Women Overworked

by Patricia Chuchryk

Pink Collar Workers
LOUISE KAPP HOWE. London: G.P. Putnam, 1977.

Not Servants, Not Machines
JEAN TEPPERMAN. New York: Beacon Press, 1975.

The nature of women's work, both paid and unpaid, has become an increasing focus of concern for feminists, academics and researchers alike. Although much of the popular literature acknowledges the existence of female job ghettos, its primary focus has not been the jobs themselves, but instead on "de-ghettoizing" women's work, on affirmative action (and other such programmes) to increase the occupational mobility of women and on inspirational tactics to urge women to seek out these new horizons. The explanations for job segregation, which range from "women are socialized to do this kind of work" to "the male power structure conspires to keep women down," also fall short of a satisfactory analysis.

These kinds of emphases and explanations, combined with the usual sensationalized media reports of a few women entering into traditional male strongholds, tend to obscure the nature of the problem and create the illusion that job segregation is diminishing. Unfortunately, recent statistical research shows that the occupational segregation of women into female stereotyped jobs is getting worse--or at best, remaining the same.(1)

Those jobs which are characterized by a predominantly female labour force (50% or higher) are the same jobs which account for the greatest proportion of women workers. In 1974, in Canada, almost 75% of all those employed in clerical occupations were women--and these women accounted for 35.4% of the total female labour force. (Facts and Figures, 1975; 49) In the same year, almost two-thirds (63.5%) of all women in the labour force were employed in clerical, sales (10.1%) and service (18%) occupations--compared with 21.7% of men. (Facts and Figures, 1975; 49)

This same situation is mirrored in the United States. Today, 77.8% of all those employed in clerical work are women (Howe, 1977; 290) and these women account for over one-third of the total female labour force. (United States Bureau of Statistics, cited in Howe, 1977; 16) In fact, clerical and sales together, account for over two-thirds of all women employed. (Howe, 1977; 290)

Nurses, elementary school teachers, telephone operators, waitresses, hairdressers, dieticians and personal service workers are examples of other traditionally stereotyped occupations which even today, both in the United States and Canada, are comprised of over 75% women. (Howe, 1977; 21: Armstrong, 1975; 374 and 377) This is not to say that there are not more women entering what were once considered "men's" jobs. What it means, however, is that the increasing numbers of women entering the labour force(2)are continuing to be concentrated in the low paying, relatively unskilled, sex-typed female job ghettos.(3)

Unfortunately, those occupations in which the majority of women wage earners can be found--with few exceptions--have attracted little in the way of study and research. Two recent publications which begin to fill this gap are Pink Collar Workers by Louise Kapp Howe, and Not Servants, Not Machines by Jean Tepperman. Both books are welcome additions to the slowly growing body of research which attempts to document women's actual experience in contemporary society.(4) Although both books share a similar focus--the female job ghetto--the many differences warrant their separate treatment in this review.

As the title suggests, Pink Collar Workers focuses on the female job ghetto. Howe deals specifically with five occupational categories--beauticians, office workers, sales workers, waitresses, and homemakers(5)devoting a chapter to each. The author allows these women to speak for themselves, to articulate their own problems and needs the way they perceive them. The women range in age and experience from the young unmarried woman just out of high school who finds it all so exciting, to the middle aged divorced woman who is disgusted with the lack of respect attached to her years as a homemaker, to the widowed cashier who finds her work tiresome but nevertheless enjoyable because "this is where I live. This is my first home." (p. 83)

The book makes a useful contribution to feminist literature in three significant ways. For those of us who are familiar with research on women's work, we are provided with anecdotal evidence to support many of the major hypotheses which are current in the field (although the evidence is unfortunately neither statistically nor methodologically significant--more about this later). For example, all the women in this book work not for "pin money" but out of economic need--in fact, were it not the need for additional income, many would prefer not to work. The stories of some of these women also illustrate the individual effects of the dual labour market theory--i.e., that women (along with minorities and youth) are employed in a secondary labour market which is characterized by low wages, job

instability, high turnover rates and a lack of internal occupational mobility.(6) Lillian, a department store worker, has been in and out of the labour force as both her need and general job market conditions fluctuate. As a result of these changing periods of employment and changing employers, she has been unable to build up job seniority. Claire, the supervisor of a word-processing center in a large insurance company, explains that her girls (sic) should reach level 4 (the highest promotional level) after one and a half years but after that, there is no where else to go.

