Women as members of the labor reserve

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We would like to express our appreciation to the students in the Economic Class on Income Distribution whose discussions of these issues contributed so much to this analysis.

I. THE PROBLEM

Extensive evidence has been gathered to expose the fact that women who work for pay in the United States, as in many other countries, are typically relegated to the lower paid, less attractive jobs. Over all, women's wages actually declined from 63 to 57 percent of men's from 1960 to 1970. In addition, women workers also experience higher rates of unemployment than men.

Chart I illustrates the rapid growth of employment of women in the paid labor force since World War II.

Traditional economic analysis in the United States is, however, singularly inadequate for explaining the low-wage-high-unemployment rates characteristic of women in the paid labor force. As Kahne and Kohen point out in their survey of the economic roles of women, there are basically two approaches to the study of sex differences in income and occupational status, and, we might add, unemployment, in current economic writings. Both are couched in the neoclassical tradition. Sex differentials are examined either in terms of theories of discrimination or human capital.

In their attempt to work within the framework of the competitive neoclassical general equilibrium model, or some variation of it, economists have failed to formulate a penetrating analysis of the causes of the problems encountered by women who work. This inadequacy lies in the partial, static nature of their analysis. They exclude important variables which are central to the explanation of the problems of women who work. In particular, they fail to incorporate the institutional framework governing the labor market.

The aim of this paper is to suggest the outlines of a broader explanation of the status of women workers in so far as they provide an important element of the labor reserve required by the unplanned, fluctuating production of the private enterprise economy which prevails in the United States today.
As the proportion of the female population in the labor force rose sharply from 1950 to 1974, the labor force participation rate for men moved downward.
Unemployment rates by sex, 1950-74
(annual averages)

Unemployment rates are generally higher for women than for men. The gap usually widens as unemployment declines.
A) Background:

Women entering the paid labor force today find themselves participating in a reserve of labor, available in periods of prosperity and rising demand for workers, but considered expendable in periods of recession or depression. This is illustrated by the fact that their rates of unemployment exceed those among men in all periods. (see chart II)

A debate has emerged among policy makers and economists as to whether there is really any justification for the persistence of a labor reserve in the affluent economy of the United States. Since World War II, a growing number of business spokesmen and governmental policy makers have maintained, on one hand, that a certain degree of unemployment is essential to ensure the flexibility needed to enable the system to respond to the unplanned 'market forces' to provide the best allocation of resources in what is assumed to be a competitive economy. Over the years, the amount of unemployment they consider 'normal' has been increased from about three percent in the early 1950s to over five percent. The 7 to 8 percent unemployment of the mid-1970s, viewed from this point of view, is undesirable but not too serious.

A growing number of economists and labor spokesmen, on the other hand, argue that the presence of this kind of labor reserve is unacceptable even as a semi-permanent feature in the U.S. Some argue that the growth of persistent unemployment reflects, not that women do not need paid jobs, but rather the failure of policy makers to utilize existing or create new policy instruments to modify assumed market forces to ensure full utilization of the available labor force. Others maintain that the growth of unemployment reflects the incapacity of an unplanned economy, dominated by multinational corporations seeking to maximize profits rather than social welfare, to provide jobs for all.

It is evident that, regardless of which of the above views one adopts as to the nature and role of the labor reserve in the national economy, its persistence is an objective fact. Decisions to invest and expand operations have been left to individual private enterprises based on their managements' assessment of the profitability of proposed ventures. As a result, the growth of
The U.S. economy has, over the decades, been characterized by expansion and contraction, followed by renewed expansion to higher levels as businesses have adjusted their output to their expectations in the face of uncertainty.\(^7\) The availability of fluctuating reserves of labor power has been essential, in these circumstances, to meet the ups and downs of the business cycle.

Historically, in the United States, the need for labor reserves has been met by waves of immigrant workers whose low cost labor built American railways, manned American factories, and spilled over into the spreading agricultural West. Many of their wives and daughters supplemented their low wages by working in textile, clothing, and, later, electrical appliance factories in the East.\(^8\) A major demand of early trade unions was to end the immigration of foreign workers who, they claimed, were undermining their wages and working conditions.\(^9\)

After World War I, the mechanization of agriculture and emergence of 'factories on the farms' pushed millions of families off the land into burgeoning cities, where young men sought to earn a livelihood in growing industries. The Great Depression focused attention on the uprooting of tens and thousands of farmers,\(^10\) who only found steady jobs in the era of expanding demand for labor during the Second World War. After that war, the less-publicized introduction of the mechanical cotton picking machines displaced Black sharecroppers in the South. Some went to work as unskilled labor in factories that had moved South seeking lowcost, non-union labor. Others escaped to the North and West. Many, especially women either as heads of families or to supplement the low wages of their low-paid menfolk, obtained jobs in the expanding service industries.\(^11\)

World War II initiated a basic structural shift in employment in this country in the context of its newly-acquired dominant role in the rapidly expanding postwar international specialization and exchange. Factory employment began to decline, relative to that in the expanding clerical, sales and service sectors. Increasing numbers of women entered these areas at wages half to two thirds of those paid to men working in jobs of comparable skills in areas traditionally closed to women. (See Chart III)

Then came the recession/depression of the mid 1970s. The unplanned
Median annual earnings of year-round full-time women workers by occupation, 1973

Annual earnings of women varied by occupation, but in no occupational group were they as much as two-thirds of those of men employed in similar work.

