

The Problem of Female Labour

A Study of Women in the Workforce During the  
Second World War.

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History Honours Dissertation

"This is the first time that this Court has had to deal directly with the problem of female labour. The Unions here insist on "equal pay for equal work". This phrase has an attractive sound, and seems to carry justice on its face; for, obviously, where a woman produces as good results as a man in the same kind of work she ought not to get less remuneration."

Justice Higgins - Mildura Fruit Pickers'

Judgement.

1912

*Despite the recent emergence of a substantial body of material dealing with the roles and functions of women in industrial capitalist society, both within and without the ranks of the professional social scientists, a coherent theory which places women functionally and analytically in that society has no yet been developed. One of the reasons for this is that much of the work has consisted of detailed empirical accounts presented as analysis, but which because of their empirical nature have been adequate only as descriptions of certain sections of women in certain situations. The currency of the term "women's role" reveals that investigators seek descriptive rather than active interpretations. A role is a part played, the superficial manifestation of underlying forces, but not the exposure of those forces themselves. A role is predetermined, not the activities which spring from human consciousness and its awareness of its surroundings. The character of these investigations has meant that one of the most neglected areas - that of women's function in the labour force - has become a thorn in the side of all contending theories.*

I hope to contribute to this discussion by documenting and analysing the functions and activities of women as a cheap source of labour in the Australian work-force during and immediately after the Second World War, and in so doing to throw the spotlight onto the importance of that cheap source of paid labour to industrial capitalism in Australia. A labour force that is apparently so important that its maintainance was able to become a threat and a challenge to Australia's war mobilization.

The Second World War was chosen as an historical reference point for two main reasons. Firstly because the writing of history about women, especially women in the work-force presents particular problems. During a crisis situation social undercurrents are often exposed which in more stable periods tend to work both unnoticed at the time and undetectable to posterity. This is especially true of women in the work-force, for their very invisibility in historical and contemporary documentation forms an important instrument for the continuation of their suppression, and their availability for exploitation. Women undertake two main forms of labour in industrial society, that of unpaid work at home, and of paid work in the labour-force. The unpaid work is presented not only as primary but also as paramount thus relegating the

paid work to insignificance and invisibility. As Juliet Mitchell in Women's Estate says,

Their exploitation is invisible behind an ideology that masks the fact that they work at all - their work appears inessential.<sup>1</sup>

Thus their suppression and exploitation in the work-force continues unhindered, for it has no ideological existence. During the Second World War, the need for vast increases in the number of women in the work-force, necessitated a temporary reversal of the relative promotion of the two functions, promoting and therefore highlighting what would otherwise be imperceptible.

Secondly and probably because of the above, the Second World War has been seen as something of a watershed in the history of women's employment in Australia and although many of supposed markers are in fact misplaced<sup>2</sup> the war did set many precedents and provides an excellent forum for the examination of women's paid labour.

The habitual invisibility of women in historical writing has now become a widely noted oversight. Many recent historians aware of their predecessors' neglect of one half of the world's inhabitants have paid token homage by including a few paragraphs, or perhaps even a chapter formally devoted to the role of women in a particular incident or period. But

1. Juliet Mitchell, Women's Estate, Penguin Books (Middlesex, 1971, p139.

2. See below p 14 - 15

the formality adopted, and the patronizing acceptance of a need to compensate do no more than demonstrate the void created by the dismissal of women from the mainstream of material deserving historical analysis.

The activities of women are usually presented in a purely narrative way, they are seen as totally separate or merely subordinate to those of the central questions under discussion. The debility of this approach is shown in the recent collection of essays The Occupation of a Continent. The chapter on the Second World War devotes two paragraphs to women. Beginning with their service in the Auxiliary Defence Forces it moves to the factories, manpower enforcements and in a last effort to include all sectors throws in:

The Australian Women's Land Army was formed late in September 1942 to take up the slack in rural industries created by the enlistment of men.<sup>3</sup>

The contributions of women are seen as a block in themselves, removed and separated from the main body of the text, giving the impression that they were incidental to the real problems confronted by the nation at war.

This approach to women in history can partly be attributed to the separatist nature of most history written about women to date, including most feminist history. In their haste to rectify the omission

3. Australian History, The Occupation of a Continent. Eureka, Melbourne 1978. p353

feminist historians have tended to fall into the same trap as their male antagonists. They have written exclusively of women and in doing so have failed to correct the balance, but have merely created a new imbalance. For society is made up of men and women and the events of history are the results of the interactions between them. No historical analysis can be complete without consideration of all the elements which have been involved in its making. While women have rarely stormed the centre stage reserved for great persons, they nevertheless have mostly constituted one half of all historical subjects, and their needs, motives, attitudes, fears, desires, intentions and purposes create a thrust in the making of history, for they are as ever-present as men.

An attempt to present a conceptual framework for the writing of women's history is made by Gerda Lerna in her article Placing Women in History: A 1975 Perspective. Lerna traces four useful themes found in most current women's history writing. "Compensatory History" attempts to readjust the balance by focusing on the "notable women" in history, but has the same limitations as its male counterpart, and because its subjects are not typical, in fact sometimes deviant they tell us little about women's real importance in historical events. "Contribution History" describes

the roles and activities in political and social movements, but neglects to discern their purposes or the forces they represent for it presents them as a contributory factor only, supplementing the activities of the men and the movement of which they are part. Another theme has dealt with women's oppression and documented their fight against it, but again this approach has failed to reveal the ongoing participation of women in the development of human culture, it has separated the particular struggles of women against their particular oppression from the overall historical context. Finally women have often been presented through the eyes of the ideology dominant in a particular historical period, (for example the 'perfect Victorian lady'), and as Lerna points out, that ideology has often been created to mystify the lives of real women, and reflects therefore not actual women and their life struggles, but rather the manequins they are supposed to emulate.

At present we have a body of distorted history. History purporting to tell the whole story but which, based on the activities of only one half of society cannot correctly tell half of that story. No accurate representation of the past can be presented without consideration of both halves of the society. They coexist in such intimate relations that their interaction penetrates all areas of their lives.

Developments towards the writing of complete histories can only now begin, for it is only now that we have understood the need to include women in the basic patterns. The histories of women written so far, despite their limitations have been an essential part of the realization of the need for that development, and thus have offered an immensely valuable contribution towards the process of seeking true historical representation.

Work of this nature has been forthcoming in Australia. Beverley Kingston's My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann and Ryan and Conlon's Silent Invaders have provided a great deal of descriptive information, giving an empirical overview of the general trends and the struggles waged by women in the workforce, but they lack any analysis of the function of these women in society as a whole.

In the introduction to Women in Australia Kay Daniels states that the history of women in Australia must be written "not as a separate study but in the context of social history;"<sup>4</sup> and points out that the inclusion of women in social history will radically alter the social history itself:

We have not thought that women's invisibility in historical writing is because they have in some way 'fallen through' the fabric of society into its 'cracks and crevices' but that historical writing has been deficient in the examination of that fabric and has consequently left unrevealed

4. Kay Daniels, Women in Australia, An annotated guide to records. Commonwealth of Australia, 1977, (p vi)

the basic processes and relationships of society and the integral role of women in them.<sup>5</sup>

One of the distortions created by the neglect of any serious consideration of the processes and activities involving women in society has become apparent during the writing of this paper. R. Ward, F. Alexander and E. Cowley in their general histories of Australia all take the position that the outstanding feature of World War 11 in Australia was the unification and co-operation of all sections of society in the face of the crisis which became evident from 1941, and the sacrifices willingly made to avert that crisis:

The home front showed a rare unanimity.<sup>6</sup>

At least from the time Russia entered the war in June 1941, the only hint of dissent came from a few hundred sympathizers of the self-styled 'Australia First' movement.<sup>7</sup>

Last but by no means least, the spreading of the sacrifice has been effected with the co-operation - somewhat reluctant and belated perhaps - of all concerned: in management, intrade unions and on wheat farms, and without disrupting any of the major political parties on whose mutual collaboration and mutual respect the peacetime prosperity as well as the wartime security would depend.<sup>8</sup>

5. Ibid., p vii

6. G.C. Bolton in A New History of Australia, Ed. F. Crowley, Griffin Press, Adelaide, 1977 (p 496)

7. R. Ward A Nation for a Continent, Heinemann Education (Australia), 1977, (p 254)

8. F. Alexander, Australia Since Federation, Nelson, (Melbourne) 1973 (p143)

This presentation is a distortion of the war-time period, which was continually marked by conflicts, strikes, discontent and labour shortages, all of which seriously impeded the nation's war effort, and all of which centered around the question of pay rates for women. Australia's most critical weakness during the war was its inability to activate sufficient manpower. With a population of only seven million people Australia was under direct attack by the southward thrust of the Japanese by late 1941. Her own available manpower had no hope of averting the Japanese advances. The traditional European allies were unable to offer help or support and so the Prime Minister, John Curtin called on America for protection. The attack Pearl Harbour by Japanese bombs assured Australia of American troops but this increased the strain on the manpower situation, for not only did Australia have to supply troops to defend her shores and ward off the Japanese advance in the Pacific, she now had to supply American troops with food and materials who were fighting in the Pacific and resting in Australia.

Many of the overstrained civilian industries had traditionally employed women, for example textiles and food processing, but from 1941 the numbers needed to be greatly increased. If Australia was to exploit

her resources to the fullest to ward off the Japanese she needed to attract women into the workforce. This paper will show that this policy had only limited success, that Government quotas for the number of women required were never met and as a result the number of available males for combatant service was lower than anticipated. It will also show that women refused to be coerced into poorly paid jobs with sweat-shop conditions; that they required increased wages and generally would not enter the workforce without them. Yet the employers and conservative politicians mounted a concerted fight against any attempts by the women or the Labor Government to introduce higher wages.

