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# The Economic Depression and the Employment of Women

by

Marguerite THIBERT

*Research Division, International Labour Office*

*(Reprinted from the INTERNATIONAL LABOUR REVIEW,  
Vol. XXVII, No. 4, April, and No. 5, May 1933.)*



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GENEVA  
1933

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# The Economic Depression and the Employment of Women

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*While the problems of women's employment have a permanent interest due to the large number of persons directly concerned—women in fact constitute about one-third of the employed population of the world—they possess at present an added interest arising from the circumstances of the economic depression, in particular in connection with unemployment. It is therefore not surprising to find that these problems are the subject of much discussion, of thesis and counter-thesis, of opinions based on passion rather than reason, which are reflected in the press campaigns that have been aroused in many countries by this renewal of interest. Mrs. Thibert's aim in the following article is to study the question in its various aspects from the international standpoint, keeping strictly to the domain of facts, on the basis of such documentary evidence as is at present available.*

**E**VER since the onset of the economic depression, the employment of women has been the object of repeated attacks launched from many quarters. This is scarcely to be wondered at. The evolution which has taken place during the last few decades in the position of women, both in the world in general and in the economic sphere in particular, is so remarkable as to constitute one of the most conspicuous phenomena of the modern world; and since concomitant circumstances are easily confused with causal ones, especially during periods of distress when the sufferers find some small consolation in saddling a scapegoat with their pains, the increased employment of women has been pointed to as one of the causes of the wave of unem-

ployment which has swept over the economic world. This view, which is too short-sighted to be taken seriously by anyone with some understanding of economic and social science, has nevertheless been frequently propagated by the popular press. Even among circles concerned with social problems, the frantic search for a way out of present difficulties has led in some cases to the opinion that, so long at least as the possibilities of employment are as tenuous as at present, they should be primarily reserved for men workers, and to the proposal that as an effective remedy for the present troubles women, or at least certain categories of them and in particular married women, should be excluded from the labour market.

Under the pressure of currents of opinion such as these, practical measures have already been adopted in some countries. Do these currents of opinion spring from valid arguments? Is there any immediate connection between the increased employment of women and the economic depression, or, at least, can any improvement in present social conditions be anticipated from the restriction of women's employment? These are the questions which it is proposed to study in the following article, not with any claim to provide a final answer to them in the space of a few pages, but with the more modest intention of exposing the fallacy of over-hasty solutions and bringing out certain aspects of the problem which have apparently escaped the notice of the promoters of many of the violent attacks already mentioned.

The problem is in fact anything but simple. Like all social problems, it relates to a complex environment in which there is constant interaction between numerous factors. This complexity must be borne in mind even when the factors studied have, like unemployment, been simplified by statistics and reduced to arithmetical terms. Human beings are not identical and interchangeable units, and mathematical methods of solving equations cannot be applied to them.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

That work is a universal law, binding on all humanity, to which women have at all times been subject equally with men, is too obvious a truth to need any demonstration. In contemporary discussions there is no question of contesting woman's right to perform useful work, this right being generally looked upon rather as a duty which human beings try to shift on to one

another's shoulders than as a privilege which they vie with each other to obtain. The object of attack is the productive employment, or rather the gainful employment, of women, which has indeed undergone considerable changes in the course of time and has made particularly rapid strides forward during the last few decades.

In fact, much of the work of production has always been in the hands of women, but in former times this work was unpaid. In the most primitive forms of society women were almost entirely responsible for producing the necessaries of life. Even to-day among African tribes agricultural work is often performed exclusively by the women, who also weave the clothes, mats, and coverings and in general provide the household with all its simple needs. In civilised societies, too, so long as there still prevailed a system based on a household economy under which the family unit itself produced in the home most of the objects it consumed, the agents of production were again primarily the women. Only a few generations ago our great-grandmothers, with the help of the other women of the household, used still to spin, weave, and sew their own trousseaux. It was they, too, who kneaded and baked the bread, salted the pork, and gathered and dried, if they did not actually sow, the vegetables and fruit preserved for the household's winter use. It was in fact the women who provided the major portion of the goods consumed by the family circle. But little by little this work slipped from their hands, and production passed from the home to industry. One by one the factory or collective workroom robbed woman of her former tasks, appropriating not only the work of producing goods for consumption—clothes, bread, etc.—but many household tasks as well. The family linen is now washed by mechanical laundries, and electricity and gas works provide the house with heat, light, and power of every kind.