CHART III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Percent of Earnings of Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All occupations</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and technical</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers and administrators, except farm</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales workers</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical workers</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft workers</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operatives, including transport equipment</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonfarm laborers</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service workers, except private household</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Occupation refers to longest job held during year. Data for all occupations include earners in groups not shown separately—private household workers, farmers and farm managers, and farm laborers. For these groups, the base population was too small to provide statistically reliable estimates.
expansion of output, which underlay the rapid increase in the numbers of women employed, had outpaced effective demand. 'Experts' forecast that unemployment is likely to persist at 7 to 8 percent into the 1980's.

That women were still, for the most part, perceived primarily as part of the labor reserve, was starkly exposed. Officially reported unemployment among women was significantly higher than among men, especially among Black and other minority groups. Women, along with minorities of both sexes, who had been hired in non-traditional jobs in the prosperous period, were among the first laid off. Official data showed overall employment had mounted to 8.3 percent by Dec. 1975. That of men over 20 years old rose to only 6.5 percent, however, while that of women over 20 rose to 8.0 percent, the minorities to 13.7 percent. Among youth, 16 to 19, overall employment had risen to 16.8 percent by Nov. 1975, and for minority youth to 33.8 percent.

Critics of national unemployment data point out that these official reports exclude many discouraged workers, including large numbers of women, who have given up the active search for jobs. The Urban League, taking into account discouraged workers and part-time employment, estimate overall employment to be 13.5 percent in Nov., 1975, and among Blacks and other minorities to be 24.7 percent. They did not, however, break their data down by sex. (See Table I)

**Table I: Unemployment as Percent of Total Labor Force, 1973-5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (Labor Dept.)</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (Urban League)a</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks &amp; other minorities (Labor Dept.)</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks &amp; other minorities (Urban League)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitesb (Labor Dept.)</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitesb (Urban League)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority youth (16 to 19 yrs.)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White youth (16 to 19 yrs.)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women, 20 yrs. and older</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men, 20 yrs. and older</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Based upon Urban League methodology which includes, in addition to Labor Dept. figures, "discouraged workers" who "want a job now" but are not in the official labor force and also 46% of part-time workers who want full-time jobs. The statistics are not seasonally adjusted.

b. Labor Dept. statistics include Spanish-surname people with whites.

c. Average of worker with no dependents and worker with three dependents. Only federal taxes subtracted.
II. The proposed explanation:

The labor reserve does not, as the basic assumptions of marginal productivity theory would seem to suggest, consist of the least competent workers, those whose marginal productivity is lowest in an assumed hierarchy of worker skills and abilities. Rather its members tend to be those who are typically differentiated from the dominant group of employees by historical experience, reinforced by an historically-shaped ideology. These are the characteristics which tend to restrict their bargaining power as compared to that of the dominant group of employees. Employers, requiring flexibility in the labor force to meet the fluctuations inherent in an unplanned economy, may treat them as residual without fear of collective opposition from the majority of workers.

A set of differentiating characteristics have typified all groups which have, historically, provided the labor reserves needed to enable U.S. private enterprise to grow, by fits and starts, until it spread across the vast continent and beyond. The immigrant workers from Europe, from the day they first landed, were set apart by their poverty, language, and culture. So-called 'native' workers, encouraged by the employer-owned press, adopted attitudes of superiority and exclusiveness towards newly arrived outsiders.\(^{13}\) In the case of Black workers, their total enslavement in the 18th and 19th centuries had been rationalized by creation of a racist ideology which was perpetuated after the Civil War to justify their continued exploitation, first as sharecroppers and more recently as the lowest paid workers in all sectors in the economy.

In the case of women, the ideology that holds their appropriate roles to be that of home-makers was shaped in the context of a past division of labor along sex lines.\(^{15}\) That division of labor was, to some degree, appropriate to the level of the technology that prevailed in the semi-subsistence agricultural economies which at one time predominated in all the lands from whence the populations of the United States migrated over the centuries. It was also fostered by the self-sufficient frontier agrarian economy in the U.S. itself.\(^{16}\) Women, as bearers of and carers for children, had, over the centuries, been expected to care for home,
children and, take part in food farming. Men were initially hunters and protectors, as well as performing the heavier kinds of farm work. With the spread of commerce and especially as a result of the industrial revolution that accompanied the emergence of capitalism the division of labor has extended far beyond the family homestead. The ideology and practices of the past have persisted, however, to foster the myth that women, tied to the home and family by the innate characteristics of their sex, were incapable of contributing significantly, far less giving leadership, to the world beyond. Men, on the other hand, were expected and encouraged to participate in the extended productive and governmental activities of the larger society. Gradually, over time, the expanding commerce and associated political structures, dominated by men, spread across the globe. It was simply assumed and socially accepted that the dominant role of men was based, not on a past division of labor based on outmoded technology, but on the inherent weakness of the female sex.

