

Working Women's Centre

Melbourne 3000

Telephone

Discussion Paper No. 11

September 1976

UNEMPLOYMENT

The 1976-77 budget cut \$33 million, or 5.7%, from the allocation for unemployment and sickness benefits. Yet there was no indication in the budget papers that unemployment levels would be reduced. Rather the implication was that the number of people needing jobs would increase rather than decrease.

The present government maintains that the No. 1 problem in Australia is inflation. Such a philosophy argues that, in order to maintain the value of money earned by a majority who have jobs, a minority must be sacrificed by being denied an opportunity to work. This minority mainly consists of women, migrants and blacks.

Evidence suggests that there are nearly twice as many women unemployed as men but the figures from the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations do not disclose this. The Department's figures show that in March 1974 39.7% of all people registered as unemployed with the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) were women. By March 1976 this figure had dropped to 36% although numbers of unemployed women had increased from 32,752 to 100,679 over the two years. These figures are likely to be construed as showing that women are not so badly affected by unemployment as are men.

Table I - Unemployed Persons

	Awaiting Placement		Rcvg. UE Benefits	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Mar. 74	32,752	49,810	12,533	20,067
Mar. 75	104,470	166,314	51,328	105,207
Mar. 76	100,679	177,331	61,178	130,846

Table II
Unfilled Vacancies

	Female	Male
	Mar. 74	31,718
Mar. 75	10,626	23,867
Mar. 76	6,845	16,131

In March 1974 unfilled job vacancies for women notified to CES offices were 31,718 - only 1000 less than the number of women registered with the CES for employment. But in March 1976 vacancies had dropped to 6,845 - only 6.8% of those wanting employment (compared to 9.1% for men).

HIDDEN UNEMPLOYMENT

The figures for people out of work only refer to those registered with the CES for fulltime employment. No account is taken of people seeking employment through private agencies. Figures for job vacancies are for all vacancies, including part-time and temporary. The statistics do not give a true picture of unemployment among women - much of which is hidden. Because of the expectation that women must care for husbands and children many women seek part-time employment. Others enter the labour force because they are offered a job without having registered. When the job is finished many leave the labour force and no record is kept.

An OECD Study on the Role of Women in the Economy⁽¹⁾ showed that 80.6% of all part-time jobs in Australia were held by women. The study found that in February 1973 of 31,400 unemployed persons looking for part-time work 80.9% were women of whom 81.9% were married. The CES figures take no account of these women.

Many women are deterred from registering with the CES because when they enquire they are informed that there is no work available for the limited skills they have to offer. The few women registered for unskilled manual jobs (527) in March 1976, compared to 54,987 men, support this assumption.

Another reason why women do not register is because those who live with men who are employed are not eligible for unemployment benefits. In March 1976 only 61,178 women were receiving unemployment benefits compared to 130,846 men. Although women then represented 36% of those seeking employment through CES offices, only 31.8% of those receiving unemployment benefits were women.

DISCRIMINATION IN PAYMENTS

Although in the 1974 National Wage Case the Australian Conciliation & Arbitration Commission abandoned the family wage concept and granted women the minimum wage, the Federal Government still maintains this concept when determining eligibility for benefits.

All people pay taxes while employed. Yet when people who have an employed spouse become unemployed they are not eligible for unemployment or other social security benefits. This mostly affects women. Women who work at home do not get paid and therefore pay no taxes. But their husbands are able to claim a rebate off their tax on account of their wives. If the husbands become unemployed they receive an allowance of approximately \$25 per week for a dependent spouse plus an allowance for each child. But a single person (usually a woman) receives no allowance for a person to mind her/his children and, as virtually no childcare is available, many cannot even seek employment.

These policies reinforce the notion that women are not - and cannot be - economically independent - and that women's dependence on the male breadwinner is the "natural" way of things. The Henderson poverty inquiry found that fatherless families had the highest incidence of poverty.⁽²⁾ More than a quarter fell below a stringently defined poverty line and one in three was regarded as being at least in marginal poverty. Other studies - both here and overseas - have called attention to the economic plight of fatherless families: *"Fatherless families are poor because they lack a man's earning power and the mother's earning power is diminished by her children's need for her care. In the long run, therefore, the poverty and dependence of the fatherless family can only be eliminated by the attainment of sexual equality of social and economic status in society and by the provision of ancilliary childcare services."*⁽³⁾

Because most women work in low-paid, low-status jobs they are unable to ensure themselves against the eventual loss of earned income.

UNEMPLOYMENT

The lack of education and job training forces women into semiskilled jobs which are the worst hit in times of high unemployment. At present the highest rate of unemployment for women is in clerical and administrative jobs (61,000 compared to only 20,684 men), followed by semi-skilled (174,208) and service occupations (16,071). These are the areas where women have traditionally sought employment. They are characterized by low pay with few opportunities for promotion.