This tremendous change in the form of social organisation—the substitution of an industrial economy for a household economy—inevitably led to the transformation of the housewife into a wage earner. This was not mainly because woman, deprived of her former work, sought a fresh outlet for her energies; if psychological motives had any share in the change, they were negligible beside the part played by the pressure of economic circumstances. In order to supply all its household needs from outside, the family was obliged to increase its purchasing power. Thus the mother and daughters, who had been

unpaid productive workers before, were forced by stern necessity to take up gainful employment, earning money to swell the family income and help to meet a great variety of needs. By giving up the household tasks which she used to perform without pay woman created a demand for new kinds of paid work ; but in order to be able to buy the goods thus produced she was forced to become a wage earner herself. This is a development that cannot be arrested. It is no use trying to turn back the clock and return to the household economy of the Middle Ages.

Curiously enough, during the earlier stages of this change in the economic system it was man who as a rule took woman's place in performing what had previously been her work in its new industrialised form. Men were employed to make the bread in the baker's shop, to salt the pork in the pork-butcher's shop, and very often to work the washing and drying machines in the mechanical laundries. In some cases the progress of mechanisation has restored to woman some of her former tasks ; at the present time biscuit factories and mechanical bakeries, especially in the northern countries, employ a high proportion of women workers, and so do all kinds of food-preserving factories. It should be observed, however, that much of the process of industrialisation has led to the elimination of the tasks performed in the home by its womenfolk. If, in connection with the revolution which has taken place in the forms of economic activity, an attempt is made to trace the transfers that take place between different agents of production, it will be found that in actual fact they are constantly being adjusted to the forms of production and that there is a frequent transfer of employment from one sex to the other. In an article recently published in the *International Labour Review*<sup>1</sup> some examples were given of this process of substitution. In particular, it was pointed out that, according to the most recent official census reports, in several countries women are deserting the industries in which they used to work in vast numbers (textiles, clothing, food and drink) while they are steadily gaining ground in those in which their presence was formerly exceptional (chemical industries, metal working, printing, bookbinding, etc.). The converse process is also found, and an increase may sometimes be noted in the number of men employed in the industries forsaken by

<sup>1</sup> "The Employment of Women since the War", by Antonina VALLENTIN, in *International Labour Review*, Vol. XXV, No. 4, April 1932, pp. 480-498.

women. In France, for instance, between the censuses of 1921 and 1926, the number of women employed in the textile and clothing industries fell by 162,788, while that of men rose by 13,123. Thus, except where both sexes lose ground by the progress of mechanisation, what is lost by one is sometimes gained, at least in part, by the other. The truest comment on this point is probably that made by Miss Anderson, who, as Director of the Women's Bureau of the United States Department of Labour, is one of the authorities best qualified to speak on the subject, and who recently expressed herself as follows in regard to the rivalry, which the press seems determined to aggravate, between the different victims of the present depression :

Women are not necessarily displacing men as workers. It is a question of division of labour, of adjustment of the sexes to the work of the world. Women may have taken some jobs from men, but in the development of home industries into factory processes men first took these jobs from women, and to-day machines are taking jobs from both.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE VOLUME OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

Let us first consider the problems of to-day from the quantitative side. To show that the employment of women has acted as a contributory cause of the depression, it must first be proved that a heavy increase in their employment took place during the years preceding the present difficulties. Is this in fact the case ?

A careful study of the statistical data does nothing to confirm such an opinion. It has already been shown in this *Review* that the vast extension of women's employment took place in most countries in the second half of the nineteenth century and not in more recent years. Only a few essential points will be brought out here.

If we study the results of general censuses<sup>3</sup>, not only examining the movements of the employed population but comparing them with the movement of the population as a whole, we find that in most countries the percentage of employed women among the total female population has remained practically stationary for the last thirty years, where it has not actually fallen, as in

<sup>1</sup> Mary ANDERSON : "The Economic Status of Wage-Earning Home-Makers", in *Journal of Home Economics*, Oct. 1932, p. 864.