Throughout 1942, a year in which according to Bolton the nation experienced "the greatest crisis in the nation's history"<sup>9</sup> (because of the apparent strength of the Japanese threat to national independence) another battle was allowed to rage internally - over women's rates of pay. Bolton describes the seriousness of the defence situation:

By the beginning of April the centuries-old European domination of S.E.Asia was at an end . . . For the first time Australia's mainland tasted enemy action, as Japanese aircraft struck at Darwin, Broome and other points along the northern coast.<sup>10</sup>

9. Crowley, Op Cit., p465

10. Ibid., p 465

In spite of this danger the United Australia Party (UAP) opposition moved a motion in May to disallow the National Security Regulations under which the Labor Government had constituted a Women's Employment Board (WEB). The Board was intended to fix the wages and conditions of the women entering industry to replace the men who were enlisting in the defence services. Speaking for the motion H. Holt said:

I say, speaking with some knowledge, that there is being developed in industrial circles a bitterness which will wreak havoc so far as our war effort is concerned, and poison the relationships between employers and employees throughout the community.<sup>11</sup>

In September the Senate disallowed the Regulations and the Government immediately introduced the Women's Employment Bill, which provided for the maintenance of the WEB by-passing the National Security Regulations. When introducing the Bill, John Curtin said:

The Government's case for the maintenance of the Women's Employment Board with the powers and functions previously exercised by it is simply that, unless this be done, Australia's war effort will be gravely impeded.<sup>12</sup>

In the same debate the Government threatened to call a double dissolution if the Bill was not

11. Hansard, 21/5/1942.

12 Hansard, 29/9/42 p 1069

allowed to pass through the Senate, Authur Calwell said:

As a matter of fact, the best thing that could happen to this Parliament, now that it is becoming unworkable because of the intransigence of the Opposition in the Senate, would be to have a double dissolution so that the people might decide the issue.<sup>13</sup>

Yet Bolton is content to say:

During the crisis months of 1942 party strife was restrained in the federal parliament.<sup>14</sup>

This is because his view, and that of his colleagues is distorted by their failure to consider women's integral part in the processes and relationships of society.

It was not only in Parliament that the conflict surfaced. The Courts continually received writs from employers challenging the wages introduced by Labor policy and strikes by women were frequent. The cost plus system which many Government contracts were organized under, meant that employers maintained stable profit margins regardless of the amount of wages they paid. Thus the fight by employers against the national need for higher female wages was in some cases simply insurance against paying higher wages to women after the war. This fight was so bitter and earnest that one is forced to ask whether employers

13. Hansard 30/9/42 p 1255

14. Crowley, Op Cit., p 465

saw their greatest threat as that which came from Japan, or higher wages for women.

All of these general histories appear to be so pre-occupied with seeking obstruction to the war effort from the labour movement, that they are wonder struck that it did not occur and conclude that there must have been total unity. This attitude comes partly from their viewing the Second World War in contrast to the First. Their preoccupation with potential threats from the left based on the challenge to the war effort by the labor movement over the issue of conscription in the first world war blinds them to the actual threats to the united war effort during the second world war - those that came from the right, from employers and conservatives. They have discerned the divisions existent in the conservative parties, but have failed to note the unity the conservatives displayed on the issue of women's wages and the threat of that unity to the national war effort.

It is perhaps understandable that the second world war has been approached as a contrast to the first when presenting a general history of Australia. But had these writers taken the trouble to treat women as real historical subjects they would have

been able to rest content with their misleading conclusions.

When women have been mentioned in these general histories in connection with the Second World War, they have been presented as a "reserve army" of industrial workers, entering the workforce at the beginning of the war and leaving with its termination. This same approach has been taken in all previous work on women in the war.

The theory of the reserve army of the unemployed was originally offered by Marx in volume one of Capital, who saw that an industrial reserve army grew from the fluctuations and variable constituents involved in capital's ability to employ workers, and that,

It is the working population which, while effecting the accumulation of capital, also produces the means whereby it is itself rendered superfluous ..... But if a surplus working-class population is a necessary product of accumulation, or of the development of wealth upon a capitalist basis, on the other hand this overpopulation becomes a lever promoting capitalist accumulation, and is indeed a necessary condition of the existence of the capitalist method of production. It forms an available industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital no less absolutely than if the capitalists had bred the members of this army at their own cost.<sup>1</sup>

This theory has been adopted by feminists seeking a theoretical framework for their understanding of women's

15. K. Marx, Capital, Volume One, Everyman Library, London 1968 (Volume 2, p698)

paid labour in capitalist society and it has been accepted and applied somewhat simplistically and formally in Australia to the experiences of women in the war. Time Rowse and Penny Ryan in Women, Arbitration and the Family state:

women, especially married women, constitute a 'reserve' army of the unemployed.<sup>16</sup>

Their subsequent analysis of women in World War 11 has failed to uncover the nature of women's employment, choosing to concerntrate only on the women who took "men's" jobs, they have obscured the conflicts which surrounded the whole question of women's work and the importance of their cheap labour to the Australian economy. As we shall see the number of women who constituted what might be termed a 'reserve army' were only one quarter of all the women who obtained employment during the war. But the obstruction manifested by employers and conservatives to these women receiving "mens" wages for fear they may disaffect the pool of cheap labour, and the inability of industry to attract sufficient women into the workforce, shows that the 'reserve army' theory has no application at all, for they must be prepared at all times to enter the work force. In Australia employers refused to construct the preconditions for that entry, that is higher wages.

16. T. Rowse & P. Ryan, Women, Arbitration and the Family from "Women at Work", Eds., A. Curthoys, S. Eade, and P. Spearitt, published by Aust. Soc for the study of Labour History, 1975, p 17

Ruth Milkman has shown in Women's Work and the Economic Crisis: Some Lessons from the Great Depression, that although the 'reserve army' theory is not applicable to American women in the Depression it is applicable in the Second World War.

Thus the 'reserve army' theory which is quite inadequate for analyzing the experience of women during the contraction of the 1930's, fits their situation during the period of demobilization in the 1940's rather well.<sup>17</sup>

Muriel Heagney, a feminist and unionist who fought during the war for higher rates of pay for women, commented in a report she prepared that in Great Britain and the United States governments and labour experts had induced interested parties to examine the problem of women's employment at the outset of the war. This organization suggests that perhaps in those countries women were brought into the war as a 'reserve army' of labour. Whereas in Australia Heagney notes:-

the issue had been left to employers to solve by rule of thumb and trial and error regardless of the social and physical damage to misplaced workers of either sex.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the reason behind the inapplicability of the 'reserve army' theory to Australian conditions

17. Ruth Milkman, Women's Work and the Economic Crisis: Some Lessons from the Great Depression, from "The Review of Radical Political Economics", Vol 8 NO.1, p85.
18. Muriel Heagney, "Report by M.H. to Aust. Paper Mill Employees Union", Muriel Heagney papers, Latrobe Library, Box 1170/3(b)

is Australia's lack of any alternative cheap source of labour. European capitalism emerged with a ready made, rigid class system, but the "New World" has been forced to look elsewhere. The annihilation of the Aborigines and the expulsion of the Chinese have denied Australian capitalism access to the cheap labour used in other colonial economies such as the native negroes in South Africa and the imported ones in the USA. Thus it could well be that women provide Australia with its prime source of cheap labour. It is very likely that this is the cause of the extreme sexism in Australia that is shown by Anne Summers in Damned Whores and God's Police.<sup>19</sup>

Working women have always been especially "Invisible" in Australia compared with those in other western democracies, there is a noticeable lack of "public" working women in Australia such as politicians, and until the war most "famous" Australian women were "housewives with a cause". The promotion of the working woman during the war and increased "visibility" led women to seek fields they had otherwise been denied. Such an example were the Women for Canberra who sought female political representation.

19. Anne Summers, Damned Whores and God's Police Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1975

Andree Wright's work examines the ideological reversal of roles which occurred to the mythical mannequin of womanhood as she was presented by the Australian Woman's Weekly throughout the war years. During this period the previously "invisible" paid worker not only became "visible" but attained primacy over her housewife counterpart. Wright notes:-

"During the early war years up to 1942, homemaking and motherhood remained the most important job."<sup>20</sup>

But as the need for increased supplies of female labour became obvious the magazine began to change its "heroine's" image.

As long as women were needed in the workforce magazine propaganda painted an attractive image of the working woman.<sup>21</sup>

However as soon as the war was over the working woman resumed her nonentity in the pages of the Woman's Weekly and "The Bride replaced the working-woman."<sup>22</sup> Wright's article is very important for it clearly illustrates the reversal of ideological primacy, but it falls down because she only views one aspect of the effect of the war on women, and that not of its effect on real women but on mythical mannequins.

Although Wright's intention is to show the ideological rationale used to manipulate women for their greater subjugation she actually accepts that ideology herself

20. Andree Wright, "The Australian Women's Weekly, Depression and the War Years, Romance and Reality", from Refractory Girl, No.3 1973 p 11

21. Ibid p 9

22. Ibid., p 13

in the sense that she uses it as evidence from which to form her conclusions. She accepts the 'reserve army' theory and concludes that women were driven into war work, and then driven out of it and fails to see that although the ideology was a necessary pre-requisite for the mobilization of women, in itself it was unable to drive women either into war work or out of it. For as we shall see the women who largely made themselves available for war work were those women available to industry at all times as a cheap pool of paid labour, other women resisted.

## Chapter 2

### The Impediment to High Wages

The history of women in the Australian labour-force this century has been dominated by conflict between opposing forces - the employers and the trade union movement. Until the Second World War neither of these antagonists really represented women, rather women workers have tended to be meat in the sandwich with employers keen to employ them at cheap rates, and the trade union movement keen prevent them from competing unfairly with male workers for jobs. The result has been the rigid sex-segregation of areas of employment. In 1907 Justice H.B. Higgins declared in the Harvester judgement that the basic wage should be based on:-

the normal needs of the average employee regarded as a human being living in a civilized community.<sup>1</sup>

Later he specified that men required more than women to cover their "normal needs" for they were responsible for a wife and children, and thus a basic wage was institutionalised to provide for a basic family unit. Realizing that lower wages for women might cause unfair job competition for men, he sought in the 1912 rural workers' case to separate men's work from women's work. In 1917 Justice C. Powers ruled that

if the work is man's work, the minimum wage to be fixed for an adult is a wage sufficient to keep a man, his wife, and a family of three children in reasonable comfort. If it is women's work, a wage sufficient to keep a single woman in reasonable comfort.<sup>2</sup>

1. Ryan & Conlon, <sup>Gentle</sup> ~~Silent~~ Invaders, Nelson, (Aust.) 1975, p90
2. Constance Larmour, Women's Wages and the WEB from "Women at Work" Op Cit., p 47

The rate fixed was 54% of the male rate, the ideological justification for paying women just over half of men's wages was provided in this "living wage" ruling, displacing altogether the concept of "the rate for the job". A precedent which was to dominate women's wage decisions for thirty years.