In addition to fostering a subordinate role for women, the extension of the division of labor has, over the centuries, as sociologists and political scientists have amassed evidence to show, become separated from the ownership of the tools and equipment in a division of labor which, as Adam Smith explained two hundred years ago, has facilitated increased productivity.

On the other hand, the class of men to which the state guaranteed access to ownership of land, machinery and equipment used for production outside the home, accumulated wealth and came to exercise predominant political and economic power. Today it is this class, which manages the multinational corporate structures, which also dominates national political life. On the other hand, increasingly in the last century, the majority of men— together with their families— have become members of the employed class, selling their labor in the market as wage laborers.

Submerged within, but nevertheless an increasingly significant feature of this larger class division, the ideology and practices holding women's place to be in the home have persisted, despite their growing incompatibility with changing reality. They have rationalized institutionalization of the subordinate status of women who seek paid jobs as part of the labor reserve. The underlying reason
for this persistence of the ideology and the practices is that they have served the interests of the men exercising power across class lines, both on the job and in the home. For the employers, the ideology has rationalized the maintenance of women in a low cost, flexible reserve of workers who may enter the job market in periods of expanding output, but who are 'expendable' in periods of recession. The majority of wage earning men, themselves seeking to earn enough to support their families in an increasingly cash-dominated world, find themselves confronting a contradictory situation. It is clearly more than a little convenient for all men to have women provide a ready-maid service to care for home and family without added cash outlay. This may help to explain why, although increasing numbers of men find their own wages too low to support their families, necessitating that their own wives, mothers and/or daughters take paid jobs, few working men have altered their basic conviction that women's proper role remains in the home.

The basic explanation suggested here for the status of women in the labor force may, in short, be summed up as follows:

1. The fluctuating output of private enterprises, whose profit-maximizing expectations shape the growth of the U.S. political economy, requires a flexible labor force, available in periods of expanding demand and prosperity, which may be dispensed with in periods of declining demand and recession.

2. Historically, the requirement of a fluctuating labor force has been met by the maintenance of a labor reserve, primarily comprised of workers who, because of historical factors differentiating them from the majority of workers, have been considered expendable. In the past, immigrants, farm workers, and Blacks have played this role in the U.S.

3. The historically-shaped ideology and associated practices which have assumed women's place to be in the home regardless of their needs or productivity, differentiates female from male workers and fosters the relegation of them to the status of marginal members of the labor reserve required to meet the fluctuations of unplanned economic growth. This is especially true of women whose role in the labor reserve is shaped not only by the fact that they are women, but also that they are members of Black or other
minority groups.

If this explanation is valid, it focuses on a range of 'solutions' at two levels: First, every effort must be made to fundamentally alter the ideology and practices which have tended to push women into their labor reserve status. Second, it will be necessary to eliminate the basic factors contributing to the persistence of the labor reserve, itself.

III. Evidence supporting the proposed explanation:

To test this theory, it is necessary to examine a range of evidence relating to the entire set of institutional factors affecting women in the paid labor force. Analysis cannot be circumscribed, as it tends to be in models influenced by neo-classical theory, to measurable price-output relationships. It is necessary, instead to analyse the way the interaction of the historically shaped ideology and institutionalized practices has tended to allocate women workers into the labor reserve. It is intended, here, to examine the way that interaction affects, first, the demand for, and, second, the supply of, women workers in the paid labor force.

A. The demand side:

The inherited ideology that holds the appropriate role of a woman is as a home maker operates both at the level of employer decision-making and at the level of employee reactions to rationalize the institutionalization of practices which narrow down the demand for women workers to the lowest paying, less skilled work categories. It shapes employer decision-making relative to the employment of women directly in three respects:

First, as technology and the division of labor have spread with the development of the economy, the key decision-making posts at the managerial level in employing concerns have continued to go primarily to men. This reflects, in part, the fact that men are still considered more likely than women to remain in the paid labor force. As a result, boys are counselled to plan their careers and are given more opportunities to obtain the necessary education to enter management level jobs before they enter the work force. On the job, supervisors are more likely to encourage men and to enable them to acquire on the job training
needed to advance. From 1960 to 1970, there was actually a relative decline in the proportion of women employed at the management and administrative level, especially in the private sector, despite the overall increase of female employment. As a result, today as well as historically, most of the key decisions relative to employment continue to be made by men.

Secondly, employers, seeking to maximize their profits by holding down labor costs, have rationalized hiring women for low pay in traditional women's jobs in periods of expanding output and demand for labor. They justify the failure to provide women with clearly defined upgrading and on the job training by arguing despite evidence to the contrary - that women are only temporarily in the labor force. When demand slackens and output falls, employers rationalize laying women off before men for similar reasons. In some instances, women have been hired to replace men in traditional men's jobs when the men have demanded wages considered too high. This practice has tended to come to public notice primarily in cases where women have been hired to replace men during strikes. Historically, it has been a significant factor bolstering trade union efforts to exclude women from employment in particular fields altogether.