The personal anecdotes which comprise the major portion of the book make the necessary link between a woman's identification as wife and mother (i.e., as woman) and her role as a worker. Peggy loses her job and needed income because she must care for her sick child. Lillian cannot keep her job because it takes her three hours commuting time per day (and therefore is unable to meet the needs of her family.) Linda is forced to keep her job as shampoo girl because of economic need but is plagued with guilt feelings that she isn't a good wife and mother. These kinds of personal situations provide the reader with an experiential dimension of the dynamic interaction which exists in the real world between women's two (or more?) roles.

With the advent of capitalism and the emergence of industrialization labour became dichotomized into a public sphere of production and a private sphere of reproduction, family, and consumption. Individual wage earners replaced the family as the productive, economic and income generating unit of society. Ideologically if not always in fact, women have been on the receiving end of an historical process which has relegated them to the private world of the family while the public world of paid production was transformed into a male domain. This has had the effect of psychologically as well as physically isolating women, as individuals, at home, performing their individual home work. Because of the nature of women's work in the home--and since women's labour has not been collectivized(7),women have always tended to view their problems as individual personal problems. Hence the second major contribution of Pink Collar Workers is that it allows women with similar experiences to share those experiences--to come out of isolation. Because the women whose lives are exposed in Pink Collar Workers, are statistically neither unique nor exceptional, the experience of women workers can be studied in a broader social context--we can see women's problems are social, not just personal.

Similarly, Pink Collar Workers enlightens those of us who have been fortunate enough not to have to work

in the female ghetto (and there are not many), who have not had to bear the burden of single-handedly raising a family while trying to earn an income and who have not experienced the exhaustion of standing on our feet all day then spending another one-half to two hours standing on a bus or subway only to return home to do housework.

It may come as a shock for those of us well meaning middle-class feminists, with grandiose notions of radicalizing women workers, to learn that the little things make the biggest difference in the lives of these women. Ingrid has been a waitress for ten years. Her biggest concern is a decent locker room where she can hang up her street clothes, assured that they won't be on the floor in ten minutes, and where she can change comfortably without tripping over cleaning materials and garbage. An ordinary chair would make life considerably easier for the department store cashiers who must stand at their posts the entire duration of their shift. Hence Pink Collar Workers forces us to shift our focus from the few women who "make it" (as writers, lieutenant-governors or nuclear physicists) to the realities of a majority of working women.

Pink Collar Workers is methodologically weak. In fact, from the perspective of social scientific research, the book is badly wanting. Howe spent a summer "hanging around" at a "lower-than-most" priced beauty shop fifteen miles from San Francisco. She took a "Christmas rush" job at a New York department store. Through mainly personal contacts, she spoke with waitresses in New York and clerical workers at one insurance company in Chicago. And she attended a Saturday conference for homemakers in Madison, Wisconsin. However, the fact that her "sample" is "unscientific" and "statistically insignificant" and borrows none of the jargon of "scholarly" research ("They're women, not data!" Howe, 1977; 24) would not have been important had Howe integrated her research with a theoretical understanding of the nature of women's work. This alone is the most serious drawback of the book.

While Howe does suggest that an explanation of female job segregation must necessarily move beyond the simplistic socialization theory (1977; 22) her actual argument only goes so far as to say that the "American business structure" needs a reliable source of cheap labour--"a female secondary earner to work at secondary jobs. At secondary pay," (1977; 273-74) and that this appears to be "No Accident." (Howe's emphasis, 1977; 274)

There are numerous instances where the lack of an analytic framework and theoretical explanation undermine the book's potential utility. For example, Howe (in agreement with Oppenheimer)(8)cites as one reason for the

increase in married women in the paid labour force the fact that the demand for women workers has increased. (1977; 20) While to a certain extent this has been the case especially in the service sector, the argument implies that women comprise a largely transient labour force and thus can be marginalized back into the family when a demand for their labour no longer exists. But evidence from Howe's "respondents" suggests that women are becoming an increasingly permanent part of the labour force.

Howe also makes note of the growing contradiction between mainstream ideology (women's place is in the home) and social reality (more and more women, especially married women, are in the labour force) but fails to theoretically examine the dynamics of that contradiction. One of the women with whom Howe spoke expresses the experiential dimension of the contradiction.

> Now as a job-holding parent, I really feel the schizophrenia of our society toward working mothers. Here, in Wisconsin, a state employee gets two weeks vacation, her child gets all summer off. Our school system, which believes it's responsible to the needs of the community, doesn't provide alternate care during the summer. Likewise our medical system. It's impossible to get a dental appointment, for example, for your child outside of working hours. So what can you do? What's the answer? An honest recognition that it's impossible and beyond the capacity of the nuclear family--to take the full responsibility for the growth of American children. (quoted in Howe, 1977; 271-72)

Unfortunately without analysis, this comment remains simply that--a personal comment.