<sup>2</sup> Antonina VALLENTIN : *loc. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> The figures on which these calculations are based are taken from the *International Statistical Year-Book* of the League of Nations, 1931-1932 : Table 3 : Population by age groups ; Table 4 : Population by occupational groups.

Austria (1890, 47.2 ; 1900, 42.8 ; 1910, 43.4 ; 1920, 34.8), Belgium (1900, 29.2 ; 1910, 29.0 ; 1920, 21.3), Denmark (1900, 34.2 ; 1911, 27.2 ; 1921, 24.1), and Italy (1900, 32.4 ; 1911, 29.4 ; 1920, 21.9).

Fluctuations have sometimes occurred in one direction or the other, but the previous level has usually been approximately regained. In France the proportion of women employed was 39 per cent. in 1906 ; it rose to 42.2 per cent. in 1921 and fell again to 36.6 per cent. in 1926.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, where various recent writers have repeatedly asserted that the 1930 census showed an enormous increase in women's employment—an increase which absolutely was indeed enormous, as was the growth of the population as a whole, but relatively was very slight<sup>2</sup>—the movement was in the opposite direction, with a drop during the early post-war years : in 1910 the proportion was 18 per cent., in 1920 16.5 per cent., and in 1930 17.7 per cent., thus remaining slightly below the 1910 percentage. In Sweden there was a similar downward oscillation, the proportions being 28.3 per cent. in 1900, 21.7 per cent. in 1910, and 25.5 per cent. in 1920.

In some countries women's employment has remained at a remarkably steady level for the last thirty years. In England and Wales, for instance, the percentage was 26.9 in 1891, 24.8 in 1901, 25.9 in 1911, and 25.5 in 1921, while the figures for Scotland were 25.8 per cent. in 1901, 24.1 per cent. in 1911, and 26.0 per cent. in 1921. In the Netherlands the degree of stability is still higher, the percentage of employed women having remained at a figure of 18.3 since 1900, falling in 1920 to 18.2.

In a very few countries, however, women's employment has varied from this general rule of quantitative stability and has shown an appreciable and sometimes even substantial increase during the last few decades. This increase appears to be due to causes varying considerably from one country to another.

<sup>1</sup> In an article supported by statistical tables Mrs. Fernande Dauriac has recently shown that in France the employment of women remained remarkably stable between 1906 and 1926, at least as regards the total volume, the only important modifications being the changes that have taken place in the distribution of employed women among the various occupational groups (*Revue d'Economie politique*, Jan.-Feb. 1933, pp. 91 et seq. : "Le travail des femmes en France devant le statistique").

<sup>2</sup> In 1920 the female population of the United States was 51,810,000 and in 1930 it was 60,638,000. During the same period the employed female population rose from 8,549,500 to 10,778,800.

In the first place, there is a group of countries, of which Greece is the clearest example, in which the growth in women's employment started from an extremely low level and has reached one which is still very moderate (from 13.6 per cent. in 1921 to 24 per cent. in 1928). The explanation in this case is probably that Greece and other countries of the same type have only recently arrived at the phase of evolution reached in most countries of Europe some decades earlier, at the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth, as a result of the complete change in the general conditions of economic life. Moreover, in Greece in particular, but to a lesser extent also in other countries showing a sharp rise in women's employment, such as Bulgaria and Finland, the greatest increase has been in agriculture ; this provokes the suspicion that the statistics may to some extent have been swollen by a more accurate recording of the womenfolk of the family who help on small farms—work in which women have always and everywhere taken an active share without always figuring in the official statistics. In any case, a rise of this kind in the employment of women is obviously quite unconnected with the present unemployment problem.