Third, in the post World War II years of relative prosperity and rapidly advancing technology, the U.S. economy experienced a structural shift towards increasing clerical, sales and service employment. In part, this was because blue collar factory work was being increasingly automated. Employers commonly do not attempt to estimate the labor cost when new technologies are introduced, for typically it does not increase. Instead, new technology often permits employment of less skilled and hence lower cost labor in the production process. At the same time, the resulting expansion of output has led to opening up new processing and distributive jobs in the clerical, sales and service categories. These have been increasingly dependent on the employment of women whose wages are significantly below those of most male workers in factory employment.
Another aspect of this picture is the increasing importance of economies of scale which have accompanied the rapid advance of technological innovation. This has contributed, on the other hand, to the trend towards increased concentration and the domination of the U.S. economy by giant corporations. The rapidly expanding and increasingly multinational corporations, which today employ a major share of the national labor force, have shown a significant tendency to shift assembly and last-stage processing to less developed countries where legislation restricting effective unionization together with chronic unemployment and rural poverty, generate a far larger and lower-cost labor reserve. Thus traditionally low paid women's industries like textiles and electronics have lost hundreds of thousands of jobs to areas like Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, Mexico, Brazil and South Africa. Wages in South African factories, for example, where four out of five U.S. dollars invested in African manufacturing are located, are about a sixth of the wages paid to women in comparable work in the United States.

At the level of employee reaction to employment decisions, the ideology that women should remain in the home interacts with and shapes the institutionalized practices of male wage workers who seek to reduce all potential competition for their jobs. A number of trade union organizations have used the ideology as an excuse to exclude women from membership and/or from apprenticeship training programs. This has, historically, been especially true of crafts unions, whose primary strength, traditionally, has rested in their ability to restrict entry.

The assumption that women should remain home contributes to restricting women's participation in union activities, even after they have been hired. As a result, only a very small proportion of women wage workers have been organized in unions: only a little over ten percent, compared to about 25 percent for male workers. For the most part, women union membership is concentrated in factory employment. Women in the more rapidly expanding clerical, sales and service worker categories, outside the public sector, tend to be almost entirely unorganized.

The fact that so few women have joined unions may be, in part, the result of
their own socialization. Available evidence indicates that women organized in unions have been able to earn significantly higher wages than those who are not.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Median weekly earnings</th>
<th>Unem-</th>
<th>Per-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All workers</td>
<td>Union members</td>
<td>Non-union workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, full-time workers</td>
<td>$169</td>
<td>$202</td>
<td>$157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, white</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, black</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Yet women's unwillingness to join unions, like that of men's, is undoubtedly fostered by press reports which single out stories of corruption in unions. The press seldom reports facts which show that unions have improved wages and working conditions for either men or women. Women's attitudes may also reflect their own particular socialization which may have the effect of convincing them that participation in unions is not 'lady-like'. This belief is fostered by the attitude adopted by white collar workers in general - including clerical and sales workers, the fastest growing employment categories for women - that to join unions is 'beneath' them. Employers often encourage this attitude, arguing that white collar workers, despite their relatively low wages, are really part of management.

On the other hand, there is a considerable amount of evidence that the unions, themselves, for the most part dominated by men, have made little effort to develop appropriate techniques for organizing the fast-growing numbers of women workers in any sector of the labor force. Women tend to be excluded from leadership, even in those areas, like the textiles and electronics industries, where they constitute the majority of membership.
Few unions make special efforts to ensure that women can attend meetings by arranging them at convenient times and locations and providing for childcare. When women do attend meetings, they are seldom encouraged to play a leadership role. Frequently, they are expected only to provide refreshments, or, at most, to act as secretaries. In other words, they are expected to fulfill the traditional role of women as auxiliary to that of men. They are seldom involved in the basic decision-making process.

The failure of unions to devote special attention to organizing women may be part of a more general failure of U.S. union leadership to mobilize all workers. Consideration of this is outside the scope of this brief paper.

As long as unions fail to deal effectively with ideologies which, like sexism, tend to divide workers, however, it is unlikely that they will be able to increase their membership and play a more effective role as a countervailing power in collective bargaining. It certainly appears probable that a major factor hindering women from attaining better wages in areas in which they predominate is their lack of effective collective bargaining machinery.

On the demand side, in sum, it appears that the ideology which holds that women's proper role is in the home has contributed to institutionalization of practices both at the level of the employer decision-making and employee reactions which restrict women from entry into and upgrading in wage employment. They also weaken their effective participation in collective bargaining which has been held by some economists, at least, as essential to enabling workers to become an effective countervailing power to the domination of the economy by multinational corporations today.
B) **The Supply Side:**

Most studies which examine why a particular group is disadvantaged in the labor market vis-a-vis other groups tend to look at questions of the supply of labor purely from the point of view of workers' educational preparation. When we examine the status of women in the labor market, we find that the influence of past attitudes and institutional relationships is important in determining not only the extent to which they are prepared but also the conditions under which they are available to enter the paid labor force given their traditional roles in the home. Traditional ideology and practices fostered by earlier patterns of technology and the division of labor persist in the home, in educational institutions, and in the society at large and hinder women from developing the necessary skills and attitudes required to improve their status in the labor market.

