

Women As a Reserve Army of Labour- Some Questions Raised*



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Les auteures contestent la théorie féministe marxiste selon laquelle les femmes représentent une "armée de réserve de la main-d'oeuvre". Ce concept, utile à une certaine époque, nous empêche de voir clairement cette réalité encore bien en vigueur: la femme est dans une situation inégale dans le travail et dans la société en général.

MARXISM and, more particularly, Marxist feminism has made and continues to make important contributions to our understanding of women's oppression. Marxist feminist theory has played an important role in challenging reactionary justifications of women's oppression, the biological arguments that tied our vulnerability in the labour force to our

'natural' role as guardians of the home. Within the Women's Movement, it has helped to shift attention away from socialization as key in determining the jobs that women worked at and indeed whether women worked at all. It made visible the social, economic and political processes at work limiting and determining the options open to women. It challenged analyses that

identified individual men as the main problem and linked women's oppression to capitalism.

The theory of women as a reserve army of labour is, for Marxists and Marxist feminists, the most popular explanation for women's subordinate position in the labour force. This notion has a currency which goes far beyond those who consider themselves Marxist feminist. In most cases this theory's validity is taken for granted. When it comes to women and work it is enough to say, 'Women function as a reserve army of labour for capital.' Full stop. No further elaboration, proof or explanation is required. We can all agree on women as a reserve army. The popularity of the theory is not hard to understand as it appears to tie women's movement between home and paid work to the needs of capital accumulation and corresponding manipulations by a ruling class. The theory suggests a mechanism that maintains women's particular inequality or oppression and at the same time links that oppression to the social relations of capitalism.**

RECENTLY this theory has been challenged. Obviously, its accuracy in accounting for women's current experience in the labour force is questionable against the reality of women's increasing participation in the labour force (approaching 50 per cent in most advanced capitalist economies) despite intensifying economic crises. But it is not simply a matter of the situation's changing and therefore of a theory's no longer being accurate and needing modification. For example, recent analyses of the situation women faced in the Thirties in the U.S. suggest that women in fact did not bear the brunt of the recession but were protected from the worst effects by the segregation of the labour force (Milkman, 1976). The growing body of historical analysis and research into women's history as wage workers has begun, if only implicitly, to challenge the adequacy of the notion of women as a reserve army of labour as key to understanding our inequality.

... Questioning the reserve-army theory also raises questions about the family and patriarchy...



It is time to reassess how we have used the concept in the past and to decide whether it can continue to play a central role in the analyses of women and the labour force. Women, like men, have formed a section of the reserve army. Both women and men have been subjected to the effects of capital accumulation in their work areas. This is not at issue. Nor can there be any question about women's special place in the reserve army of labour. Women are more vulnerable than men in the labour market and this has implications for their position within the reserve army. What is at issue is whether women's labour *functions* causally as a reserve army of labour and whether such a theory *explains* women's inequality in the labour force.

Where the theory has not simply been assumed, debate focusses on whether or not women do in fact *fit into* the concept of a reserve army of labour. That is, the concept is always integrated by means of a definition. This points to a problem. The concept of a reserve army of labour in Marx (where the term originates) means simply the 'relative surplus population' produced by capital accumulation. In current Marxist feminist analysis the concept has both more and less meaning than in Marx, more, in that it is

defined by concrete characteristics and less, in that its definition severs it from the analysis of capital accumulation. Proving women are a reserve army of labour according to an often arbitrary definition does not integrate women into an analysis of capital accumulation. The question of the relation between women's subordination in the labour force and capital accumulation remains unsolved.

It is certainly not 'wrong' to describe women as playing a peculiar role in the reserve army at specific times and in specific places. The problem arises when we ask it to do more for us. The concept is neither an adequate description nor explanation of women's subordinate status in the labour force. The descriptive strength of the reserve-army concept as applied to women arises from the fact that women have been available as a reserve army in a way that men have not. Even today, women as a group are more likely to be 'last hired and first fired.' This is particularly true where women have made inroads into 'male jobs.' When layoffs come, women, the last hired, are the first to go. For example, recently in Canada, women have fought and won battles to work in the mines. But in many places subsequent layoffs resulted in the elimination of these women from the workforce. This is a visible and dramatic aspect of women's vulnerability and subordinate status in the labour force. But, women are not only 'last hired, first fired.'