It might therefore be possible to conclude without fear of contradiction that there has been no quantitative increase in women's employment sufficient to influence the labour market and disturb its equilibrium, were it not for the somewhat disconcerting exception of Germany, where women's employment has steadily risen, both before and after the war<sup>1</sup>, up to a figure of 35.6 per cent. of the total female population in 1925, i.e. one of the highest of all recorded percentages.<sup>2</sup> It would, however, be obviously false to conclude that an increase in women's employment, which from 1907 to 1925 was of the order of 5.1 per cent. of the total female population and about 2.4 per cent. of the total population of Germany, could have had any serious effect on the labour market in the course of a depression which in February 1932 had thrown out of employment 6,128,429 persons, or more than 19 per cent. of the employed population and nearly 10 per cent. of the total population of the country. Here again the rise

<sup>1</sup> 1882 : 24.0 per cent. ; 1895 : 25.0 per cent. ; 1907 : 30.5 per cent. ; 1925 : 35.6 per cent.

<sup>2</sup> Owing to the difference in the statistical methods employed an accurate comparison between different countries is impossible and is better not attempted.

in women's employment cannot be held responsible for unemployment; it would probably be nearer the truth to look upon it as one of the effects—among which unemployment itself is yet another—of the economic disturbances experienced by post-war Germany.

These disturbances—among which currency inflation and the loss of accumulated wealth are probably the most important—have had very similar effects on both men and women as regards the proportion of them in employment.<sup>1</sup> Between 1907 and 1925 the proportion of women recorded as employed rose from 30.5 to 35.6 per cent., and that of men from 61.4 to 68 per cent., so that the increase in men's employment was actually the larger. If account is taken of the changes in the composition of the German population and the increased proportion of adult women resulting from the decimation of the male population by the war, the increase in women's employment will certainly not appear excessive.<sup>2</sup>

As there are no statistical data later than 1926, it is impossible to ascertain the exact movement of women's employment in Germany during the most serious years of the depression, from 1926 to 1932. But it is unlikely that the total number of women in employment and women seeking work has perceptibly fallen, although the number of women actually in employment may have done so. When economic conditions are precarious, as they are in Germany at present, everyone does his utmost to provide himself and his family with the means of subsistence, and mothers and fathers, daughters and sons alike seize any opportunity of gainful employment that may present itself. The intensity of their need drives more and more persons to enter paid employment, or at least to seek it and occasionally find it. Thus, however disconcerting it may appear, it must be admitted that economic insecurity and unemployment tend to increase the number of women workers, whereas in prosperous

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<sup>1</sup> The increase in the employed population must also be partly due to the changes in the composition of the German population. The high birth rate of the years 1890-1914, followed by the drop in subsequent years, has resulted in a population which at present includes an abnormal proportion of persons in the prime of their working life, i.e. between the ages of 17 and 40.

<sup>2</sup> These figures are taken from *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Vol. 402, I and II: "Volks-, Berufs- und Betriebszählung vom 16. Juni 1925. Berufszählung. Die berufliche und soziale Gliederung der Bevölkerung des Deutschen Reichs. Teil II. Die Reichsbevölkerung nach Haupt- und Nebenberuf", p. 215.

times women, and especially married women, are much less likely to enter paid employment.

This view is supported not only by general statistics, in which it is often difficult to isolate the causes and effects of the fluctuations shown, but also by enquiries carried out in certain countries during the depression.

It is true that the scope of these enquiries is limited. In most cases they cover only a very narrow section of the employed population. But as samples they may give valuable information to anyone seeking to form an opinion on the possible relations between the quantitative movement of women's employment and the problem of unemployment.

In Germany, as early as 1928, and therefore at a time when unemployment was still far from attaining its subsequent dimensions, an enquiry carried out by Mrs. Anna Geyer<sup>1</sup> among married women workers in different occupations to determine their reasons for entering employment showed that, of the 87 women workers and employees who replied to the enquiry, 39 had gone out to work because their husbands were partly or wholly unemployed. Excluding from these figures workers in the textile industry, in which for various reasons it is customary for women to continue working after marriage and which has therefore been more or less unaffected by the economic depression in this respect, it may be estimated that 56 per cent. of the married workers in other occupations who replied to the enquiry had taken up paid work because their husbands were unemployed.

A more extensive enquiry set on foot in Austria in July 1931 by Mrs. Käthe Leichter, Secretary of the Women's Employment Section of the Vienna Chamber of Workers and Salaried Employees, led to similar conclusions. This enquiry obtained particulars of 1,320 industrial women workers, of whom 515 were married, and it was found that in 41.2 per cent. of these cases the husbands were unemployed.