The response to this ruling by employers was to seek -

increasingly to have more occupations classified as female work, and the trade unions traditionally opposed these applications.<sup>3</sup>

Thus women were paid low wages and confined to special areas of employment.

In the twenties a section of the trade union movement influenced by the ideas of the feminist movement and led by Muriel Heagney, began to campaign for equal pay for women, as a basic social justice and to prevent the unequal job competition which the low wages presented to men. In 1937 the Council of Action for Equal Pay was established and constituted of delegates from unions with Muriel Heagney as its secretary. The Council's main concern was to fight for a commitment to the concept of equal pay in the Labor Party and the trade union movement.<sup>4</sup> Although both the UAP and

3. Ibid., p48

4. Minutes of the Council of Action for Equal Pay, Muriel Heagney papers op cit.,

the ALP had equal pay in their policy statements there was obviously still much groundwork to be done. Ryan and Conlon say of Muriel Heagney:

Hers was the fairly thankless yet necessary task of chipping away at the trade union movement, putting in the spade work which led to showy but unfortunately shortlived resolutions in favour of equal pay and opportunity.<sup>5</sup>

The depression increased ~~the union~~ fears of ~~the women~~ women as unequal job competitors and it was content to protect itself with job segregation.

The Second World War brought these issues to a head, and the confrontation between employers and the labour movement centered around the question of pay rates for women. The same basic principles were involved but the urgency of the situation forced both unionists and employers to clarify their positions, and it forced the conflict into the political arena compelling the two main political parties to declare their positions over the question. A concerted opposition was mounted by conservative politicians, employer organizations, government administrators and individual employers against any steps for increased pay rates for women, the only steps which would have resulted in the much needed increased participation of women in industry. The women on the other hand, with only the half-hearted support

5. Ryan & Conlon Op Cit., p 121

of the ALP and the trade union<sup>movement</sup> fell back onto the only weapon of free workers in industrial capitalism, the right to withhold their labour, and even this was a luxury not all could afford. The impediment to the war effort<sup>created</sup> by this situation was noted often by both the labour movement and the employers' fraternity, but the employers' belligerence on the matter created a stalemate which lasted throughout the war.

At first Australia was slow to mobilize its womanpower at all. Women were the recipients of the war-time propaganda inciting in them strong patriotism, but those who were eager to participate in a more direct way than their traditional roles allowed, were frustrated by the social and economic barriers which prevailed. In response to these frustrated needs, women formed volunteer organizations, some of which formed themselves into training groups, designed their own uniforms, chose leaders and began to seek official recognition. But these efforts were not appreciated by the authorities:-

It is clear from the files that male officialdom found them something of a nuisance.<sup>6</sup>

In October 1940, the Air Force which was chronically short of telegraph operators had proposed the formation of the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force. It was known that 350 women had already

6. P. Hasluck, The Government and the People 1939-41 "Australia in the War of 1939-1945" (Aust. War Memorial, Canberra 1952) p 401

been trained by the Voluntary Women's Emergency Signal Corps and the Women's Air Training Corps, whereas it would have taken £175 and eight months to train men to the same standard.<sup>7</sup> It took until January 1941 for the Government to agree to the enlistment of women in the Air Force, where they would mostly be doing "mens" jobs, and then it was seen as a purely temporary measure, and they were paid only two-thirds of the male rate.

The labour movement was confused about the potential entry of vast numbers of women into "men's" jobs. A large section remained hostile seeing women as unfair competition. The ALP Federal Opposition opposed the employment of women in the armed services but their greatest concern seemed to be over the question of wages. N.J. Makin spoke for the Opposition saying that if they must be employed they must have the same rates of pay and privileges.<sup>8</sup> Makin and Blackburn two of the most left wing members of the Parliamentary Labor Party approached the Minister for Air, stating that;

It should be an axiom that when women and men are employed on the same class or work, they should be paid the same rate of wages. Any other course is unfair to both the women and the men.<sup>9</sup>

7. Ibid., p 403

8. Ibid., p465

9. Extract from Hansard, in Equal Pay Report of A&TU sub-committee, April 22, 23, & 29, 1941. p594. Clothing Trades Union file, "Women and the War".

Paul Hasluck attributes the sluggish attitudes to the use of female labour

very largely to male obtuseness, coupled with a lingering idea that war is man's work.<sup>10</sup>

This does not explain the ferocity of the battle which ensued over the wages which women were to be paid, nor does he explain the tenacity of the "lingering" idea that women should work, but for less.

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Attempts were made to expand Australia's industrial output by the complete re-organization of munitions production. In June 1940 a Department of Munitions was established which had complete power to requisition all private resources of plant and equipment. A Manpower Committee was also set up to direct the supply of labour, the shortage of which was recognised at this early date. It was estimated that a total of 15,200 workers were employed in munitions and a further 80,000 would be required during the next twelve months. This presented problems for the Committee as Hasluck points out:-

It was not a matter of affecting machines but political human beings; it did not handle raw material but men with ideas embedded deep in the strata of social custom, industrial practice and human rights and liberties.<sup>11</sup>

10. Hasluck, Op Cit., p 401

11. Ibid., p 231

The labour had to be found from somewhere and coerced into the required areas. An amendment to the National Security Act, supported by the ALP in June 1940, gave the Government the power to control

both the property and the services of all Australians for the defence of Australia.<sup>12</sup>

As the allied defeats in Europe increased, the manpower shortage in Australia became more pressing and the use of women seemed inevitable. Faced with this situation the trade union movement tried to consolidate its position and began a campaign to defend their conditions and postwar job security by calling for equal pay for women employed in "men's" jobs. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) held a conference in April 1941. A sub-committee was formed to investigate the question of equal pay for women which reported:-

The conference affirms the right of women to earn their living in industry, the professions and the public service and demands for all workers the legal right to equal occupational rates based on the nature of the job and not on the sex of the workers.<sup>13</sup>

These sentiments had obviously stemmed from the fear that employers would use the opportunity to introduce women at lower rates of pay into previously classified "male" areas. The report of the sub-

12. Hasluck, Op Cit., p232

13. Equal Pay Sub-Committee, Op Cit., p 5

committee continued:-

since the beginning of this war women are replacing men at differential rates of pay in rapidly increasing numbers, yet, the Menzies Government ..... has failed to apply equal pay even where it has power so to do. On the contrary, Federal Cabinet Ministers appear determined that whilst they continue to hold office, the capitalists and profiteers of this country will be assured of a steady flow of cheap female labour to replace men withdrawn for military purposes.<sup>14</sup>

and they pressured the ALP:-

Having regard for the fact that during the war the Commonwealth Parliament has almost unlimited power to make laws, this Congress requests the Federal Labour Party to take the necessary action to provide for equal pay for sexes.<sup>15</sup>

Makin responded for the Labor Party by moving a Private Members Bill, calling for equal pay in all civil and defence departments. The Bill said:-

in the opinion of this House the discrimination by reason of difference of sex between workers is economically indefensible and is inconsistent with the Australian principle of equality, and that consequently the Government should forthwith apply this principle of equality in all civil and defence departments by according equal wages, salaries and allowances to men and women employed upon work of the same class.<sup>16</sup>

14. Ibid., p5

15. Ibid., p?

16. Reported by Heagney, "Women's Place in Post-war reconstruction, 1941" - M.H. papers, Box 1170/(e)

The labour movement had made its position clear. It would not tolerate cheap female labour being introduced into "male" areas of employment.

Meanwhile the ground work for the transference of labour to specific areas was seen as vital by the government. The preparations for this transference began to take effect. In May 1941 the Prime Minister told a War Cabinet meeting that they should get the best publicist and journalist in Australia to ensure that the press and the people were caught up into the national effort.<sup>17</sup>

The strategies of the UAP had become evident, they were concerned to "sow the seeds" of patriotism, in order to coerce labour, but they made no mention of the possible need to compensate labour for any inconvenience caused. On the 8 June the Director General of the Department of Information was appointed part of his duties were:-

to organize in all parts of Australia committees and groups to play their part in the creation and expression of a sound public psychology and the furtherance of our efforts in relation to both manpower and supply.<sup>18</sup>

In June 1941 658,100 women were "gainfully" occupied in Australia excluding those in the defence forces, 15,000 women having been brought into the workforce since the beginning of the war in 1939<sup>19</sup>

17. Hasluck, Op Cit., p 238

18. Ibid., p 238

19. Labour Report, Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, No. 38, 1949

It was estimated that another 150,000 persons were needed for munitions and associated production alone<sup>20</sup> and the government was forced to consider the question of female employment seriously. The defence services had become anxious to recruit females to release men for combatant duties. On top of this the essential civilian services needed women to take the place of men who could be released into the defence services. The strain on Manpower was becoming considerable, there was a total population of 3,544,768 females and 3,598,767 males in June 1941.<sup>21</sup>

At this time there were only 1,399 women in the services and 11,503 in Munitions and civilian employment for armed services, more than half of whom were unskilled workers.<sup>22</sup> In July the review of manpower prepared for the War Cabinet said:-

in the course of two years the total number of women engaged in the services, munitions and aircraft production .... should be raised from 12,972 to 52,376.<sup>23</sup>

The entry of the Japanese into the war in October 1941 preceded the election of a Labor Government, and immediate steps were taken to

20. Hasluck, Op Cit., p231

21. Commonwealth Year Book, 1942.

22. Hasluck, Op Cit., p406

23 Ibid., p406

alleviate the now critical manpower shortage. The entry of the Japanese increased the need for women's labour to be utilized, and a Labor Government, while not perhaps committed to women's employment was nevertheless not traditionally opposed to increasing pay rates, as the UAP was. However there was resistance to the employment of women from section of the trade union movement, who were faced with women being introduced on lower pay rates into their areas of employment. The munitions workers at Lithgow and the Omnibus employees in N.S.W. had refused to let women enter their job areas.<sup>24</sup>

When John Curtin announced in December 1941 that Cabinet had decided

as a war measure to approve of the principle of extensive employment of women in industries where men are no available in sufficient numbers to attain the scale of production approved as a war objective,<sup>25</sup>

he also gave a public undertaking that all women employed under the conditions approved shall be employed only for the duration of the war and shall be replaced by men as they become available.<sup>26</sup>

This was a clear statement of the Labor Government's intentions, but the trade union movement remained sceptical. Promises seemed worthless

24. Hansard 30/9/42, p1251

25. Ibid., p 265

26. Ibid., p 265

without any substantial legislation for equal pay, or which guaranteed that women would not pose a threat to the security of men's post-war employment prospects. There were well aware that employers were only too keen to employ women at cheaper rates than the men being drawn into the defence services.