Near the beginning of the book, Howe makes an important statement--that "occupational choice in this country is still largely a class matter as well as a matter of gender." (1977; 22) Toward the end of the book, she suggests that what is necessary is, "a deeper understanding of how this economic system capitalizes on the conflicts of women in dual roles." (1977; 274) Howe's failure to develop these two central themes, and her reliance upon the skills of the individual reader to situate and integrate the material presented in a wider social context, detract from the potential usefulness of the book. Similarly, her use of informative statistics (she provides an Appendix of various charts, graphs and tables) is reduced in significance by the absence of a theoretical framework.

Howe also deals with the question of women and trade unions, but only minimally. However, some of the points she raises lend support to the fact that the organization of women workers

has traditionally been a rocky road which, once travelled, often proves inadequate. For example, the beauticians with whom Howe spoke were represented by a union which not only included barbers but also proprietors (!) and the women could not see (neither can I) the point of bargaining with them as fellow union members. Despite the fact that the organization of employees in the public sector (which includes a vast number of women) has dramatically increased over the past decade, the proportion of unionized women workers in the United States has notably decreased (from 17% of all women workers in 1950 to 12.5% in 1975, Howe, 1977; 252).(9)

One of the concrete suggestions which emerges out of Pink Collar Workers is the "need to organize and join and shake up and lead labour unions," (Howe, 1977; 251) and Jean Tepperman's book Not Servants, Not Machines, is the story of how office workers are doing just that.

Not Servants, Not Machines is about office workers--secretaries, bank tellers, typists, telephone operators and file clerks--but more importantly it is about the office workers' movement. Where many of the women in Pink Collar Workers responded to their miserable working conditions with "well, you know, you get used to it," the women in Tepperman's book respond with "we are being unfairly treated as second class workers and it's time to do something about it." The growing consciousness found among the office workers is a response to their exploitation and oppression both as women and as workers. They have begun to notice that the up-and-coming white male management trainee, whom they have trained, gets promoted while they remain in secretarial servitude. They notice that the office would run smoothly even if their bosses did not show up for work. They notice that they're being paid as little as one-sixth of the boss's salary, even though they're doing his work.

The anger and the awareness which inspire these women to publicly relate their personal work experience is also an inspiration to the reader. For this alone, the book is a valuable contribution to research on women. But Tepperman does more than provide the medium for the message. She spends an entire section not only exposing many of the popular myths about office work, but also providing the evidence to lay them to rest once and for all. The common myths range from "office work isn't really important and therefore your job doesn't deserve more money," and "you can't get hurt on the job," to "girls will work for a few years and then get married." Tepperman does a credible job of analysing these myths so that even the non-believers will have to think twice.

The office workers' movement began with growing pockets of dissatisfac-

tion and rebellion. A handful of clerical staff nervously approached the personnel office at the insurance company where they worked to demand an end to harassment and racism--and they won!(Tepperman, 1975; 64) Another small group pressured their employer into creating a maternity leave policy (p. 64) and yet another group--of legal secretaries--forced the law firm who whom they worked into taking into consideration their needs when ordering office furniture. (p.65) It may not sound very significant but thousands of these kinds of incidents grew into an active, effective and successful network of women's pressure groups all over the United States.

Women Office Workers (WOW), in New York, organizes around the rights of office workers. City Women for Action, an organization which originated with women who were employed by the City of Boston, now has many member branches --for example, the City Women for Action at Boston City Hospital. Women Employed (WE) started in a small office in Chicago YWCA and has successfully staged demonstrations and boycotts against companies which discriminate against women. The list is long.

These kinds of organizations enable women to begin to organize around their specific oppression as women workers. However, Tepperman recognizes the limited potential of pressure group tactics and the need for an organization with more clout--a union. One of the more important functions of the various pressure groups, as Tepperman points out, is providing women with the skills and strength to begin to organize. It is not an easy process and Tepperman effectively underlines many of the problems and difficulties. She realistically presents the inevitable barriers to unionization which stem not only from management but also from the unions themselves. Male dominated unions have traditionally ignored the clerical sector (in fact, most female job ghettos) on the grounds that "women aren't interested in unions" or "clericals are unorganizable." But the women in Tepperman's book testify to the contrary.