Is it therefore to be concluded that during the present depression women are working while men are unemployed, and that

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<sup>1</sup> *Die Frauenfrage im Lichte des Sozialismus*. IV: *Die Frau im Beruf*, pp. 190-193.

<sup>2</sup> Käthe LEICHTER: *So leben wir... 1.320 Industriearbeiterinnen berichten über ihr Leben*, pp. 9-13.

therefore the women themselves are not suffering from the evils of the economic situation? Such a conclusion would be a gross exaggeration, if not entirely unjustified. As will be seen below, cases have occasionally occurred where work has thus been transferred from men to women, but they can in no way be looked upon as constituting a general rule. From Mrs. Leichter's enquiry it also appears that of the 1,320 women workers covered by the enquiry at a moment when they were in employment, two-thirds had previously been unemployed and 42 per cent. of these for more than a year. The large proportion of married women found in employment while their husbands are unemployed is probably explained by the fact that normally a great many of them would have been dismissed on the ground that they were in receipt of earnings from two sources (*Doppelverdiener*). This proves nothing except that the poverty consequent on unemployment naturally encourages every effort to obtain the bare means of subsistence, and transforms the whole population capable of work of any kind, of whatever age or sex, into a vast army seeking employment and grasping every opportunity of earning—a morbid symptom which undoubtedly arises from a morbid state.

#### UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG WOMEN

“To-day machines are taking jobs from both”, wrote Miss Anderson. These words are only too true, with the reservation that machines are not solely responsible for the sufferings of the unemployed, their effects having been reinforced by all the factors of the depression whose combined action has so disastrously reduced the possibilities of employment for the workers of both sexes. For indeed both sexes—companions in misfortune, as in work—have been affected, although perhaps not always or everywhere in the same way.

Although a study of this kind bristles with difficulties, and is quite impossible for several countries which do not publish unemployment statistics by sex, an attempt is made below to give comparative tables for certain countries showing the unemployment among men and women workers respectively during the twelve months comprising the second half of 1931 and the first half of 1932. Figures, taken from official statistics, are given for eight countries for which the necessary data are available.

#### Austria<sup>1</sup>

Date	Applicants for work at the end of each month					
	Men			Women		
	Total	In receipt of relief		Total	In receipt of relief	
		Number	Per cent.		Number	Per cent.
1931 : July	173,509	147,133	84.7	61,848	47,231	76.7
Aug.	175,830	149,162	84.7	61,928	47,159	76.2
Sept.	189,515	158,902	83.8	60,469	43,228	71.4
Oct.	213,823	179,604	83.9	67,722	48,497	71.4
Nov.	260,809	218,834	83.8	76,271	54,824	71.8
Dec.	311,610	267,041	85.6	84,371	62,586	74.1
1932 : Jan.	334,483	290,574	86.8	88,201	67,542	76.5
Feb.	338,903	295,357	87.1	87,795	66,611	75.8
March	331,601	287,699	86.7	85,577	64,745	75.6
April	287,311	243,834	84.8	80,355	60,054	74.7
May	259,174	216,590	83.5	75,713	54,891	72.4
June	251,102	209,666	83.4	76,425	55,374	72.5

<sup>1</sup> From figures published monthly by the Federal Office of Statistics in the *Statistische Nachrichten*.

#### Czechoslovakia<sup>1</sup>

Date	Applicants for work registered by the public employment exchanges and not placed at the end of the month	
	Men	Women
1931 : July	151,710	59,198
Aug.	153,116	61,924
Sept.	163,646	64,705
Oct.	183,988	70,213
Nov.	251,554	86,100
Dec.	375,205	111,158
1932 : Jan.	453,888	129,250
Feb.	494,024	137,712
March	498,507	135,400
April	427,603	128,229
May	368,817	118,411
June	349,851	117,097

<sup>1</sup> From figures published periodically in *Die Mitteilungen des Statistischen Staatsamts der Cechoslowakischen Republik*, and communicated monthly to the International Labour Office.