Wages had been pegged as part of the early war emergency programme which meant that the traditional wage Arbitrators could not see their way clear to raise women's pay, despite the fact that many of the women to be drawn into industry would be occupied in new work for women for which there were no previous wage awards. To ensure the successful transference of women into "men's" jobs the government created the Women's Employment Board in March 1942, to rule on cases pertaining to the wages and conditions of women employed in jobs for which there were not set awards or conditions. The constant threats to the Board's existence, the attacks on its validity, and the refusal to pay women the rates it put down were clear indications of the strength of the opposition of employers to women receiving higher wage rates.

The Board was not to override the established arbitration machinery but to determine women's rates on the basis of their comparative efficiency with that of men within the limits of 60%-100%.

It was to consist of two employer representatives, two employee representatives and an independent chairman, Judge A.W. Foster. When it was first constituted in April 1942 the Associated Chamber of Manufacturers refused to nominate a representative because,

the Board was to do work which is properly a function of the Arbitration Court, reconsideration should be given to its appointment.<sup>27</sup>

As a result of this delay the Board did not begin functioning until May and even then the employer representative changed three times.

In September the Senate disallowed by 17-16 the National Security Regulations under which the WEB was constituted, and on the same day the Victorian Chamber of Manufacturers and Hecla Electric Pty., Ltd., instituted action in the High Court to test the validity of the Board. This action was provoked by the fact that WEB had become operative and issued a comprehensive judgement of 60% for one month probation and then 90% for metal workers employed by nineteen firms.

The Government however showed its willingness to defend the WEB by threatening to call a double dissolution of the Parliament when they introduced the Women's Employment Bill into the House of Representatives. This Bill by-passed the need for the

27. Chamber of Manufacturers Annual Report, 1942, p 9.

National Security Regulations. In the debate A. Calwell said that the Government would be pleased to call a double dissolution over this matter for they were sure that the people would see the need to attract women into the workforce which the Opposition obviously did not.<sup>28</sup> The Senate let the Bill pass through.

In the second reading of the Bill the need for the maintenance for the WEB was discussed and the Prime Minister made clear the reasons for the existence of the Board. He said that it was an essential part of the organization of Australia for total war and unless it was maintained

Australia's war effort will be gravely impeded. In addition the organization of the labour resources of this country and the diversion on a large scale of women to employment in war production and essential industries will be rendered practically impossible.<sup>29</sup>

He went on to explain the overloading of the Arbitration Court and the resulting delays in decisions, saying that quick judgements were necessary for women because

the Government was faced with the urgent problem of telling women what their rates of pay and conditions of work would be before it drew them into avocations in which they had never before engaged, and in which they were temporarily required to replace men.<sup>30</sup>

28. Hansard 30/9/42, pp 1255 - 1259

29. Ibid., p1071

30. Ibid., p1071

Curtin was concerned to show the Board's role as arbitrator in clarifying the position of these women with regard to pay and conditions but also in determining the temporary nature of their employment.

The men faced with this temporary intrusion of women were as much interested in the rates of pay and conditions of work as were the women themselves.<sup>31</sup>

And he tried to reassure employers that general wage levels (presumably including the wages of the lowly paid women in "women's" work) would not be affected:

the general level of wages is not in question; that is determined by the Arbitration Court. What is required is an adjustment of women's wages on the basis of the capacity of women to undertake work that is normally done by men.<sup>32</sup>

The employers however, were aware of the implications of raising the pay of a section of women employees. Other women would become dissatisfied and seek the higher wages for themselves. The arguments of the Conservative Opposition to the Bill centered around its constitutional validity, and its encroachment on the areas of the Arbitration. This was a sore point because the Board's constitution restricted its judgements to 60%-90% of the male rate. Its entitlement to award rates on the basis of efficiency created dissention as the Arbitration Court could have

31. Ibid., p1071

32. Ibid., p 1073

dispensed with the efficiency ruling and would have been free to award any rates on any basis, and would, very likely have ruled in favour of its 1919 basic wage ruling.

However it was evident that the real fear of conservatives, was the expected disputations which would occur from the large wage disparities which the WEB ruling were creating.

The underlying fear that employers might not receive a fair hearing led to the Opposition objecting to the appointment of Miss E. Cashman, an ex-trade union official, as the Government employer representative

All of whose affiliations must, if she is honest  
 ..... be with the trade union movement, and particularly the women's section of the trade union movement.<sup>33</sup>

They also questioned the impartiality of Judge Foster, the president of the Board with the casting vote, for he had some previous involvement with left-wing politics in Victoria.

The Board's decisions were limited for its constitution didn't allow for any Common Rulings, which meant that each place of employment needed separate hearings. In January 1943 the Minister for Labor E.J. Ward announced an extension in the powers of the Board which enabled it to make a Common Ruling (under which the same conditions, might be prescribed for the same work performed in the same conditions), intending to expedite

applications to the Board and thus minimize its delays.<sup>34</sup>

The employers reacted immediately, and applied to the full Arbitration Court for an order interpreting the Women's Employment Act, hoping to receive a decision which would prevent any Common Rulings being handed down by WEB. The employer's representative at the hearing said:-

that the ulterior motive (for the WEB) was to give effect to the Labor policy of equal pay for the sexes.<sup>35</sup>

However the Arbitration Court upheld the Act, by a majority decision. It stated clearly that WEB had power to set pay rates for women in certain industries retrospective to March 1942. The employers had asked the court to determine the terms "work usually performed by males" but Chief Judge Piper said it was a matter for the Board to determine.<sup>36</sup>

The Board had given a Common Ruling of 90% to the metal trades and employers responded by sending a deputation to the Prime Minister asking:-

that the attitude of the Government be defined and a clear indication given as to whether it was the Government's policy to institute the payment of Women's Employment Board rates to all female employees in the Metal Trades Industry, thus removing the anomalies created by the Board's decision and, at the same time, placing upon the Government the onus of introducing rates which, it was considered, were

34. Argus 8/1/43 p2  
 35. Argus 14/1/43 p 2  
 36. Argus 25/2/43 p 4

entirely uneconomic from a national standpoint.<sup>37</sup>

*Real  
Matters  
Wage  $\rightarrow$  Labor  
economic*

In March 1943 the Senate moved to disallow the *WEB* new regulations which covered the Common Ruling powers. Senator Leckie of the UAP said when he gave notice of the move for disallowance that he intended to object to the clauses in the regulations which gave WEB the power to fix wages and conditions of work now being done by women which had not previously been done at all. Secondly those which extended decisions relating to one employer in an industry to other employers in the same industry and thirdly, those which extended WEB decisions to work other than the class of work which was the subject of the application were to be disallowed also.<sup>38</sup> The Senate disallowed the regulations and WEB could make no further Common Rulings.

There were also problems associated with the application of WEB rulings, for the question of what was in fact "women's" work and what was "men's" was not so clear cut as might at first have been anticipated, particularly as many of the decisions were actually left to be decided by the employer and employees, after the Board's rulings had been made. The rulings covered the type of work and the wages to be paid, but not exactly which people in each

37. Annual Report, Chamber of Manufacturers, 1943 p7

38. Argus 17/3/43

shop were covered. The confusion which arose from this situation is illustrated by the variance in rates of pay at General Electric Pty., Ltd., recorded in the logbook of Muriel Heagney when she was an organizer for the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) which covered many women in men's jobs. 176 girls were employed and sixty of these received the common WEB rate for the metal trades (90% of the male rate), and yet there were 116 women employed on jobs designated as "female" because women had executed them before the war although they were similar in nature to those which came under the WEB rates. These women received the pre-war Metal Trades Award which was 75% of the male basic rate plus margins and penalties, £3.13.6. In some cases the jobs were almost identical, and some actually worked the same machine. In one case two women did identical work by day as two men did by night but because the firm employed women for night shift and because the job had been done by a woman before the war they received the female rates.<sup>39</sup> These problems were widespread, in some factories women received female rates because those factories had previously employed women, whereas in other factories women doing identical work received WEB rates because men had previously been employed. This of course led to a situation where women workers

39. Muriel Heagney Papers, A.E.U. Log Book, kept by Heagney when she was an organizer, Box 1159/4(a) Entry dated 22/3/43

sought the "men's" jobs because of the higher rates of pay, sometimes skilled women sought unskilled jobs and were paid £2 or £3 more per week. This situation was aggravated by the pegging of pre-war wages so that women tended to move out of their traditional job areas to obtain the higher rates. Thus the cheap pool of labour which women provided was jeopardized. The firm and consistent stand that employers took against the WEB rulings indicate their concern to maintain this pool.

The records kept by Muriel Heagney also show the reluctance of employers to pay the higher WEB rates to women, even after their attempts to negate its validity had temporarily failed. One outstanding example of the manouevres typical of employers were those by the Cooper Engineering Company in N.S.W. who paid the women in the main shop 90% of the male rate and those in an annex doing similar work the female Metal Trade Award. On the 24 March 1943 Heagney report:-

There is great discontent and men and women are agreed that action should be taken to secure the 90% for all women engaged in this shop.<sup>40</sup>

The women had threatened to decrease their production to 60% in protest at their 60% wages, but Heagney persuaded them to keep working whilst she investigated the legal situation of the WEB rates.