Successful organizing has occurred in universities, banks, insurance companies and legal offices. The commitment and awareness of the many women who initiate such organizing drives and the many strength building organizations such as UNION Wage and "9 to 5," which "help women to function within their union," (p. 129) have contributed to this success.

Not Servants, Not Machines is not simply a do-it-yourself manual on how to form your own union. It relates the experiences--problems, pitfalls, and successes--of women who have lived (and survived) the process. We learn how to turn the dissatisfaction of one worker into a newsletter, and how to

bargain with an employer to our psychological advantage. In addition, Tepperman includes a discussion of management anti-union tactics. She graphically shows not only how so-called "extras" (i.e., subsidized cafeterias or company picnics) are not "extras" at all, but also how to interpret and deal with the harassment which accompanies an organizing drive. Most importantly Tepperman gives us examples which show that it is not a losing proposition and that "we can win."

Not Servants, Not Machines combines the personal stories of women office workers with a sound theoretical analysis. Tepperman deals with the Why as well as the who, what, where and when. She argues that two factors have contributed to the growing radicalization of women office workers: 1) the changing nature of office work and, 2) the growing consciousness of women.(p. xi) Office work has become less personal, more automated and routinized--in fact, it has become more and more like factory production. The personal secretary is being replaced by word-processing centres in which the only skill required is the ability "to select the proper paragraph." (Braverman, 1975; 346) New machines for file clerks even "eliminate the need to know the sequence of the alphabet, or even the sequence of numbers; everything is eliminated but the task of placing under the photographic apparatus of the machine, as swiftly as possible, one document after another." (Braverman, 1975; 340) The mechanization of clerical work has made the work more monotonous and has increased both the demands for speed (productivity) and the control of workers by management. This transformation (and resultant degradation) of work has thus transformed clerical workers from personal service workers into machine operators in a paper-processing factory. It is little wonder that this transformation has radicalized office workers.

The women's movement has also increased women's awareness. Why, women ask, should our work be worth less money because we are women? Why should men be promoted out of dead end jobs while we are destined to remain in them for the rest of our working lives? What right have employers to treat us as non-persons?

Not Servants, Not Machines, not unlike Pink Collar Workers, brings women's experience out of isolation and thus enables women to share and rebel against their collective oppression. But the frustration and feelings of powerlessness which emerge out of Howe's book do not surface in Tepperman's. Instead, we feel the exhilaration of collective strength because, as one office worker-turned-union organizer put it, "if corporations have the power of money then we have the power of women." (emphasis in text: Tepperman, 1975; 85)

Both of these publications document the experience of women in the United States. While I would suggest that the situation in Canada differs little, it is important that we begin to do our own research in order that Canadian working women can share their experiences with each other in a public and meaningful way.

NOTES

1. The most thorough statistical documentation is probably Hugh and Pat Armstrong, "The Segregated Participation of Women in the Canadian Labour Force, 1941--1971," Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, Part I, November 1975.

2. In Canada, in 1941, 20.7% of all women were wage earners and accounted for 18.5% of the total labour force; by 1971, 39.9% of all women were wage earners and accounted for 34.6% of the total labour force (Armstrong, 1975; 371). In 1940, in the United States, 28.6% of all women were in the paid labour force, accounting for 25.4% of the total work force: in 1970, 43.3% of all women were wage earners, accounting for 38.1% of the total work force (Blau, 1975; 217).

3. In 1971, in Canada 18.4% of all women workers were still employed in these just mentioned seven occupations. (Armstrong, 1975; 374 and 376-77.)

4. A similarly useful anthology, but which relates to a wider diversity of occupations (both male and female) is Ronald Fraser, Work, 2 Vols.,(Penguin Books, 1969).

5. A category which Howe (quite rightly) includes as an occupation (Howe, 1977; 22).

6. See David M. Gordon, Theories of Poverty and Underemployment: Orthodox, Radical and Dual Labour Market Perspectives, Lexington Books, 1972. See also, Martha Blaxall and Barbara Reagan (eds.), Women and the Workplace, University of Chicago Press, 1976.

7. One of the forces of capitalist development has been the industrialization of the labour process. For example, individual weavers were removed from home or family based production into the factory where tasks became highly specialized (increased division of labour) and control over the work process became increasingly concentrated in the hands of the factory owners. This transformation has not occurred in housework.

8. Valerie Kincaid Oppenheimer, The Female Labour Force in the United States, Berkeley Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1970.

9. The situation in Canada is quite the opposite. In 1968, for example, 17.0% of all women workers were union members. In 1976, this figure rose to 23.5% (Hartman, 1976; 246).

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