France <sup>1</sup>

Date	Applications for work at official employment exchanges not satisfied at end of month		Unemployed in receipt of relief from unemployment funds			
	Men	Women	Men		Women	
			Number	Per cent. <sup>2</sup>	Number	Per cent. <sup>2</sup>
1931 : July	37,531	13,380	27,149	72.4	8,767	65.5
Aug.	40,141	13,532	29,277	72.9	8,396	62.7
Sept.	42,644	13,787	30,857	72.3	7,667	55.5
Oct.	61,677	18,686	45,471	73.7	10,650	56.9
Nov.	98,358	25,533	75,204	76.4	16,953	66.3
Dec.	140,699	36,595	117,996	82.4	29,013	79.0
1932 : Jan.	217,769	60,914	194,153	89.1	47,334	77.7
Feb.	264,705	72,424	236,959	89.5	56,239	77.6
March	269,471	77,975	243,087	90.2	60,133	77.0
April	261,986	79,074	224,424	84.8	57,589	72.8
May	245,907	76,413	207,522	83.4	54,662	71.4
June	222,514	72,964	182,368	81.9	50,003	68.5

<sup>1</sup> From figures published weekly in the *Bulletin du marché du travail*.

<sup>2</sup> Percentage of applicants for work of each sex in receipt of relief.

Germany

Date	Statistics of public employment exchanges <sup>1</sup>		Trade union returns			
	Unemployed not placed at end of month		Percentage of members unemployed <sup>2</sup>			
	Men	Women	Wholly		Partially <sup>3</sup>	
Men			Women	Men	Women	
1931 : July	3,218,077	771,609	26.1	22.2	21.4	30.2
Aug.	3,402,548	812,217	27.6	25.3	23.6	34.3
Sept.	3,519,092	835,891	—	—	—	—
Oct.	3,734,620	888,860	29.7	26.4	24.8	33.3
Nov.	4,073,536	986,237	31.0	27.6	24.1	30.6
Dec.	4,564,589	1,103,598	33.7	31.1	25.5	32.2
1932 : Jan.	4,844,066	1,197,844	35.1	31.5	25.8	33.1
Feb.	4,922,085	1,206,344	35.5	32.0	25.6	33.3
March	4,841,047	1,193,053	36.4	33.0	25.8	33.3
April	4,585,916	1,153,154	36.7	33.0	25.2	32.3
May	4,456,022	1,126,598	36.8	33.3	25.8	34.8
June	4,357,159	1,118,619	37.0	33.4	25.7	32.8

<sup>1</sup> Published monthly in the *Reichsarbeitsblatt*.

<sup>2</sup> This percentage is calculated for permanent occupations, excluding seasonal trades, and therefore relates exclusively to unemployment due to economic conditions (*Konjunkturarbeitslosigkeit*).

<sup>3</sup> *Kurzarbeit*.

Great Britain and Northern Ireland <sup>1</sup>

Date	Insured persons registered as unemployed <sup>2</sup> at end of month							
	Men				Women			
	Number	Per cent. of insured			Number	Per cent. of insured		
Wholly unemployed		Partially unemployed	Total	Wholly unemployed		Partially unemployed	Total	
1931 : July	2,127,615	18.0	5.8	23.8	678,860	13.4	6.1	19.5
Aug.	2,118,329	18.6	5.1	23.7	694,834	13.9	6.1	20.0
Sept.	2,173,302	19.3	5.0	24.3	707,244	14.2	6.2	20.4
Oct.	2,167,676	19.7	3.9	23.6	625,303	13.9	3.6	17.5
Nov.	2,166,867	20.0	3.6	23.6	567,987	12.8	3.1	15.9
Dec.	2,132,343	19.9	3.3	23.2	538,474	12.0	3.0	15.0
1932 : Jan.	2,303,990	21.1	4.0	25.1	550,800	11.6	3.8	15.4
Feb.	2,300,063	21.0	4.0	25.0	509,040	10.7	3.5	14.2
March	2,211,205	20.5	3.6	24.1	449,209	9.7	2.8	12.5
April	2,269,733	20.4	4.3	24.7	456,712	9.3	3.4	12.7
May	2,322,736	20.3	5.0	25.3	499,104	8.8	5.1	13.9
June	2,357,963	20.4	5.9	26.3	505,125	8.7	5.4	14.1

<sup>1</sup> From figures published monthly in the *Ministry of Labour Gazette*.