Only recently have economists and other social scientists begun to study the institutional as well as economic conditions affecting the supply of women in the labor market. One of the first steps which economists took in this direction was the recognition that the supply of labor in the market (and, in particular, the supply of women workers) depends upon economic relationships in the home as well as in the market. The traditional approach to the study of labor supply decisions viewed the individual as dividing his or her time between two alternative uses: paid labor and leisure, and failed to consider that labor market decisions must be made in terms of what Jacob Mincer has called the "family context."²⁶

Gary Becker, in his article, "A Theory of the Allocation of Time," used traditional economic tools to develop a general theory of allocation within the household which treated the entire household both as a producing and a consuming unit.²⁷ Individuals within the family, in his model, combine their time and purchased market goods to produce basic commodities such as child care, meals and leisure for household consumption. Thus, in the home each family member must make decisions to distribute leisure, home production
and market work in accord with his or her relative marginal contributions to
the household and relative earnings in paid employment. Although Becker's
model elucidates the complexity of household decision making, it still fails
to examine the causes of the differential allocation of labor between sexes
in the home -- a differential which is deeply embedded in the institutional
structure and ideology of the family and society.

In "Stratifying by Sex: Understanding the History of Working Women,"
Alice Kessler Harris points out that the status of women in the labor market
"reflects both the interdependence of individuals within the family and the
ideological and economic relationship of the family to the surrounding culture." 28
At each stage of economic development, there is a need to reaffirm and define
the so-called "proper" place for women and stipulate what work women may be
expected to undertake. For example, when New England mill owners required
cheap labor, it was considered respectable for young girls to work in factories
to contribute to the family income before they embarked on their career as
wife and mother. Later, when other cheap sources of labor became available,
factory work lost its respectability and only those women at the bottom of the
socioeconomic ladder ended up in mill work. Better educated women who found
it necessary to work maintained respectability by becoming elementary school
teachers or dress-makers. Teaching posts opened up rapidly to women as local
communities discovered that women could be hired at significantly lower wages
than could men, thus reducing the cost to taxpayers. In short, social norms
have reinforced sex role patterns which confine women primarily to the home, to
a limited range of socially acceptable occupations or to the least skilled,
lowest paid ranks of factory labor.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the progression of
technological and economic development altered the objective conditions of
women's work in the home and, at the same time accelerated job specialization
n the market. Outside the home, the demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labor increased and led to greater paid employment opportunities for women. Inside the home, technological innovations reduced the time required to perform many household tasks.

Electric refrigerators and packaged and frozen foods have reduced much of the time needed to collect and prepare meals. Washing and drying machines reduce the many hours formerly spent in washing clothes. Ready-to-wear synthetic fabrics have eliminated a great deal of time formerly spent in starching and ironing. Vacuum cleaners have shortened house cleaning hours. The list of innovations reducing housework is long, and continually getting longer.

Not all families have been affected by technological innovations in home production in the same manner. The differing impact of these changes reflects the economic and social status of families. We can look at two categories of families: those in which women find it economically necessary to work for pay; and those in which family income is high enough to afford women the choice between paid and home work. Two types of families fall into the first category: those where the husbands' earnings are too low to support the family; and female-headed households.

Economic hardship caused by inability of a poorly educated unskilled man to fulfill what are his "duties" toward his family as viewed by society forces a large number of similarly unprepared women into the labor force.
In 1974, 43 percent of all women who were married, husband present, were in the labor force, i.e. in nearly one half the families with both husband and wife present, both worked in the paid labor force. One out of three of the women in these families must continue to work, even when they have children under six years of age. In families where the wife is an earner, she most commonly contributes between 20 and 40 percent of the family income.

Over the past two and a half decades, one-parent families headed by women have been growing more rapidly than husband-wife families. The large increase in female-headed families reflects the increase in the number of separated and divorced women. Sawhill and Ross feel that the increasing economic independence of women may in part contribute to greater marital instability. It might be added that recent high levels of unemployment have aggravated family conflicts and further increased the divorce rate. A much higher proportion of women who fall in this group must work in the paid labor force to support themselves and their families, e.g. some 73 percent of all divorcees and 55 percent of women married but whose husbands are absent were in the labor force in 1974.

In March 1975, one in eight families (7.2 million families) was headed by a woman. These families had a median income of about $6,400, compared to $13,000 for families where both husband and wife were present in 1974. Nearly half of women heads aged 25 to 44 have three or more children.

These women constitute a particularly victimized group in our society in that institutions make little or no allowance for the problems they face both as mothers and as providers of financial support for their children. The 1975 Manpower Report to the President points out that for many of the women in these families, the high cost of child care and low earnings reduce the feasibility of paid employment, and, in many cases, make it uneconomical.
Quite often, divorced and separated women find themselves ill-equipped for market occupations other than those requiring little education and skill. Many of these women ultimately end up on welfare rolls.