40. Ibid., Entry of 24/3/43

The men were also claiming increased pay and had put an embargo on overtime. All of the women were entitled to the 90% under the Common Ruling of the WEB on the Metal Trades. On the 24th May the employers asked the men to separate the two issues and offered them an increase of 6/- per week, but as far as the women were concerned they continued to prevaricate. They said that they needed three weeks' proof that the women could produce 90% of the male output and once that was obtained, that they needed Government approval to pay the WEB rates, despite their possessing a letter from the Munitions Department advising them to pay WEB rates "where applicable" the meaning of which they questioned. Management argued that if they increased some women's pay it would cause an upheaval with the others, the 'others' referred to prepared a written statement assuring management that they would not object to their workmates receiving the higher rates. The Legal Adviser of the Department of Labor and National Services said that 90% was applicable to Cooper Engineering workers, and the Munitions Department said that applicability of WEB rates rested with the Department of Labor and National Service. Despite this the WEB rates were still not being paid by the 26 August and management had reclassified many of the women to permanently

avoid payment of the WEB rates. The Log Books are full of examples of employers refusing to pay women WEB rates in N.S.W., but it was all done by individual employers. Whereas in Victoria the situation was much more one of open warfare.

In Melbourne on the 22 March 1943, 1500 female munitions workers, stopped work and were followed by a further 1500 the following day. The workers were striking because employers had refused to pay the 90% WEB rates. Ironworkers Union representative was reported by the Argus as saying:-

The Chamber of Manufacturers had advised their firms not to pay 90% of the male rate of pay to these workers back to March 3, 1942<sup>41</sup>

Employers however persisted and in May 1943 some firms were still refusing the back-pay owed to their employees. All of these industries were involved in direct war work and the employers refusal to pay the rates determined by the WEB can be seen in no other light than a determination to contain women's wages at the expense of the war effort.

The WEB rates were applicable only for the duration of the war, and employers were gambling with time which was on their side. By 1943 the turn of the war was clear. This delaying tactic was facilitated by a special condition of WEB payments allowing a shorter period for claiming retrospective

pay than the Arbitration Court or the State Industrial laws, after the cessation of pay.<sup>42</sup>

In June 1943 the employers tried to invalidate the rulings of WEB, and Foster resigned. The WEB continued for some months and eventually its work was taken over by the Arbitration Court of which Foster was now a Judge.

Although the Labour Party battled for the defence of WEB, it seems that their main concern was the peaceful relations between employers and employees rather than with the question of equal wages for women. The trade union's had made their position clear, and the institution of WEB emerged as an ingenious tactic to satisfy the demands of the union movement, but because of its nature it was no real threat to the cheap pool of female labour.

The Arbitration Court saw strong sex differentials in types of suitable employment, nevertheless Justice H.B. Higgins ruled in the Mildura Fruit Pickers case in 1912:-

that in the case of the pickers, men and women, being on a substantial level, should be paid on the same level of wages;<sup>43</sup>

If this ruling had been extended to all women engaged in men's work they would have received full pay automatically as men did, but the institution of WEB meant that they had to prove their efficiency before

42. Heagney Papers, Op Cit., MS9106 Box B1166/2

43. Commonwealth Arbitration Reports, No. 6 p72

their award was set. Although the insistence of the conservative opposition and the employers that the Arbitration Court alone should determine women's wages suggests that they were confident it would rule in their favour, it is an indictment of the Labour Government's attitude to women that it didn't legislate or direct the WEB to uphold this precedent.

It is also interesting and not very commendable in view of the later confusion caused by the Board, and the temporary nature of its judgements that Makin's Private Members' Equal Pay Bill presented while Labor was in Opposition, lapsed when the Women's Employment Bill was introduced. It seems apparent that in fact WEB played a significant role itself in controlling rather than in promoting higher wage rates for women, for the Equal Pay Bill would have set a precedent for equal pay which the WEB did not. The Bill recommended equal pay without reference to its duration, or without any reference to the efficiency of women.

Judge Foster himself saw the Board as the precursor of a battle for equal pay, but not as setting any precedent for equal pay itself. He said:-

It may quite well be that females who have enjoyed the higher rates will be influential enough through their industrial organizations

to secure the continuance if not the extension of Women's Employment Board rates.<sup>44</sup>

The Board was seen by one of the employer representatives as a vehicle to ensure the temporary nature of women's new work and of occupational sex segregation for he said:-

that it is one of the objects of the formation of this Board to help to ensure that they shall go out when the war ceases.<sup>45</sup>

Whilst the Board was operative it determined the wages of between 80,000 and 90,000 women, out of a maximum of 800,000 employed . It gave 100% of male rates to nine categories of employment, but most of these were made with the full agreement of the employer, for example the Tramways Board was paying full rates to women tram conductresses when the Court heard the case, and the minutes of the Council of Action for Equal Pay show that the Milk and Ice Carters gained the full rate by direct union - employer negotiation.<sup>46</sup> These rates could only be reduced by direct union - employer negotiation making them more lasting, for the WEB rates would be reduced automatically with the termination of the war.

44. From Report of Chairman, 1945 WEB papers, cited by Lamour Op Cit., p55

45 Heangey Papers, Box 1170/3 (F)

46. Heagney Papers, Box B1166/2

## Chapter 3

### The Promotion of Low Wages

From the beginning of 1943 the emphasis in industry began to shift from munitions which employed many of the women on WEB rates (as well as many on lower rates) to those industries which supplied the necessary refurbishments for the Australian and American forces in the Pacific. The lend-lease arrangement with the U.S.A made Australia responsible for supplying most of the clothing, stores, provisions and food for the troops whilst the Americans supplied most of the munitions and heavy materials.

As far as women were concerned the spotlight had been on the women receiving WEB rates, but after the arrival of the 'Yankees' it shifted to the women in the areas which were receiving increased pressure for production. All of these areas were very low paid, and it was their work which became most vital to the war effort from the middle of 1943 until the end of the war.

The WEB workers had been paid higher wages, and although these had caused dissention by employers unwilling to pay them, and afraid of the disparities they would cause, they had attracted women into the required areas. However after 1943 as we shall see all areas of vital female employment suffered chronic shortages of labour, all areas paid low wages, and

all areas resisted wage increases. A short survey of the situations in some of the vital areas which employed women on low rates of pay will begin to illustrate the extent of the shortages.

The Women's Land Army and Auxiliary was formed by the Department of Labour and National Service in July 1942 as an extension of several voluntary and privately-sponsored land armies. It fell under the auspices of the Director General of Manpower and consisted of women of top physical condition who enlisted for twelve month periods in the army and shorter periods in the Auxiliary. The WLA recruits received award or district rates for their work unless it was under a basic remuneration of 30/- p.w. plus keep or 50/- p.w. without. The WLA was intended to release men from the rural sector but its success in this was limited by its inability to attract sufficient numbers of women, with its low rates of pay. By May 1943 only 2,000 women had enlisted<sup>1</sup> despite a target of 6,000 set in January.<sup>2</sup> The WLA was eventually intended to reach a maximum of 10,000 but its actual maximum in the harvest of 1943-44 was only 4,000. The lend-lease programme had led

1. S.J. Butlin & C.B. Schedvin, War Economy 1942-45  
Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1977 p199

2. Ibid., p378

to increased attention on the rural sector, and its manpower situation was re-considered. The WLA was obviously not going to rally the necessary number of women unless its pay rates were increased. However instead, another source of even cheaper labor was found. Towards the end of 1943 and during 1944 12,000 Italian prisoners were imported from India for work in rural industries.<sup>3</sup>

The same situation was evident in the Services although initially sections of women clamoured to join. Women in the Services received social acclaim, and ex-serviceman's benefits, both of which were denied the women in low paid civilian employment, but despite this the expectations of enlistment were not met.

In the early stages of female enlistments the numbers of women increased rapidly from about 20,000 in July 1942 to about 43,000 in July 1943, but thereafter the rate of increase slowed appreciably and enlistments fell well short of expectations.<sup>4</sup>

Women in the services received roughly 2/3rds of the men's rates, a Group 4 Navy and Army personnel (the lowest paid rate) received 3/10 per day active pay.<sup>5</sup> In a pamphlet prepared by Muirel Heagney called "Women in the War" she says of the services:-

3. Ibid., p526

4. Ibid., p366

5. Hansard, appendix, 5/5/58, "Answers to Questions"

(they) were formed in a hurry with no proper legal standing, no disciplinary codes to govern their members, but with only one thing made clear - that women in the services were not to have, automatically, the same pay and allowances as men.<sup>6</sup>

Another area of low remuneration for exacting work which suffered critically from lack of staff was the nursing profession. Nurses received very low pay, worked long hours with shifts around the clock in very bad conditions.<sup>7</sup> The minimum rate for a 1st year nursing trainee was 10/10 p.w. for a working week of fifty hours. In a factory working shorter hours on WEB rates she could have received £5 or £6 p.w. The three Nursing Services drew heavily from civilian sources and many nurses moved into other occupations offering superior wages and conditions, leaving the nursing situation in civilian hospitals critical.

The textile industry which largely depended on female labour and which expanded greatly during the war, also suffered from a severe short of staff. It offered low wages and sweat-shop conditions. This description of one of the factories was made by a shop steward of the Clothing Workers' Union:

The factory is in the main over-crowded and

6. Australian Women in the War, Heagney Papers, Box
7. Victorian Anti-Sweating League, Report of December 1st. in Anti-Sweating League Box, Latrobe Library Box 1062/2

unhealthy and the constant supervision exercised by the proprietors of the firm in an endeavour to force production to an impossible level is having a serious effect on the health of a number of employees. For example this week one male machinist fainted at his machine as a direct result of the strain of working at high pressure combined with the over-bearing attitude of the employers.<sup>8</sup>

It is therefore hardly surprising that Butlin says that the labour shortages were so great that they were largely responsible for the decline of the industry in 1943.

In the overall employment situation of 1943 and 1944 clothing and textiles lost labour to better paid and often more congenial work.<sup>9</sup> The industry was forced to decentralize in its search for labour.

