

# THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER ROLES IN SOCIAL POLICY:

## MOTHERS' ALLOWANCES AND DAY CARE IN ONTARIO BEFORE WORLD WAR II

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*Les auteur(e)s examinent les premiers développements des politiques sociales telles que les allocations pour mères et l'éligibilité pour les garderies en Ontario, dans la perspective de l'idéologie de la famille. Dans la première partie du 20e siècle cette idéologie perpétuait une définition étroite des femmes comme épouses dépendantes et comme mères avec de telles politiques sociales.*

This paper examines the early development of social policies such as mothers' allowances (now called 'family benefits assistance') and day care eligibility criteria in Ontario in terms of the ideology of the family. The ideology of the family contains within it a set of notions and assumptions about the nature of men and women's work. In the first part of the twentieth century, women were primarily economic dependents and men breadwinners. This ideology perpetuated a narrow definition of women that reinforced their roles as dependent wives and mothers within the aforementioned social policies.

The dominant ideology of the family in the early decades of the twentieth century was closely linked to the family wage, a wage earned by an individual man sufficient for the support of himself, his wife and dependent children. This type of family arrangement came to be conceptualized as an ideal form of family, modelled after the middle class norm. In fact, it was only accomplished by a minority of the working class, but it embodied the notions of acceptable, "normal" roles for men, women and children within families.

The primary source of support for families was shifting at this time from a reliance on farming and agriculture to wage labour. The wage labour market

became structured according to gender, age and marital status for women. Unlike their British counterparts, Canadian married women were generally absent from the officially acknowledged labour market at the turn of the century. Large numbers of young unmarried women were, however, employed. They found jobs in domestic service and, along with children, in certain industries until the late nineteenth century when government legislation restricted their industrial employment.

Legislation, such as the Ontario Factory and Shops Act of 1884, sought to regulate and restrict the working hours of women and children. Its intent was to ensure that they worked no more than 60 hours per week, with work prohibited for all children under 14, girls between the ages of 14 and 18, and all women whose health might be endangered by their working environment.<sup>1</sup> These health standards included a provision limiting the amount of time that women should stand in one place in order to prevent damage to their reproductive organs. As a remedy, stools were made mandatory.<sup>2</sup>

Regulations, aimed at limiting women and children's labour market participation reflected the moral standards of middle class reformers, many of whom were women, and their growing concern about the erosion of family stability. Central to this concern was the fear of "race suicide" among Anglo-Saxon families. As their fertility rate was declining and their infant and maternal mortality rate remained high, the increasing fertility rate of immigrants was viewed as a threat. Hence the impetus for the reformers' activities in the late nineteenth century derived, in part, from their desire to protect the future reproductive role of native-born women.

In a similar vein, concern over morals prevailed. The belief among members of

the middle class that women were morally pure, yet easily tricked into temptation, was incorporated into the reports of factory inspectors who insisted that male and female workers be kept separate. Separate lavatories were also to be provided for female workers. Women's innate purity was considered synonymous with their desire for cleanliness, a view which rendered problematic their employment near men who smoked, chewed tobacco or used spittoons.<sup>3</sup>

The reformers' moral mission to secure the reproduction of the working class was highly influenced by their gender and class origins. Many reformers were married women with well-to-do husbands who could afford domestic servants to perform domestic duties. However, what leisure time they had was strictly circumscribed by the ideological prescription that a woman was essentially a dependent creature whose proper place was in the home, where she fulfilled her God-given duties as wife and mother. A woman's sphere could be expanded to include the public world only if her actions there were an extension of her role at home. Thus,

*... there was also an extension of woman's Madonna role into the public sphere, and although it was generally considered undesirable for a "lady" to work, she was encouraged to interest herself in the poor, to set her poor sisters a good example by performing good works.<sup>4</sup>*

If her care for the poor was a manifestation of her "innate" maternal qualities, then so too was her choice of issues. The reformers were particularly vocal with regard to how the working class woman might properly fulfill her proper role in life as a good mother. Consequently, the reformers were active in decrying the infant mortality rate, the immoral environment confronting young working

women, the dangers of the workplace to reproduction, and the inadequate performance of the working class mother in providing the fruits of a good home for her family.

The activities of middle-class reformers aimed at restricting women's participation in the wage labour market through protective legislation was supported by the labour movement. Almost wholly comprised of men in the late nineteenth century, labour sought to better working class conditions through improved wages for men and the establishment of a family wage.