Welfare mothers constitute a group with few rights and little ability to push for better status in the labor market. They often face a dilemma because their welfare payments are insufficient to maintain their families, but they are taxed by loss of part of their meager wages if they seek to supplement their income by taking a job. It is, of course, impossible to know how many of these women work illicitly at menial, low paying jobs merely to survive, but estimates suggest the numbers run into the hundreds of thousands.

The second category of women who work in the paid labor force are those whose families' incomes are high enough that they can substitute market goods for home production and still make the choice as to whether to devote their time to leisure or market employment. Increases in wage rates at the more skilled levels has made it desirable for more and more married women to enter the labor market. At least part of the subsequent increase in female income from this source has allowed women to substitute market commodities for the goods they previously produced at home without sacrificing overall family welfare. One substitute, which is available only to higher income families, is domestic labor which is generally low paid relative to other types of labor. While the numbers of women in domestic service have declined over the years, the existence of a pool of unskilled women seeking paid jobs has made it possible for more well-to-do women to take advantage of job opportunities outside the home. But the extremely low wages and hence the relative exploitation of workers in the service category appears to contradict many higher income women's stated desires to improve the status of all women in the paid labor market. It might be noted that it is often the female head of family...
who is forced by her family's poverty to take this kind of job illicitly, so she is in a particularly weak bargaining position.

Although technological innovations and rising wage rates have made paid work more feasible and attractive for women, the received ideology born of the past division of labor has perpetuated the role of woman as homemaker. Most women are constrained in their decisions to work as well as in their choices of occupations because their fathers-husbands-brothers-children expect them, even when they work outside the home, to perform most of the household activities as well. Therefore, the supply of women workers, as well as their occupational distribution, is affected by what are essential attitudinal and institutional factors in the family itself. Analysis of the supply of labor within a "family context" would predict that there would be a reallocation of time in household production among family members, from wife to husband, if the wife could earn more outside the home relative to her contribution in the home. Time use studies have shown, however, that women in the labor force continue to be the primary household worker in the home, especially in lower income families. In some cases, the major reallocation of time in the household production function has been from wife to adolescent(s).

The burden of housework limits women seeking paid employment to those types of jobs which place little demand on their time outside normal working hours. Hence, they are discouraged from entering certain occupations and professions where hours are long, demands are heavy and training periods are extended. In affluent families where possibilities for substitution of market goods for home production are greatest, increased family incomes have only served to augment the time the woman has had to spend in home production. Women, whose husbands hold influential or high status jobs, find they must expend considerable time in the administration of household and leisure activities. As Galbraith states:
With higher incomes the volume and diversity of consumption increase and therewith the number and complexity of tasks of household management. The distribution of time between the various tasks associated with the household, children's education and entertainment, clothing, social life and other forms of consumption becomes an increasingly complex and demanding affair.

While the wives of affluent families are more likely to be better educated than their lower income counterparts and, therefore, better able to command higher wages, in general the higher earnings of the husbands has been associated with lower participation rates by their wives. This factor underlines the fact that women are still often perceived as subordinates in the marital situation even when they find themselves with better education and greater resources.

Changes have occurred in the past 20 years so that, as employment opportunities and wages have increased for more educated women, this inverse relationship has become less consistent. There now appears to be a U-shaped curve reflecting the increased entry of better educated women into more attractive professional jobs. One might also add that, in addition to changed economic conditions, changing attitudes of women themselves may have contributed to these changes.

The typical pattern today appears to be for the woman with a BA or above to obtain a job, leave it while her children are young for a period of years, and then to return to the paid labor force for a prolonged period, as many as 30 or 40 years, before she retires. One out of three women must work, even when her children are under six years old.

In spite of the secular increase in labor participation rates for women, women, as a group, are still not expected in the long-run to work for pay outside the home and their families do not encourage them to seek improved education and a career. Instead, they are encouraged to behave acceptably in order to marry and fulfill their appropriate roles in the family.

Formal and informal educational institutions, including television, play an important role in perpetuating the myth that women can expect to work primarily at home,
taking care of the family. There is inadequate space here to explore this role in depth, but a few of the more salient features might be noted. First, it is true that most formal and informal educational institutions are administered at the top by men, but this is by no means the entire explanation for perpetuation of the myth that women are likely to be primarily homemakers. Even the women who play an important role, especially at the lower levels of educational institutions, typically, uncritically repeat the myth, unconscious of its detrimental effect on women's career options.

In the lower grades of school, girls are usually encouraged to think of themselves as housewives and mothers, or, at most, school teachers and nurses. They are seldom encouraged to aspire to higher levels of professional work or administration, even in areas of paid work where women predominate, like health and education. Women are seldom encouraged to plan and develop careers that involve extensive training and long-term commitment to advancement in the paid labor force, despite the fact that one out of two of them today will probably spend a major portion of her life working for pay. There are few, if any, courses designed to help women understand why it is important to participate in and acquire the skills for collective bargaining. Once women reach institutions of higher education, they find the facilities needed to enable them to acquire advanced training are sorely lacking: there are less funds for women students; child care is seldom available; flexible programs that might enable them to raise a family while they are studying are often frowned upon; released time from current jobs to obtain advanced training is difficult for women to obtain.