Throughout the war the manpower situation remained critical in all of these areas of employment, and it is no coincidence that that they all offered low remuneration to the their female employees, although other factors were involved.

Geographical distribution meant that some women were not used simply because they lived away from any convenient industry. Moving women from one area to another was problematic. Apart from the fact that many had dependents, in the social climate of the 40's

8. Disputes Folder, Clothing Workers Union, Trades Hall Melbourne.

9 Butlin Op Cit., p50

they needed special accomodation conditions which were not usually available. Industrial planners tried to decentralize industry to overcome this problem, at first munitions and then textile factories were established in country areas in the hope of using the remaining groups of unoccupied women and girls.

The psychological resistance to women working remained strong in many men and women, for it had been strongly entrenched and probably continued to prevent some sections of women entering employment.

However attempts to overcome these difficulties were insignificant in light of the importance of the pay factor and employers determination to retain it at its current level. One of the strongest criticisms of WEB was that its high wage rulings led to such wage discrepancies among female labour that women flocked into the highly paid jobs at the expense of the low paid areas.

When the Sydney County Council advertised twelve positions at WEB rates ranging from £6.7.6 to £4.16.0 in 1942, it received 2,000 applications<sup>10</sup> at a time when there was a grave shortage in areas declared "female" paying traditional female rates.

Most women worked for money, and if the amount paid wasn't sufficient those who could afford to, abstained from working at all. The Clothing Trades Union Journal, Voice points this out in July 1943 when it said:-

10. Hansard, 30/9/42 p1253

More women work today because it has become a necessity. In the past, food and other things essential to life were purchased more cheaply, but today living costs have risen, and a woman can no longer live on the allowance that her husband or father can allow her.<sup>11</sup>

A judgement of the Arbitration Court in 1944 in response to an appeal from the Australian Boot Trade Employees Federation, shows the acceptance by the Court and the Unions that women were attracted by higher rates of pay:-

The Court should not intrude into the field of manpower distribution or regulation by fixing a rate, which it would otherwise not fix for the purpose of affecting or controlling the available supply of manpower;<sup>12</sup>

This quotation appeared in the Chamber of Manufacturers' Annual Report, thus they too recognised the need for higher wages to attract women into the required areas. However these wages were not forthcoming and the situation remained critical.

In May 1942 manpower needs for the Services and Munitions were assessed at 270,000 men and 48,000 women. By the end of June only 90,000 men and 14,000 women had been obtained. These figures were clearly short of those needed, although in the period from April to June employment in civil production had fallen by about 140,000 and enlistments had absorbed 228,000

11. Voice Clothing Trades Union, July 1943, p2

12, Chamber of Manufacturers' Annual Report, 1945, p6

men and 12,000 women reflecting the strain on civil employment and the need to secure greater numbers from elsewhere. The realistic situation as presented by Butlin in War Economy based on the documents of Inter-departmental committee set up to investigate the manpower needs was:-

(that) the most optimistic estimates were that 145,000 men might be extracted - if replaced by 40,000 women.<sup>13</sup>

This meant that the total number of women needed from civilian sources was 88,000. At this time there were 1,300,000 unmarried and married women without dependents aged 14-59. 800,000 were already in the workforce and by June 1944 the figure only increased by another 25,000.<sup>14</sup> Some indication of the number of "available" women who refused employment becomes evident when we consider that many of 825,000 gained for employment were in fact married women with dependent children. The situation was desparate, Butlin says

without the most determined and unrelenting use of compulsion, the committee repeated again and again, that these optimistic estimates, whether for male or female labour would be quite unattainable.<sup>15</sup>

Cabinet however delayed over the question of conscripted female labour, for it implied a gross infringement on civil liberties even in war-time.

13. Butlin op Cit/, p39

14. Ibid., p389

15. Ibid p 42

The Manpower Committee was forced to attempt to solve the problem by increasing the restrictions on employment in non-vital areas, and by instigating far reaching publicity campaigns. But they did not consider any general policy of higher wages, women's wages still remained pegged to their pre-war levels.

However this policy proved to be unsuccessful and in August the inter-departmental committee proposed that:-

the Director-General of Manpower should have and 'use extensively' power to direct both men and women<sup>16</sup>

Thus the previously evaded step was taken in January 1943. The Manpower Committee was given the power to direct any person to engage in specified employment. This step was treated very delicately, and certain exemptions and rights of appeal accompanied it, for it represented an acknowledged infringement of the right of personal choice for employment and seemed dangerously close to industrial conscription.

Intensive publicity campaigns encouraging the voluntary transfer of labour accompanied it but they carried the warning that force would be used. The Manpower Directorate sent registration cards and questionnaires to all single women aged 18 to 45 and married ones without children.<sup>17</sup> The National Service Offices called up large numbers of women for interviews,

16. Ibid., p 44

17. Age 9/3/43 p2

these pressures were intended to prevent the necessity of large scale conscription, but eventually in March 1943 the enforced engagements began. The N.S.W. Director of Manpower said

women who were unwilling to work, but whose excuses failed to satisfy the authorities together with all those who failed to answer the call-up would be notified to start work immediately.<sup>18</sup>

He did not mention the low rates paid in the particular jobs or the lack of willingness among women to enter low paid work. His statement followed the announcement that 130 conscripted women had begun work in Sydney Canneries, and was obviously largely designed to scare women into voluntarily applying for the low paid jobs.

The Manpower Directorate co-operated with employers to force women to work for low wages. In 1943 the Annual Report of the Chamber of Manufacturers reveals:-

Council considered that the appointment of a Liaison Officer, who would be in a position to give expert advice regarding the needs of manufacturers, would be of assistance to both the authorities and to our members. The suggestion was approved by the Deputy Director-General of Manpower, who kindly made available an office in the Central Bureau of Employment, and a member of the Chamber Staff, Mr. C,H, Morrow, is now acting in this capacity.<sup>19</sup>

18. Age 9/3/43 p2

19. Annual Report, Chamber of Manu., 1944 p5

However the Director of Manpower was not so obliging to the women he directed. He became the scourge of working women and the collusion between employers and the Directorate is illustrated by the following examples. At Foster instruments in August 1943 a 16yr old girl was refused a release despite the presentation of a doctor's certificate.<sup>20</sup> In Melbourne a dispute at a clothing factory had resulted in four girls walking out and refusing to return unless the boss asked them personally. Instead he reported them to the local Manpower Office where:-

Mr. Thornton of '.....' had tried to bounce them and threatened them to six months imprisonment.<sup>21</sup>

Of all the women who were conscripted between January 1943 and July 1944, 14% lodged appeals and half were upheld.<sup>22</sup> This power could not be used to direct women into the services. It is an interesting statement on the attitude to female labour, that they could be conscripted into low paid factory work, without any prestige at all, whilst moves to conscript women into the services were resisted. The social forces against women entering men's jobs were obviously greater than those against industrial conscription for women, showing in fact that society's prejudice was not so much against women working as against them breaking out of their traditionally designated jobs.

20. Heagney papers, Log Book, Op Cit.,

21. Disputes Folder, Clothing Workers Union

22. Butlin Op Cit, p368

Many women showed their antagonism to their expected role either by refusing the employment offered or by fighting against the conditions of their employment. Muriel Heagney reports in her papers that the women in lower paid jobs were dissatisfied and that there were many threatened and actual stoppages.<sup>23</sup> The concern of women to improve their employment conditions is shown by the remarkable increase in Trade Union membership shown by Table 1.

TABLE 1 24

TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP SHOWN AS PERCENTAGE  
OF THE TOTAL WORKFORCE, BY SEX.

	males	females
1939	51.6	32.8
1940	52.7	35.0
1942	52.5	50.0
1943	53.5	49.2
1944	53.3	50.6
1945	54.9	51.9
1946	61.8	51.7
1947	66.6	51.6
1948	69.7	50.6

The following figures in Table 2 show a large increase in the number of disputes and a startling number of establishments affected by disputes in 1943. This year saw the need for women in low paid jobs at its greatest, and was also the year that conscription was introduced. The high number of establishments affected indicate the widespread extent

23. Heagney Papers Box 1170/4/b

24. Commonwealth Year Books,

of the disputes.

TABLE 2<sup>25</sup>

INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES

	No.	Estab- ments	Workers Involved	Days Lost	Wages Lost
1939	416	505	152,836	459,154	455,716
41	567	1,540	248,107	984,174	1,000,102
42	602	745	169,263	378,195	456,090
43	785	4,481	296,103	990,151	1,153,506
44	941	1,992	276,558	912,752	1,111,729
45	945	1,648	315,938	2,119,641	2,567,444
46	860	1,882	348,518	1,947,844	2,290,147
47	982	3,058	301,125	1,662,686	2,299,114

The figures of workers involved in disputes are not sex segregated but some indication of the number of women involved is given by a statement on female minimum rates prepared by the Clothing Workers Union in 1943:-

So far as the men are concerned, this objective (no disputes) was largely achieved and at no stage during the war was there a dispute even of a minor nature involving males .....