As several authors note, during the struggle for the family wage only a minority of working class families were able to manage on one income.<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Smith, a sociologist writing about the family at this time states that "a wife who did not work and contribute directly to the means of subsistence, and who had to depend upon her husband's wage, was most definitely undesirable."<sup>6</sup> Hilary Land argues that the family wage economy, in which the man was the sole breadwinner, was largely a myth for the working class.<sup>7</sup> The situation was such that, although the ideology of the family wage system did not correspond to reality for the majority of working class family situations, it still served to reinforce and preserve the right of the male workers to higher wages and skilled jobs.<sup>8</sup>

Costs were prohibitive for most families without a male breadwinner. The family wage system provided no support or protection for families without a male breadwinner. If a woman with dependent children did not, or could not, rely on a man's wage, she was left in dire straits, forced to rely upon charity and private welfare measures.

In the campaign for mothers' allowances, reformers, philanthropists and trade unionists argued that the state should take up the support function of widowed families who lost their means of income through no fault of their own. They sought to prevent situations in which widows would have to seek full-time employment. Mothers' Allowances were seen as substituting for women's as well as children's wages in cases where a male breadwinner was absent. In this sense the campaign for mothers' allowances was also a campaign to end child labour. Reformers and philanthropists alike believed that working mothers caused

juvenile delinquency, and the best place for children to grow up was at home under the care of their mother. For these reasons, women's groups (like the National Council of Women of Canada) advocated both the family wage system and a mothers' allowance scheme, both of which would uphold the traditional "natural" role of women.

During the First World War women workers replaced substantial numbers of male industrial workers at lower wages. The threat that women workers posed by their ability to undercut the male family wage prompted the labour movement to advocate a social assistance scheme that would keep women in their "proper" role as mothers and wives at home. After the enactment of the Mother's Allowance Act of 1920 in Ontario, the president of the Trades and Labour Congress said "Labour has also benefitted [from the introduction of mothers' allowances], though in a more indirect way. The removal of these mothers and children to seek industrial employment has enlarged the opportunity of work for others . . ."<sup>9</sup>

The Mother's Allowance Act granted assistance to widowed families and families with an incapacitated or not unmarried, deserted or divorced mother. The latter, if eligible at all, had to undergo more stringent measures than others to prove their morality and meet the conditions of eligibility. Only the deserving mother-led families were eligible for aid – namely, those who conformed to the male-headed, nuclear family norm but were thought to be innocent victims of a



Illustration by Paula Youens

tragedy that had left them without financial support.

Mother's allowance legislation thus served to maintain the gender roles associated with the "normal" breadwinner family: it was predicated on two assumptions – the support obligation of men and the undesirability of female and child participation in full-time wage labour. These assumptions about the division of labour by gender within the breadwinner family form were continually reconstructed and reinforced through the implementation of the Mothers' Allowance Act. Home investigators supervised the moral character and child-rearing practices of recipients. The purpose of home investigations was to reveal the "fitness of the mother to bring up her children and to maintain proper standards in the home . . ."<sup>10</sup> The motive behind home investigation was the belief that working class mothers needed "help" to raise their children:

*The mother is regarded as an applicant for employment as a guardian for future citizens of the State, and if she does not measure up to the State's standards for such guardians, other arrangements must be sought in the best interests of the children and to prevent increase in the number of dependents of this nature.<sup>11</sup>*

Home investigative techniques involved efforts to reorganize working class families such that they approximated the breadwinner norm, and were justified on the grounds that families in need of financial support were also by definition deficient and deviant. This philosophy became closely linked to the case-work approach to social welfare. Even though eligible mother-led families were not the authors of their own misery, state aid was conditional on their willingness to "correct" their situation.

The effort to reform 'deviant' working class families was also reflected in the few day care centres which existed in the 1920s. Called 'day nurseries' or 'creches,' these early day care centres were run as employment bureaus for working women. A mother could bring her children to the creche in the morning, and then be given an address where she would find work as a domestic servant. Social workers would screen the applicants and judge their eligibility according to the same middle class norms applied by the home investigators of the mothers' allowances.