<sup>2</sup> I.e. in receipt of unemployment insurance benefit.

Italy <sup>1</sup>

Date	Insured registered as unemployed					
	Men			Women		
	Wholly unemployed	Partially unemployed	Total	Wholly unemployed	Partially unemployed	Total
1931 : July	475,693	18,293	493,986	161,838	7,528	169,366
Aug.	528,571	19,655	548,226	164,702	10,981	175,683
Sept.	575,413	21,392	596,805	172,351	8,430	180,781
Oct.	610,280	23,102	633,382	189,464	9,726	199,190
Nov.	686,440	22,931	709,371	191,827	8,036	199,863
Dec.	758,952	24,870	783,822	223,369	8,279	231,648
1932 : Jan.	802,860	25,204	828,064	248,461	8,023	256,484
Feb.	903,709	17,998	921,707	244,236	8,323	252,559
March	826,080	24,159	850,239	226,936	7,477	234,413
April	766,347	25,349	791,696	233,678	7,371	241,049
May	718,060	26,763	744,823	250,396	8,765	259,161
June	651,962	22,391	674,353	253,135	9,319	262,454

<sup>1</sup> Statistics of the National Social Insurance Fund (communication of the Italian Government to the International Labour Office).

Poland <sup>1</sup>

Date	Applications for work registered by the public employment exchanges at end of month		Number of applicants per 100 vacancies	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
1931 : July	203,486	51,693	—	—
Aug.	196,550	49,830	—	—
Sept.	196,953	49,473	—	—
Oct.	203,633	51,989	—	—
Nov.	211,832	54,195	1,693	1,984
Dec.	249,867	62,620	2,975	1,911
1932 : Jan.	271,467	66,967	3,444	2,842
Feb.	285,546	64,599	3,643	2,884
March	295,875	64,156	3,648	2,209
April	280,035	59,738	2,085	1,331
May	253,637	54,164	1,500	1,049
June	218,547	45,600	1,088	1,271

<sup>1</sup> Based on figures published quarterly by the Central Office of Statistics in *Informations statistiques* : table showing the activity of the public employment exchanges.

Switzerland

Date	Applications for work at official employment exchanges <sup>1</sup>		Number unemployed per 100 members of insurance funds <sup>2</sup>			
	Men	Women	Wholly		Partially	
			Men	Women	Men	Women
1931 : March	—	—	5.9	5.1	10.5	18.6
June	—	—	3.2	4.5	8.0	14.7
July	11,748	6,227	—	—	—	—
Aug.	12,154	6,352	—	—	—	—
Sept.	13,095	6,694	3.7	4.8	9.4	16.7
Oct.	19,519	8,264	—	—	—	—
Nov.	26,854	10,066	—	—	—	—
Dec.	40,339	10,231	11.0	7.5	13.1	20.1
1932 : March	—	—	9.2	8.5	12.5	18.1
June	—	—	6.7	8.2	10.1	14.5

<sup>1</sup> Figures published by the Federal Labour Office in *Ergebnisse der Schweizerischen Sozialstatistik*, 1931, and the *Annuaire statistique*, 1931. As figures by sex are not given in the monthly publications, those for the first half of 1932 are not yet available.

<sup>2</sup> Figures published periodically in *La Vie Economique* by the Federal Department of National Economy. They refer to the end of the month.

These figures call for important reservations and for the greatest caution in comparison and comment, for however carefully the official statistics may be compiled in the countries concerned they can give only a very imperfect picture of the actual unemployment situation. All statistics are necessarily incomplete and fail to cover all the facts. In the present case and for a comparative study of the two series of figures there is a still more serious drawback : whatever the system used in compiling the statistics (applicants for work registered at the public employment exchanges at the end of the month, statistics of insurance or relief funds, trade union returns), the possible causes of error are not the same for the two series or else do not affect them equally, thus rendering any attempt at comparison extremely hazardous. It will therefore be useful to see how the possible causes of error work in each country, so that their effects may be taken into account in commenting on the figures obtained by each of the methods employed.