What has applied by and large to men has not, unfortunately applied equally to women workers in the clothing industry. Circumstances in regard to female employment are totally at variance to those surrounding employment of males and the result has been somewhat disasterous.<sup>26</sup>

By July 1944 the situation in low paid female jobs which were vital to the war effort was so bad that the

25. Commonwealth Year Book, 1951.

26. Statement prepared on Female Minimum Rates, "Women in the War", Folder, Clothing Trades Union

Full Arbitration Court finally issued new regulations which lifted the pay rates to 75% of the male basic rate plus loadings.<sup>27</sup> The "men's" jobs had involved large numbers of munitions workers and by July 1944 the number employed in Government munitions had dropped by 37,961 from the peak of employment in April-June 1943.<sup>28</sup> Many of these women were expected to move into the cheaply paid jobs in the food processing and textiles industries, the Council for Women in War Work, reported in 1944:-

The swing of demand for labour has passed from heavy industries to the traditional women employing industries and the gains achieved through the WEB are being negatized as women are being compulsorily transferred by Manpower to jobs rated at about £3.0.0 p.w.<sup>29</sup>

Enforced labour had not accomodated the shortages, it had merely increased the dissatisfaction and the extent of industrial disputation. It would seem that the step of raising pay rates was a last desperate attempt to attract women into these very unattractive jobs. In a report on Women and Children in War Work completed in January 1944, Heagney gives some idea of the fall in wages which some women were expected to accept:-

In the metal industry women had received with overtime wages ranging up to £9.0.0 p.w. and now in food processing industries they would not attain more than £4.0.0 with the same amount of overtime.<sup>30</sup>

27. Age, 20/7/44 p2

28. Commonwealth Year Book, 1944/45, p1064

29. Heagney Papers, Box 1167/66

30. Heagney Papers, Box 1162/4(b)

The Labor Government had attempted to adjust female wages in March 1943 when Ward made the issue the subject of a submission in which he contended that unless the Arbitration Court had the power to change women's awards, to create greater parity with WEB rates,

(the) present unsatisfactory conditions of protests, stoppages and absenteeism would continue.<sup>31</sup>

However the submission was rejected by the Court and it wasn't until July 1944 that they lifted the wages of women in vital industries, and even then it was not to be a permanent feature, the new rates were applicable only for the duration of the war and for six months thereafter.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the fact that married women with children were never considered by the Inter-departmental Committee as a potential labour force, it is clear that in fact they were used during the war, and that the Government and society at large condoned the situation, inducements being offered to these women in the form of child minding facilities. An undated letter from the Industrial Welfare Division of the Government to Muriel Heagney confirms that the department had made a wide survey of child-care requirements and furnished it to the Health Department.<sup>33</sup> In 1939 there were 72 free kindergartens in Australia and by

31. P. Hasluck, The Government and the People 1943-45

Australian War Memorial, Canberra. p 268

32. Age 20/7/44 p2

33. Heagney Papers, Correspondence, Box 1159/4/(b)

1945 there were 124,<sup>34</sup> a phenomenal growth given the shortage of manpower and materials, and one which suggests that these pre-school centres must have received priority from the State Governments under whose jurisdiction they fell. The Department of Labour & National Service issued a report in September 1941 "Freeing Mothers for War Work". It revealed that the preparation for the entry of mothers into the workforce took place very early in the war.

In June 1940, the Ministry of Health arranged at the request of this Ministry that where the provision of day nurseries was found to be necessary in order to free young married women for war work, the Government would pay the local authority one hundred per cent of approved expenditure on the adaptation of equipment of premises and one shilling per diem for each child.<sup>35</sup>

Requests were received from 90 districts and the Government authorized the local authorities in all cases to go ahead.

In order to free for war work the women of slightly older children and of children of school age, the Board of Education have encouraged in these areas the increased provision of meals at school.<sup>36</sup>

The reports continues:-

Early in 1941 it became apparent that the provision of nurseries on a scale sufficient to meet in full the Government's needs for the increased employment

34. Commonwealth Year Books, 1940 and 1946

35. Clothing Union, Folder - Women in War Work

36. Ibid.

of women would be impossible owing to difficulty in obtaining staff, premises and equipment ... a scheme was worked out for state registration of childminders.<sup>37</sup>

This scheme paid childminders 6d per day or 8d per night. Thus it is clear that whilst many women chose not to work for the low wages offered who had no dependents, mothers were expected to offer their services.

37. Ibid.

## Chapter 4

### The Nature of Women's Work

The total number of employed women during the war rose by nearly 200,000 from 1939 to 1943, and dropped by nearly 70,000 from that peak by 1946, but in 1948 the total number of employed women had risen above the 1943 peak by 4,000.<sup>1</sup> However these figures do not include the defence forces which absorbed 65,956 women throughout the war<sup>2</sup> and approximately 46,000 at the peak of 1943. The Department of Labour & National Service estimated that from 1945 to 1947 53,400 women left the workforce.<sup>3</sup> Therefore the commonly held view that the women employed in war work were forced out of industry after the war, is misleading.

However women were forced out of the "men's" jobs they had been occupying. The temporary sex intergration in some job areas had to terminate for unless women <sup>as were contained</sup> ~~are continued~~ in strictly defined job areas their wages cannot be maintained at a lower rate. Before the war employers had sought to employ women in many of the jobs classified as "male", but the war experience showed that either women must be kept in specially classified "women's" work, or they must receive higher rates of pay. During the war the trade union movement had shown that it would not tolerate women entering "men's" jobs on cheaper rates of pay, and the disparity of

1. Figures estimated from those shown in Commonwealth Year Books
2. Hansard 5/8/58, p66/7
3. Labour Report, No. 38

women's wages created by the WEB ruling led to a high level of industrial disputation among women, indicating that the only course open to employers if they were to successfully maintain their cheap pool of female labour was to ensure that strict job segregation was enforced.

The "men's" jobs done by women during the war were mostly in the munitions plants in the metal or electrical trades and in clerical work. In September 1944 the AEU held a special women's conference and a letter inviting Dr. Coombs, the Director of Post-War Reconstruction to attend, noted that

(as) ours is one of the first industries to be demobilized, the Department of Reconstruction would most assuredly have a plan for the future employment of women who have given such efficient and devoted services in the metal sections of war production.<sup>4</sup>

The Director had no such plan. The Re-Establishment & Employment Bill of 1945, ensured service personnel the return of their jobs in civilian employment.

Where an application has been made ... the former employer shall make employment available to the applicant in accordance with this section at the date notified to him .. ... as the date on which the applicant will be available for employment ....<sup>5</sup>  
Failure by employers to comply met with a fine of £100.

4. Heagney papers, Box 1159/4 (b)

5. Re-establishment and Employment Bill, 1945 p34

The women who had worked throughout the war had to make way for ex-servicemen in civilian jobs. Their jobs in munitions had all terminated and ex-service-personel were to be given job preference when seeking new employment. Thus the squeezing of women from "men's" jobs was done effectively and almost invisibly. Its implementation formed one of the basic prerequisites for the continued exploitation of women at a cheaper level than men. In an article by Margaret Power, The Making of a Women's Occupation  the extent of sex segregation in Australian industries immediately after the war becomes evident.

If there were no sex segregation in jobs we would expect each occupation to have a 'normal' proportion of women workers, that is, women would be represented in each occupation in the same ratio as in the total work force.<sup>6</sup>

For 1947 that ratio was 22% but 78% of women workers were in "women's work", that is, occupations which contained a higher ratio of women than the average of 22%.

Business interests had become so aware of the need to contain the sex segregation of the work-force that in July 1946 W. Scott of the Association of Consulting Actuaries of Australia blamed "the introduction of vocational guidance"<sup>7</sup> for the shortage of female labour, showing his hostility to women widening the scope of their employment skills.

6. M. Power, *The Making of a Female Occupation*, Hecate

7. Age, July 10<sup>th</sup> 1946 p 2.

The period immediately after the war was a period of great shortages; - shortages of goods, shortages of materials, and shortages of labour. Industry had seen an incredible upturn during the war of which Ward says:-

One of the greatest achievements on the home front during World War 11 was the great advance made in the fields of manufacturing and technology. It is hardly too much to say that secondary industry reached what economists have called 'the take-off point'. Under the goal of necessity Australian factories began producing a whole range of sophisticated commodities which previously had had to be imported.<sup>8</sup>

This industry was to be turned to peacetime uses, and its conversion made the employment of cheap labour as vital as it had been during the war. But cheap labour was still just as scarce. The low birth rate of the depression was beginning to take its toll, the number of juveniles available for cheap employment was well below normal. The battle over women's wages continued, but significantly to took a muted form, employers refusing to lift female wages and women refusing to work. The Labour Government chose to remain silent, but gave tacit support to employers. The Re-establishment and Employment Bill had made no provision whatsoever for the women who had worked through the war, leaving them to fend for themselves and to avail themselves of lowpaid work in industry ,

of which there was much available. At the opening of an exhibition of women's industry in June 1945 the Minister for Labour and National Service E.J. Holloway said:-

Factory work is a career with a future. The reluctance of many parents to consider such a career for their daughters had mostly been due to lack of knowledge of improved factory conditions, wages and amenities and opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

The reference to improvements must have expressed an aspiration, for they were certainly not a reality. The only factories forced by the war to upgrade their conditions for women workers were those that came under the jurisdiction of WEB, and Holloway clearly did not mean these, for women were successfully being cleared out of "men's" jobs, not attracted into them. The wages referred to were the princely sum of 50/- p.w. offered to young girls in the hosiery trade, and the opportunities one must leave to one's own imagination.

The situation had not eased by July 1946, but no moves had been made to increase pay. Most women were still paid 54% - a waitress earned 60/-, a laboratory assistant £3.12.0, a showroom girl 60/- while a male dry-cleaner was offered £6.0.0. p.w.<sup>10</sup>

The 'situations vacant' pages in the Age were full of advertisements for "girls" and "women", which far outnumbered those for "men" and "boys". Some

9. Age 25/6/45 p 6

10. Age 10/7/46 , from "Situations Vacant"

employers actually chose to employ men and to pay them the full male rate, rather than lift the wages of their female staff. In May 1946 Fairfield Hospital announced its intention to apply for registration as a training school for male nurses,<sup>11</sup> reflecting the abysmal lack of nurses. A massive publicity campaign had been waged by the press, churches and State Governments to attract women into the nursing profession, but it secured only 54 applicants.<sup>12</sup> In July 1946 the Age reported that a Brisbane clothing manufacturer had commenced the training of "25 returned servicemen to work his sewing machines."<sup>13</sup>

Employers had benefited greatly from the developments in industry of the war years. Many manufacturers were contracted to supply the defence forces with munitions, equipment and uniforms, food and provisions and many of these contracts were organized on a cost plus basis, ensuring stable profits. Employers were keen to point out during the war that the paying of WEB rates would not have affected their profits. The Chamber of Manufacturers claimed when talking of a pending prosecution of members who had refused to pay WEB rates:-

and this in spite of the fact that working under a cost plus system, compliance with the order would result in added profits to the firms in question.<sup>14</sup>

11. Age 30/5/46 p 5

12. Age 17/5/46 p 2

13. Age 6/7/46 p 2

14. Annual Report, Ch. of Manufacturers, 1943 p7

Another employer was reported by the Argus as saying,

that he did not object to paying high wages to females, because on the cost-plus system he was able to charge profits on cost of labour.... but it was public money he was dealing with and he wanted official approval.<sup>15</sup>

In July 1943 the Clothing Trades Union Annual Report said:-

Members referred to the soaring prices of clothing - which has risen 70% since the war began, pointing out that increased labour costs were not the main cause.<sup>16</sup>

I was unable to find any figures on actual employers' profits but Table 3 shows a remarkable increase in the average value of production per person engaged in factories, during the war years suggesting that the increased number of women on low wages as well as the assurance of a market for particular goods produced allowed employers profits to soar.