The impact of formal education is reinforced by the 'informal' education provided by the communications media. Extensive studies have illustrated that women are seldom given roles in which they might show leadership, either in the paid work world or the political community. Instead they are typically portrayed as housewives and/or sex objects. The ad in which the fatuous man proclaims, "My wife, I think I'll keep her," sums up the ignominious status of women presented by most of the media, even today.
The "surrounding" institutions and practices of the community at large further perpetuate the myth that women's place is in the home. Tax and social security legislation, even the methods of paying unemployment compensation, discriminate against women who work for pay. Banks and department stores still require women to obtain their husbands' signatures before they will grant them credit. The list is too long to include here, but the point must be stressed that institutionalized societal practices function at almost every level to sanction, and, in this sense, 'teach' the myth that women should be expected to stay at home.

In short, the sum total of educational institutions and practices, outside as well as inside the home, contribute to accommodate the expectations of both men and women to the myth that women will work at home. As a result, they help to build the ideological foundation of the manifold practices which have shaped the supply of women workers into unconscious acceptance of their position as members of a labor reserve.

C. The Impact of Current Unemployment:

The relative prosperity of the 1960s, during which increasing numbers of women were absorbed into the rapidly expanding and structurally changing labor force, saw the emergence of an increasingly conscious women's movement. This new movement, though largely led by women from the higher income groups, seeks to change both the ideology and associated institutionalized practices which have relegated women into low-paid, unattractive jobs. By the late 'sixties and early 'seventies, primarily as a result of pressure from women's groups, a series of laws and administrative rulings had begun to provide for equal wages for equal work, equal work opportunities, and affirmative action by employers in significant sectors of the labor market.

Enforcement of this legislation was, however, hampered from the outset by lack of sufficient funds and personnel, as well as cumbersome administrative procedures. It was most effectively enforced in the Federal Government where
direct sanctions could be instituted. In the private sector, too, government efforts to insist on affirmative action for firms with government contracts, and in some instances legal suits brought by women, began to have some impact in opening up non-traditional jobs to women and ending openly discriminatory unequal pay practices. These successes had little impact, however, in upgrading the work performed or the incomes earned by the majority of women working for pay. Most remained in traditional women's job areas at incomes barely more than half those of men.

When mass unemployment emerged in the 1970s, many of the improvements that had been made were eliminated. Once again, women were among the first laid off, and their unemployment rates exceeded those of men's. Government funds for personnel and enforcement of legislation and administrative rulings providing equal pay and work opportunities for women and minorities, inadequate as they had been before, were sharply reduced on both federal and state levels. In Massachusetts, for example, the 1976 budget of the Commission Against Discrimination was slashed 31.5 percent below 1975 level, although complaints had increased significantly 41.

Some employers, seeking to lower wages of all workers to reduce overall labor costs, attempted to take advantage of rulings providing for equal work opportunities for women and minorities to weaken effective collective bargaining. Affirmative action was used in some instances to rationalize attacks on seniority, historically a vital collective bargaining demand designed to protect the jobs of workers with more seniority and higher wages. This tended to harden the positions of some unions against making special efforts to organize women.

* In fact they were reduced to the 1969 level, despite rising costs and the large increase of complaints since that year. (Glendora Putnam interview).
The emergence of a semi-permanent unemployment of six to eight percent nationally, with much higher rates of unemployment among women and minorities, once again brought the issue of women's role in the labor reserve to the fore. It appears probable that, as long as unemployment persists at such high rates, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to change the ideology and institutionalized practices that have hindered women from entering and attaining advancement on an equal footing with men in the paid labor force.

IV. The Need to Restructure the World of Work:

The explanation here posed focuses on the way the ideology and institutionalized practices, inherited from a past division of labor, have interacted to relegate women into an expendable labor reserve characterized by low pay and high unemployment rates. Both the ideology and the institutions persist, despite the fact that the objective conditions relating to the division of labor, which initially gave rise to them, both at home and on the job, have been fundamentally altered under the impact of the massive technological changes spawned by the industrial revolution. If the explanation is valid, it argues strongly that the solution to the problems of low-wages - high-unemployment among women lies in restructuring the world of work at home and on the job, to bring it into line with the technological possibilities of the mid-twentieth century. In the process of attempting to achieve this solution, it will clearly be essential to re-educate both men and women, altering the institutionalized practices which have penetrated and distorted their relationships not only in their work places, but in the family setting as well.

