questions of class, gender and occupational relations in Canadian society. Since we do live in an industrialized economy with the basic relations of work set in the context of capitalist organization, we do need to have a firm grip upon the way in which patterns of female work operate in the regional, occupational and sectoral labour markets. The realignment of interests in this field, following upon the foundation established by such economists as Ostry (1969), Cook (1976) and Gunderson (1976) and extending in a more sociologically sophisticated way should be on the connection between current patterns of gainful employment and other social patterns in the family and the community and their change. An argument such as is to be found in Connelly's study of women as a reserve army of labour (1976) leads us to an examination of the causes of current trends but does not spell out the important consequences for women workers and the community. The work of some economists such as Allingham (1967, 1968) and Spencer (1970, 1972) are from a so-

biological perspective a deadend trail. The concentration upon family size, training, age and technical qualifications begs all the important questions about the structure and power relationships which permit the continuation of labour markets making possible only such patterns of work. It is not technology or industrialization which have enforced such work patterns as the economists document, designed for an urban, prime age male labour force, but rather management and power interests which have permitted such technology and organization to be maintained. What we need to know is how this happened, how it is maintained and where the forces for change exist. This means far more historical, macrosociological and macroeconomic studies on women in the context of Canadian development taking into account the new emphasis in history on the crucial legal, social and technological changes which have affected the organization of women's productive contributions.

Equally limiting is the concentration upon differential wages, or the rewards of the system of production (Gunderson, 1976; Women's Bureau, 1967-1975). While for policy purposes such studies are interesting and for political mobilization they are essential (Macdonald, 1975), they still do not address the central concerns about authority, the division of work tasks and social relations at work by sex. Further we need to understand processes of wage negotiation by both organ-

ized and individual workers, negotiation over specific tasks and promotions and specifically at what point in the process women workers settle for less pay and lower status (Madden, 1972). For example, it appears that it may be at the point of hiring rather than earlier or later that basic relationships are established which set the pattern of a worker's life or the position of a job category. For highly qualified workers, the negotiated process of entry to post-secondary and especially graduate studies is equally crucial (Marsden, et al, 1975). Sociological methods do offer a body of research techniques capable of helping us to understand such events (Kervin, 1976).

A third major problem of both theoretical and empirical importance concerns the relationship between paid and unpaid labour. There is a considerable amount of work underway on the meaning and importance of housework and home based work (cf. Moffat, 1976). Crucial issues can be solved if we understand the part which housework plays in production, who benefits by its continued existence and the transformation which is likely to occur in the near future; the balance between paid labour and nonpaid is part of a political analysis of the economy and the position of both women and men. Here, too, we can establish theoretically and empirically the meaning of unemployment, of life-cycle work patterns and of life-cycle earnings. We can get behind the data to see how relations of production are negotiated in and out of the

family (Meissner, 1975).

If class relations do grow out of the relations of production, and are defined not in terms of rewards but of the processes of negotiation which arise around production, then the key is to understand women's work, women's relationship to property and the nature of the family as a unit of production.

This is not a reductionist argument. That is, I am not asserting that the family is only a unit of production but is an active unit for the organization of productive relations. Some basic aspects of production are so closely linked with reproduction that we must understand how production is organized there if we are to make any progress in understanding the related issues (Mitchell, 1971). It is from a basis of the family, that labour is organized, trained, recruited and reinforced into accepting the nature of the work life which we currently experience. It is when women do not fit into the organization of production, such as on the family farm, that we find high rates of migration of young women into the urban areas, the high rates of female participation in the service and tertiary sectors of the economy and the establishment of a pattern of secondary production which characterizes our society at the present time.

Alternative Theories and Forms:

In fact, of course, none of the questions outlined above is original nor even

radical. Probably the most urgent need from the perspective of a sociologist, is for the development of a fully theoretically justified analysis of the Canadian labour force and the sexual relations of labour. Such questions as why males have such a different position from our own, the causes of their alienation and oppression, the success of the capture of male labour by employers (owners and managers), the phenomenon of men's continuing integration into nearly all occupational groups, the totality of their absorption into competitive wage raises and the maintenance of a system which separates them from their children, their spouses and their participation in many aspects of community life is deserving of a thorough re-examination. So is the apparent failure of the educational system to induce women to accept these patterns of life, but the increasing capture of women as labour force participants and the gullability of the males who have swallowed the package and the paucity of their rewards for doing so (early deaths, high rates of accidents, suicide and industrial disease, inadequate wages, material insecurities, urban tensions).

We need to re-interpret all those findings from Statistics Canada studies which have shown how women 'fit' into the male work force, to find out where women resist fitting in. It is at those points of resistance that we will discover the very interesting nature of the female culture and relations of production in Canada (e.g., all the poor women who do

not go out to work . . .).

Research Barriers

While the types of research that have been proposed above are theoretically within our grasp, empirically there are some substantial barriers to the completion of these tasks at the present time. The barriers reduce to three: time, money and data.

Time is a problem because there are so few researchers interested in the problem or at least in a position to carry it out in the institutions where they work; time is also a problem because women's relationship to production is changing so rapidly with major shifts in our economic structure and because much of what happened in the past is not readily available--or has become lost through time.

Data are even more difficult. Data collected for Statistics Canada are based upon the present organization of the economy in terms of paid labour force production. The data show patterns of consequences of social negotiation between workers and employers but not the processes. We don't really know from national and official sources of data what women do if they are not at work (cf. Boyd 1975) nor what happens on the job or at the hiring point. Furthermore, data are not organized into historical series which can help us answer questions about basic patterns.

Conclusion

In a diverse, regionalized and colonized country such as Canada, it is no doubt true to say that an adequate understanding of women's paid work and how it institutionalizes gender behaviour will take a very long time. But it is also true that until we have a sociological theory which is suitable for testing we will not be able to begin.

Equally true is the fact that until there is a recognition of the need to undertake this research we will not have the financial support from research bodies nor the publication outlets to make such work possible in a researcher's career. The impetus to providing time, money and facilities grows with the recognition of the contribution of women to the economy, especially in times of labour shortage such as will be experienced in this country in the mid-'80's. The pressure on governments and unions to deal with the policy issues of equal pay for work of equal value, affirmative action programmes and the integration of female workers into traditional male preserves may be the impetus we want. It will be a shame if when the barriers break down we cannot focus on the important issues in a fully theoretically justified way.

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