Employers are constantly complaining that they cannot get labour but the jobs they are offering are either highly skilled - for which few women have received training - or jobs so hard or boring that men will not take them. Instead of training women for the skilled jobs, they urge the government to bring migrants from overseas. Migrants are also used to fill unskilled jobs - male migrants who have wives and children to work as factory fodder and who have to be housed and educated. When they have been in Australia for a few years the men may move on to better jobs and the migrant women are left doing the jobs which no-one else will do. Even though migrant women may have other skills, the lack of English prevents them from using them and there are many skilled women employed on piecework in the clothing and other trades.

"Working conditions in Australian factories range from good to archaic, unhealthy and unsafe. Migrants and women, on whom some parts of manufacturing depend, are disadvantaged and even exploited. Many workers are frustrated and dissatisfied with jobs that offer them little interest or sense of personal involvement."⁽⁴⁾

CHILDCARE

A Morgan Gallup poll conducted in 1973 found that 32 per cent of women interviewed said they would go out to work if there were a convenient daycare centre available.⁽⁵⁾ Although the Government is committed to a full range of childhood services in every community, eighty per cent of the 1975/76 budget allocation for childcare will go to maintain preschools which offer only sessional care and are of little help to working parents - particularly shift workers.

UNEMPLOYED SCHOOL-LEAVERS

It has been argued recently that married women should not be employed when there are not sufficient jobs for teenagers. However Table II shows that there were only 6,845 job vacancies for females compared to 16,131 for males (March 1976). In any case everyone should have the right to equal opportunities for paid employment; one group of prospective workers should not be penalized because they happen to be women and married.

A survey of unemployed young people conducted by the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations in September 1975 showed that they were predominantly the less educationally qualified, the low-skilled, the inexperienced and FEMALE.

Numbers of school-leavers receiving no training or only minimal training reflect unfavourably on Australia compared to other industrialized nations which devote more resources to adequate vocational preparation. This failure to provide counselling has major implications for the development and productivity of the economy as well as for the individuals themselves. About one quarter of people seeking apprenticeships have not been able to be indentured and, according to employer organizations, unless the trend is reversed, industry will be confronted with a desperate shortage of skilled employees.

LACK OF CHOICE OF EMPLOYMENT

Due to the scarcity of work and training opportunities, most people are forced to seek jobs in nonpreferred areas. In a survey conducted by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence(6), only 6.7% of young people who were referred to jobs by the CES found the jobs to be in line with their actual choice of job. What must be the future effect of the resultant lack of job satisfaction and self-fulfilment on job stability and production?

Over 80 percent of those surveyed said they would like an opportunity for job training but most had insufficient information about opportunities available and had not heard of the NEAT scheme.

WOMEN - A "RESERVE ARMY"

Women, because they earn less than men, are considered to be secondary wage-earners and, unless they can obtain employment which pays enough to enable them to replace their household services, they are relegated to "home duties". In times of full employment and economic buoyancy women tend to enter the labour market but, with an economic downturn, they are forced to leave and join the reserve army which is not counted as part of the labour force.

AUTOMATION

Many women are losing jobs because of automation. In office work - where most women are employed - many typing and shorthand jobs are being taken over by machines. Yet there is no legislation for redundancy payments in Australia as there is in the United Kingdom. Provision of redundancy payments to deter employers from casually sacking workers should be a major aim of all unions.

WHAT UNIONS CAN DO

1. Pressure employers and governments to train women for skilled jobs; to advertise such training; and to show that this has been done before they resort to bringing new workers to the country who will ultimately add to the unemployment level and provide competition for jobs which will thus reduce wages.
2. Seek redundancy clauses in all awards.
3. Seek the removal of discrimination in payment of benefits.
4. Campaign for more appropriate assistance from CES officers regarding vocational training. This information to be multi-lingual.
5. Approve and encourage the development of a programme for adult training as well as an extension of opportunities for junior apprenticeships for boys and girls.
6. Educate their own members to recognize that women are entitled to the same benefits and right to work as they themselves expect and that non-unionized unemployed women are a greater threat to their job security than women who are employed and members of their union.

REFERENCES

- (1) OECD Study on the role of women in the economy. 1974
- (2) Morton, J. "Women and welfare". In The Other Half.
Ed. Jan Mercer. Penguin. 1975.
- (3) Marsden, D. "Fatherless families on national assistance".
In The Concept of Poverty. Ed. Peter Townsend. Heineman
London. 1970 (p.215).
- (4) Policies for Development of Manufacturing Industry. Vol. 1.
A Green Paper. October 1975. Quoted in Brewer, G.
Workers without Jobs. Brotherhood of St. Laurence. Oct. '75.
- (5) Summers, A. Damned Whores and God's Police. Penguin. 1975.