



HAMILTON WORKING WOMEN

IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION*

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A la suite de conversations avec des femmes qui travaillaient pendant la dépression à Hamilton, en Ontario, une étudiante conclut qu'il est nécessaire de repenser nos idées sur les tristes années 30. Vingt pour cent des femmes entre seize et trente-quatre ans faisaient partie de la main-d'oeuvre. Leur indépendance leur semblait plus importante que les mauvaises conditions de travail et les maigres revenus. Le dénominateur commun des femmes à la recherche d'un premier emploi à plein-temps à cette époque, était de faire des ménages contre le gîte et le couvert, de garder des enfants, ou de servir dans un restaurant.

TEN LOST YEARS, the winter years, the dirty Thirties,' these are some of the

terms used to convey the bleakness of this decade in Canadian history. The most familiar photographs from the period are of men lining up at soup kitchens, unemployed youths riding the rails and abandoned Western homesteads. Women are not entirely absent from literature about the depression but they are definitely in the background.

Barry Broadfoot's *Ten Lost Years* has ten interviews with women. The female heroines in his collection are mothers, the women who 'kept the home fires burning. They scrounged and scrimped and patched and glued and sewed and borrowed. . . Tens of thousands of mothers lived this life, for years, and we should never forget them.' Agnes Macphail, annoyed with T.C. Douglas for describing the impact of the depression on young men only, said, 'I should like to see Canada composed entirely of young men and see how they get on.'

WORKING WOMEN formed less than 20 per cent of the gainfully employed during the Thirties. There exist a number of primary sources with valuable information about working women for this period: the *Royal Commission on Price Spreads and Textiles*; the Census of 1931 and 1941; and the *Labour Gazette*.

Women workers in the 1930s were badly paid and concentrated in the traditional female ghettos where they had worked since the early days of industrialization in Canada. They were viewed with suspicion and sometimes hostility by their male co-workers who felt that they were displacing men from jobs and pulling down wages. The majority of women workers were young, single women who expected their years of paid work to be few before they embarked on their 'real' career of marriage and motherhood. The sources then

paint a picture of women workers similar to that of earlier decades.

Two industries in particular seemed in the eyes of contemporaries and later historians very exploitative of women workers the garment and the textile industries. Deplorable conditions were not really new in either. Interviews with nine Hamilton women who worked during the depression years added some important qualifications to this general picture and raised some questions about the emphasis in written sources.

MANY OF THE WOMEN interviewed described their work experiences affectionately and positively. While they recognized difficult and unfair circumstances at work, they did not dwell on them. The opportunities to be productive and independent, the social contact, the advancement (however minor), the respect and responsibility which being paid workers gave these women were the aspects they emphasized in recalling those years.

I hope to draw some conclusions about their picture of themselves as women workers (compared with the picture that emerges from the written sources) and about women workers in comparison with men workers in this decade. Finally, the focus of this paper on women workers may suggest or underline the need for rethinking the way the depression has traditionally been written about in Canada.

According to the 1931 Census, more than 14,000 women were gainfully employed in Hamilton. Close to one in four worked in manufacturing. All but one of the women interviewed were between sixteen and thirty-four years of age; the majority of women workers in Hamilton and across the country were of similar age. Less than four per cent of the women working in Ontario were married.

WAITRESSING was very poorly paid. As an option for women it ranked low in status. The *Labour Gazette* reported a number of strikes by waitresses in

the Thirties, though none took place in Hamilton.

One of the women interviewed, Mrs. Mackness, was forced to accept working conditions far worse than she had been used to as a single woman a decade earlier. The depression was an important factor in drawing her back into the paid labour force.

Vida Richard's experience of doing housework for her room, babysitting for very low pay, getting part-time and then steady work as a waitress was a pattern common for young women seeking work for the first time.

May Hoyle, a stenographer at Eaton's, felt that the stenographers had better conditions than salesgirls from the point of view of wages and hours, but this was not in fact the case. There is, however, evidence which corroborates her recollections of cutbacks at the store.

The depression was a factor in pushing more women into domestic dollars a week in 1927 was not an unusual wage for an inexperienced woman worker in Ontario.

THE EXPERIENCE of women who engaged in war work in Hamilton is also suggestive of the broader patterns. Women had opportunities to work in heavy industry, to gain higher wages and to learn new skills. Women were drawn into war work as a temporary measure, were paid lower wages than men but typically higher than what they had been earning in the depression years. Many of the women noted that attitudes towards women working once they were married and had children changed as a result of the war.

They may be part of that first generation of women workers in Canada to have the 'two-phase working life cycle,' noted by Sylvia Ostry as characteristic of post-war working women in Canada.

** The full text of this 37 page paper (plus footnotes) is available from: Sylvia Van Kirk, Department of History, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1A1.*

CANADIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women is holding its sixth Annual General Meeting and Conference in Ottawa, November 19-22, 1982. This year's conference theme *Sexism in Research and its Policy Implications* is based on the premise that sexist research ought to be the concern of all citizens and decision-makers because it distorts the base on which policy decisions are made. For information, contact: Jill Vickers, Conference Convenor, c/o CRIAW, P.O. Box 236, Station B, Ottawa, Ontario K1P6C4.

INSTITUT CANADIEN DE RECHERCHES POUR L'AVANCEMENT DE LA FEMME

La sixième conférence annuelle et l'Assemblée générale de l'Institut canadien de recherches pour l'avancement de la femme se dérouleront à Ottawa du 19 au 22 novembre 1982. Le thème de la conférence cette année — *Le sexisme en recherche et ses incidences sur les politiques* — se base sur la prémisse que tous les citoyens ainsi que celles et ceux qui prennent les décisions devraient être intéressés à la recherche sexuelle car elle déforme les fondements des décisions en matière de politiques. Pour plus de renseignements, communiquez avec: Jill Vickers, coordonnatrice de la conférence, a/s ICRAF, C.P. 236, Succ. B, Ottawa, Ontario K1P6C4.