WOMEN are now permanently installed in the workplace. The number of women working has more than doubled since 1950 and nearly tripled since 1940. Almost all women work sometime during their lives. Today a woman can expect to spend nearly five times as many years working outside the home as she spends working full-time in the home. The numbers of married women in the labour force are increasing faster than those of any other single group. Far fewer women are dropping out of the work force and, when they do, their absence is

shorter. Women are integral to the Canadian labour force and this situation is by no means unique to Canada. Though women are still vulnerable and can be pushed back in areas where gains have been made, this integration is irreversible. Making the concept of the reserve army of labour central to our analysis means ignoring or explaining away these fundamental aspects of women's situation.

The way women have been integrated into the labour force does not correspond to the characteristics of a reserve army. Women are segregated into clerical and service jobs. These are indeed low-paying, dead-end jobs, but they are not temporary and there is no indication that they are about to be filled by men. The view that women function in the labour force as a reserve army merely diverts attention from this reality and the mechanisms which determine it.

TREATING WOMEN as a reserve army of labour fixes their relationship to the work force in isolation from the process of capital accumulation, class struggle and struggles between women and men within the working class. It is assumed that women have, do and will continue to function as a reserve army. This does not correspond to the history of women's experience in the capitalist labour market. For example, the fact that women's work was confined to the home and a narrow range of occupations was not predetermined. Capitalism's 'natural' tendency was to extend women's employment opportunities, precisely because their labour power was available at a lower price. This tendency was the basis for a struggle around women's right to work, women's relation to the family and women's relation to men. The outcome of these struggles was that women were available to capital in certain ways that corresponded to the notion of women as a reserve army. But it is these struggles that were the key determinants in establishing women's relationship to the labour force, not women's role as a reserve army of labour.

... The concept of women as a reserve army straight-jackets women's experience as workers...



In challenging the concept of women as a reserve army of labour we are also raising questions about the concepts of the family and patriarchy that usually accompany it. It is impossible to understand women's relation to the labour force without seeing this in relation to the family. It is important not to underestimate this connection. But the problem is that women's role in the family is generally seen in the same static way their role in the labour force is. Women function in the family as reproducers of labour power and thus are available to function in the labour force as a reserve army. The common view is that women's role in the family determines their role in the labour force. Our point is not that the influence of the family is minimal or that the determining relation comes from the other side, that is, from the labour force, but that the form of the family and women's relation to it was and is determined through actual historical struggles in the real process of capital accumulation.

THESE STRUGGLES continue today. Any analysis of women's situation in the labour force must make them central. We must know how the development of capital accumulation is affecting women's employment opportuni-

ties. What is happening in women's sectors? Are new sectors opening for women? We need to look at the family. Are there limits to women's integration into wage labour? What are they? Then there are the struggles within the working class. How will the male working class respond to the struggle for equality? Will it support women's demands for preferential treatment in relation to hiring and layoffs in 'male jobs'? Will it provide real support to demands for unionization of women's jobs? Will it support women's political struggle for childcare, for abortion, for women's right to determine their sexuality? The answers to these questions will determine women's role in the labour force.

What are behind these issues are the more general questions of women's inequality in this society. How is women's inequality organized and maintained? Who is involved in maintaining it? How and with whom do we organize to oppose it? The notion of women as a reserve army advanced our thinking at an earlier point but, in examining how it has been used and what it has actually told us, we see gaps. The gaps will only grow larger if we continue to straightjacket the reality of women's experience into the concept of women as a reserve army.

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**This is an excerpt from a much longer paper. The complete version is available from the authors, c/o 29 Prince Arthur Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, M5R 1B2.*

***Two recent examples of Marxist feminist work which use and support the theory of women as a reserve army of labour are Pat Connelly's Last Hired, First Fired, which deals with the Canadian experience, and Irene Bruegel's 'Women As a Reserve Army of Labour: A Note on the Recent British Experience,' Feminist Review, No. 3, 1979, pp. 12-23. Criticisms of these two pieces are contained in the expanded version of this paper.*