The primary prerequisite for success in efforts to end discriminatory practices against women seeking paid work, the above explanation argues, is full employment. As long as unemployment persists, employers and male workers are likely, consciously or unconsciously, to cling to outmoded practices and institutions which appear to function in their interests. For the employers,
the argument that women are only temporarily in the paid labor force provides justification for the failure to improve their pay and upgrade their skills in periods of prosperity. At the same time, it rationalizes laying women off first in periods of recession. For male workers, the argument bolsters shortsighted exclusion of women from jobs and unions they perceive as 'theirs', even though in the long run these practices weaken women's effective participation in the collective bargaining essential to improve the overall conditions of work for both men and women.

Increasingly, social scientists and policy makers have begun to argue for the introduction of a higher degree of planning to ensure full employment for all, both men and women, who seek paid jobs. It seems reasonable to maintain that in the United States - among the most affluent nations in the world, if not the most affluent - it is not too much to expect that all who need and want to participate in the division of labor which today extends far beyond the boundaries of the home, should be able to obtain jobs for pay to enable them to buy the commodities which modern technological advance has produced. Legislative proposals have been advanced to provide full employment through government provision of jobs, assuming a multiplier effect to all sectors of the economy. Increasingly, too, economists are suggesting that the orthodox model that assumes competition for profit will lead to the best allocation of resources is unrealistic in light of the facts of modern technology. This is true whether one is developing analysis at the level of jobs for women, or at the level of the national political economy. Modern technology has imposed economies of scale facilitating, and to some extent, necessitating a level of industrial concentration which renders meaningful competition a myth. Increasingly, it is being argued that what is needed is effective overall planning along with the reorganization of essential institutions to ensure effective implementation of the plans made. While more specific prescriptions are outside the scope of this paper, the development of more concrete analysis along these lines appears essential to improve the job status of women.
At the same time, it appears evident that technology in the United States has reached levels high enough to produce all the requirements of the society during a shorter work week for individual employees.* It seems probable that the current eight percent rate of unemployment could be eliminated if the hours of work of the labor force were reduced to, say, thirty. Wages for all those at the lower end of the pay scale, including women and minorities, would need to be raised to enable them to provide adequate family support by working for the shorter period. By raising the wages at the lower end of the pay scale, it would be possible to reduce the income gap between the highly-paid supervisory-managerial-coupon clipping families and those of the majority of workers with wages below the median, whose present weekly wages are too low to support a family of four at the minimum estimated necessary by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The resulting spread of purchasing power, furthermore, should augment effective demand and stimulate increased production and employment throughout the economy.

In the context of a full employment economy, new approaches to paid work could provide for greater flexibility and more creative participation by both men and women in the labor force. In many jobs, more cooperative decision-making could replace the prevailing hierarchical job structure which tends to reduce some workers, typically including most women and minority employees, to unskilled, repetitive boring tasks while others assume the policy-making, supervisory role. The introduction of flexitime and perhaps shared jobs could provide an opportunity for both men and women to adjust their work time more flexibly to mutual family needs.**

It must be emphasized that restructuring the world of work on the job to permit women to play a fuller and more equal role in the paid labor force requires,

*It is often argued that managerial and professional workers have not even been able to reduce their hours to the legally required forty a week. The fact is, however that such salaried workers are well-recompensed for their extra hours, and, at least in the case of professional people, often work them because they enjoy the work. There need be no requirement that salaried workers must reduce their hours to the legal maximum of thirty, if it were established.

**Research might be conducted to determine whether managerial and supervisory hours, too, might not be reduced, in the long run, by the adoption of such cooperative approaches to work.
simultaneously, a restructuring of the world of work at home. The husband and children can no longer assume that the wife-mother will carry on all the housework and childcare, regardless of her paid work responsibilities outside the home. Instead, they need to participate in a more cooperative sharing pattern. The fact that both husband and wife will have access to a shorter work week on the job, giving both the greater leisure necessary to enjoy the family and associated cultural and recreational activities, should facilitate adoption of this more cooperative approach.

If restructuring the world of work on the job and at home is to become a reality, it requires a fundamental change in the entire inherited ideological and institutional pattern. It is here argued that the objective technological conditions are over-ripe for these changes. Women, who seek to improve their status in the paid labor force, should be in the forefront of efforts to achieve them.
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5. Carolyn Shaw Bell, in "Age, Sex, Marriage and Jobs", The Public Interest, No. 30, Winter, 1973, justifiably objects to the argument that the high rate of unemployment among women, and hence in the labor force, reflects the alleged fact that they do not really need to work.

6. For a summary of this approach, see David Gordon, Theories of Poverty and Unemployment (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1974) esp. ch. 5.

7. A. Seidman surveyed some 40 articles listed in the Social Sciences Index re expectations of firms from 1950-68 all of which emphasize the impossibility of forecasting with certainty.


32. Ibid.


36. Ibid.


41. (NE Alert, Vol. 1, No. 1, Jan. 1976) In fact they were reduced to the 1969 level, despite rising costs and the large increase of complaints since that year. (Glendora Putnam interview).

42. Robert H. Heilbroner, in "The American Plan" (New York Times Magazine, Jan 25, 1976) argues, "National economic planning will arrive when businessmen demand it - and demand it they will, to save the capitalist system."