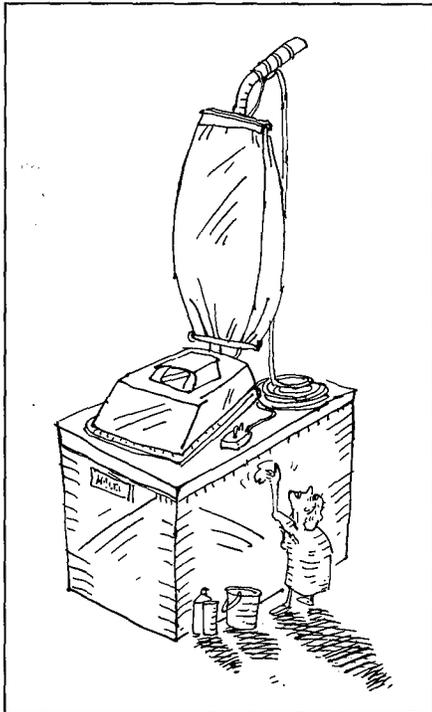


Illustration by Paula Youens

The social workers saw their goal as helping the families of working women return to the ideal of the family wage ideology. Accordingly, they attempted to maintain the family unit wherever possible, even if that sometimes meant helping women to find work outside the home. Thus, if a mother was forced into the workforce because of the unemployment of her husband, then child care in the nurseries appeared to be the best way to keep the family together. However, the role reversal of a working wife would only be countenanced if there was no other option:

*Although unemployment is general among unskilled workers, we cannot at any time advocate the father remaining in the home to care for the children while the mother goes out to work. If this were done we would be excluding him from all possible chance of getting an odd job.<sup>12</sup>*

Accordingly, the creches sometimes found work for unemployed husbands rather than for their wives, especially if the children were infants. The possibility that a woman might genuinely desire to work outside the home was completely rejected by the social worker of the East End Creche in 1927:

*A number of families we have admitted conditionally, and we feel by following up these cases we will prevent to a large extent the mothers being out of their homes any*

*longer than necessary. Strange, but for some women, "going out to work" has an attraction, it is a diversion as it were from the drab existence in their own homes.*

The creches' adherence to the prevailing family ideology was further reinforced by the "Kitchen Garden" classes offered to the older girls, where they learnt the skills and values of mothering.

Clearly, the invocation of the family wage ideology was used as a means of regulating the membership of the workforce, according to sex. The fact that significant numbers of families were forced to rely upon more than the wage of the husband demonstrates that the family wage identified primary (male) and secondary (women) labourers and labour markets, as much as it discouraged women from working at all.

The day nurseries enforced another aspect of the family wage ideology which was indirectly linked to labour force participation. Like the home investigators of the mothers' allowances policy, the social workers and health care professionals at the day nurseries disdained the domestic labour and child-rearing practices of the working class as inferior to their standards, and to the care which the children actually received at the day nurseries. The creche's staff found that health care was poor among the working class, and that the values that led to good citizenship – such as thriftiness and industriousness – were not sufficiently encouraged. Both the authors of the mothers' allowance legislation and the creches staff saw these values as essential to the production of people eager to work obediently. One East End Creche report (1926) lamented that:

*While theoretically the best place for a child is at home, yet there are so many mothers who are ignorant of so many of the things that are essential to the proper rearing of a child that we think they are much better off in the Nursery in the present conditions.*

*We hope that in the near future the mothers will have an opportunity of learning more of those things that are necessary to the proper bringing up of a child.<sup>14</sup>*

The "proper" child rearing methods also reflected the general revolution in reproductive standards which had accompanied industrialization since 1900. Through mandatory schooling, compulsory health inspections and vaccinations at schools and improved sanitation techniques, the state had made significant

strides to control the mental and physical health of children – in the service of producing a compliant and healthy workforce. Through social services such as day nurseries and income maintenance policies such as mothers' allowances, the early welfare state revered the family wage ideology and the breadwinner family form as a means to the end of fulfilling state-sanctioned reproductive standards. Hence, woman's relation to the early social policies cast her role as wife and mother. Despite various mediations and historical changes, many aspects of present day welfare state social policies are still based on assumptions about the division of labour by gender underlying the breadwinner family form.

<sup>1</sup>Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts, "Besieged Innocence: The 'Problem' and Problems of Working Women – Toronto, 1896-1914," *Women at Work* (Toronto, 1974), p. 222.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Wilson, *Women and the Welfare State*, (London, 1977), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup>For the British case see, Barrett and McIntosh, "The Family Wage: Some Problems for Socialists and Feminists," *Capital and Class*, #11 (1980); for the Canadian case, see Patricia Connelly, "Women's Work and the Family Wage in Canada," in Anne Hoiberg, ed. *Women and the World of Work* (New York, 1982).

<sup>6</sup>Dorothy Smith, "Inequality in the Family," (1981), p. 179.

<sup>7</sup>Barrett and McIntosh, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup>J.L. Cohen, *Mothers' Allowance Legislation in Canada* (Toronto, 1927), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>Ontario Mothers' Allowance Commission Annual Report (1922), p. 17.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup>East End Creche Annual Report (1927).

<sup>13</sup>East End Creche Annual Report (1926).

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