TABLE 3<sup>17</sup>

AVERAGE VALUE OF PRODUCTION PER PERSON ENGAGED IN FACTORIES IN £s			
Fin Year	Amount per person	Fin Year	Amount per person
35/36	330	40/41	397
36/37	339	41/42	436
37/38	351	42/43	464
38/39	360	43/44	478
39/40	377	44/45	483

15. Argus 23/3/43

16. "Voice", Clothing Trades Union, July 1943 p 6

17. Bureau of Census & Statistics Production Bulletin 1945 - 46, p5

The increased number of women in the workforce throughout Australia is shown by the relative masculinity figures, in 1938-39 financial year there were 271 males to every 100 females in the workforce, whereas in 1944/45 that figure had dropped to 250 males to every 100 females.<sup>18</sup>

The deduction of the average amount of wages (table 4) from the average value of production per person, especially the wages of the women, indicate that employers were economically able to pay higher rates to females, and that their opposition was based on a determination to preserve women as a cheap pool of labour.

Table 4 <sup>19</sup>

	AVERAGE AMOUNT PER EMPLOYEE (WAGES) PER YEAR £s	
	male	female
35/36	206.55	91.19
36/37	212.44	93.19
37/38	224.35	99.69
38/39	231.84	103.92
39/40	239.08	108.09
40/41	258.77	117.65
41/42	301.86	138.44
42/43	335.17	160.59
43/44	342.68	172.62
44/45	333.93	169.14
45/46	326.99	171.88

Thus the employers hampered the war effort by refusing to lift female wages to attract sufficient women to essential industries, even when their profits would have been maintained at a high level. It is too simplistic to see this simply in the terms that the trade union movement saw it, that is as war

18. Australian Quarterly Summary of Aust. Statistics, No 163, March 1941 p 15, and No 187, March 1947, p15

19 Commonwealth Year Book, 1947

profiteering, for employers were prepared to increase male wages, at least in some areas. We have already seen that at Foster Instruments, management offered their male employees a 6/- p.w. increase which was actually illegal because of wage pegging but refused to pay women the rates granted by WEB, because "they doubted its legal validity".<sup>20</sup> The Clothing Trades Union report on Female Minimum Rates instances the same situation:-

It must nevertheless be remembered that the payment by employers of bonuses and other forms of incentive payments over and above the 1942 "pegged" rates has had a considerable influence on keeping the men reasonably contented.<sup>21</sup>

Employers, it seems were prepared to increase the pay rates of men but not of women. Conservatives were keen to place the hampering of the war effort and the confusion surrounding the female labour force at the feet of the trade union movement and and ALP, but neither of these organizations did any more than protect men's jobs in order to avert the even greater obstruction which would have occurred had men refused to leave their jobs to enter the defence forces.

It has already been mentioned that women worked during the war mainly for the rates they earned, and not for patriotic or other ideological reasons. The ideological summons for women to work would have helped to break down the barriers of many women against working but it could not

20. See below p 39

21. "Women in the W r" Folder. Clothing Trades Union

have been responsible in itself. The figures show that the decrease in the number of women working was not as significant as is usually assumed. Much has been made of the high marriage and birth rates of 1946 and of the drive for procreation forcing women out of the work force, but it would appear that these factors affected only a small number of women. The number of married women working in 1947, two years after the war, was 33.8% of all working women, whereas in 1933 that same figure was only 12.5%.

It seems clear that most of the women who worked both during the war and after it were those who had no choice, for most single women work, and not all married women are free to choose not to work, or to devote their time to the families they are constantly being reminded need them. It is these women who provide the constant pool of cheap labour. The number of women available for cheaply paid jobs is obviously economically determined, many women in society being forced to work for whatever remuneration they can extract. The war industries absorbed all of these available women, in fact the expanded industry absorbed more than ever before, but eventually the number of jobs outgrew the number of available women, in fact the expanded industry absorbed more than ever before, but eventually the number of

jobs outgrew the number of available women.

The women who left the workforce at the end of the war were middle-class women who could choose not to work for the low rates that were being offered. Of the 800,000 women employed during the war only an estimated 53,400 departed from the workforce by 1947, a number which corresponds closely to number of women receiving 80%-90% WEB rates.<sup>22</sup>

The post-war situation at first appears very confusing. On the one hand there was a shortage of women workers and public outcries for recruitment to certain jobs and on the other, as Andree Wright has shown a drive for women to return to their homes and resume their home duties. The proximity of the Japanese in the war had re-inforced the awareness of Australia's small population and its vulnerability as a white outpost in Asia. A program to attract migrants was delayed by the housing shortage and lack of transportation amenities. Women were encouraged to procreate and to become homemakers once again.

However this apparent contradiction is resolved when we examine the relationship between the two functions of unpaid homemaker and paid worker. Once women had been successfully removed from "male" areas of employment the primacy and "visibility" of the

22. There are no figures for the exact number of women receiving 80%-90% Web rates, but since WEB rates covered 85,000 and ranged from 60% - 90% it seems likely that the numbered received the higher levels would have approximated 53,000

housewife function needed promoting to recreate the necessary "invisibility" of the sweated female worker.

The "invisibility" of working women is part of their suppression and their vulnerability to exploitation. They are not only "invisible" to society but to themselves as well. They are conditioned to see themselves primarily as housewives and mothers, thus accepting exploitation in the work force. As Mitchell states:-

Women are brought up to think of themselves primarily as mothers and wives; yet finding themselves despite this, nevertheless out at work, it is this family identification that determines their relationship to their job and their companions.<sup>23</sup>

This "invisibility" obscures the actual exploitation of female labour, both the individual workers and to a society ideologically committed to the equality of opportunities. The extent to which this "invisibility" prevents women from fighting for improved conditions is evidenced by the number of strikes during the war. The "visibility" of women's employment brought about by the extreme shortage of men and resultant dependence on female labour resulted in increased militancy among women workers, an increased militancy among women workers which eventually led to the lifting of the basic female wage to 75% of the male rate in 1949.

23. Mitchell OpCit., p 139

The presentation to women that their main function in life is that of housewife and mother, renders a section of economically handicapped women vulnerable as a cheap pool of labour. Thus the drive for women to return to their homes after the war was not contradictory to but was part of the drive to maintain the enlarged cheap pool of labour.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize several points which this study has revealed, both about the nature of women's work and the character of historical investigation.

1. During the 'greatest crisis in the nation's history', employers were prepared to impede the war effort by:-
  - a) refusing to offer women sufficient remuneration to attract them into the industries which were vital to the war effort and were suffering critical labour shortages, despite their economic ability to do so.
  - b) using every available means to obstruct the operations of the WEB which was constituted by the Government to facilitate "the extensive employment of women" in sufficient numbers "to obtain the scale of production approved as a war objective"

c) refusing to pay the rates fixed by the WEB (despite the fact that in many cases employers were re-imbursed in full by the Government under the "cost-plus" system of contracts); thus creating widespread industrial unrest and disputation.

The belligerence shown by employers towards any attempts to raise women wages can only be explained by a recognition of their reliance on the cheap pool of labour which women provide. Thus women's sweated labour is a vital component of the economy as a whole.

2. The experiences of the war taught employers that they must retain rigid sex-segregation in the workforce if they are to maintain the cheap pool of female labour. The necessity for women to enter into many "male" job areas heightened the tensions already existent between employers and unions. The unions made it clear that they would not tolerate unpaid job competition from women. Thus if employers were to employ women in men's jobs they must do so on full rates of pay. But the resultant disparity in women's wages led to a high level of industrial strife among women and robbed the "family wage" justification of women's low wages of its rationale.

3. The renewed sex segregation of the work-force brought with it the recreation of the primacy of women's housewife function, rendering their paid work as "invisible" once again. The war experiences of women have shown that the importance of the promotion of the "homemaker" image lies not simply as Wright suggests in the pressure brought to bear to put women back in the home. The renewed primacy of the "homemaker" function rendered women vulnerable to gross exploitation as their paid work became "invisible".
4. We have also shown that the "exodus" of women from the workforce after the Second World War was not significant. Although some women did leave the workforce concentration on them clouds the importance of women's paid labour to Australian Capitalism. It implies that women have only a subsidiary function in times of crisis in the workforce whereas we have seen that this function is vital to the economy, and that employers were to a large extent protecting their future interests - the continued maintenance of this cheap pool of female labour. The implication that the war work of women culminated in their exodus from industry in fact promotes the primacy of their function of "homemaker" and fails to see that this promotion in itself renders women vulnerable to perform their paid work at low rates of pay.

5. This study has taken into account not only the way society has acted on women workers, but also the way women workers have acted upon that society. And, in so doing has provided a startling example of the "distorted history" which emerges from the exclusion of women as historical subjects. The "rare unanimity" which has been presented has been exposed here as common hostility between workers and employers, Conservatives and Laborites, and capital and labour. A hostility which led to quotas for manpower not being met, quotas for the amount of manpower required to fully exploit the nations resources in her defence. Not only have women a right to "visibility" in history but it has become evident, that unless they are represented as active forces in the historical process, then that process will be misrepresented by historians.
  
6. Finally the uncovering of the importance of women's paid labour in Australia points the way for further historical investigation. Only a thorough understanding of the evolution of the working woman and her affect on Australian society, and a comparison of that evolution with those of

other "New World" countries will determine whether women are Australia's only source of cheap labour as suggested here or not. The introduction of migrants after the war and their relationship to the cheap pool of female labour also need investigating. Until these studies have been undertaken we will not have a clear understanding of working women or their suppression in Australian society; nor will we be able to re-create the "completed fabric" of our past.