It might be expected *a priori* that the most accurate statistics would be those of the unemployment insurance funds in countries where insurance is compulsory. But although in fact these are fairly comprehensive, the records they provide nevertheless leave serious loopholes for error in comparing unemployment between the two sexes. In the first place, unemployment insurance is rarely compulsory for all categories of workers. The occupations which are exempted, and in which the volume of unemployment is consequently unknown, do not employ men and women workers equally, so that the resulting error in computing the volume of unemployment is not distributed equally over the two series of figures. Among the more important occupations usually excluded from unemployment insurance several are primarily women's work. Domestic servants are excluded in Austria, Bulgaria, Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Italy, and Poland ; all home workers in Italy and Poland, and some classes of them in Germany <sup>1</sup> ; nursing and teaching staff in Great Britain ; occasional or casual workers, variously defined, in almost all countries : persons working for more than one employer simultaneously or successively (e.g. charwomen, daily dressmakers), persons working for less than a specified minimum number of hours each week, a minimum which in

<sup>1</sup> In particular, married women home workers earning less than 12 marks a week.

Germany, for instance, was raised to 24 hours in 1930, thus excluding a large number of married women whose household duties leave them free to do a few hours' paid work each day. Owing to these exceptions the statistics do not show the unemployment actually existing among several large groups of workers, in particular of women workers.

Another source of error, also due to omission, lies in the method of granting unemployment benefit. As the statistics of the insurance funds give particulars of the number of unemployed workers in receipt of benefit, the conditions on which it is granted necessarily have a considerable effect on the statistical data obtained by this method. It is well known that owing to the exhaustion of the resources of insurance funds measures of economy have been adopted in a number of countries limiting the rights of various categories of unemployed workers and especially of women. Several countries have introduced very strict rules for the grant of unemployment benefit to married women. In Germany amendments to the Unemployment Insurance Act dating from 1931 require insured married women to prove their need in order to obtain benefit; emergency relief had already been subject to this condition for some time. In Great Britain, under the Anomalies Act of 1931<sup>1</sup>, unless her husband is incapacitated from work or unemployed and not in receipt of benefit, a married woman who since her marriage has had less than fifteen contributions paid in respect of her, or who, if more than six months have elapsed since her marriage, has had less than eight contributions paid in respect of her during the period of three months preceding the beginning of her benefit quarter, is not entitled to benefit unless she can prove (1) that she is normally employed in, and will normally seek to obtain her livelihood by means of, insurable employment, and (2) that having regard to all the circumstances of her case, and in particular to her industrial experience and the industrial circumstances of the district in which she resides, she can reasonably expect to obtain insurable employment in that district. In Belgium, under a Circular issued in 1931, unemployed married women are no longer entitled to the payment of extended benefit out of the National Emergency Fund. In France special regulations have tightened up the conditions under which charwomen may receive allowances from the public unemployment

<sup>1</sup> 21 & 23 Geo. V, ch. 36.

funds. In addition, certain regulations which do not specifically apply to women are nevertheless especially hard on them: in particular, the regulations issued in a number of countries to limit the right to benefit of persons who have means of support other than their personal earnings, married women whose husbands are in employment being classified in this group.

The figures given above for Great Britain provide a striking example of the effects an administrative measure of this kind may have on the comparative unemployment statistics for the two sexes. When the Anomalies Act came into force on 3 October 1931 there was at once an appreciable drop in the curve of women's unemployment. It was alleged that this curve had previously been kept at an artificially high level by the number of women who were dismissed from their employment on marriage—a practice common in certain branches of British industry—and then registered as unemployed without really intending to continue work. It is, however, impossible to ascertain how far these irregularities actually took place, since the employment exchanges are unable to tell whether applications are genuine or fraudulent by offering these women posts<sup>1</sup> the acceptance or refusal of which would prove whether they were genuinely seeking work or not. But whatever the actual facts may be, it remains true that as a result of an administrative reform which has had no effect at all on the actual situation, unemployment among insured women, which was formerly only slightly lower than that among men, now shows a considerable difference. During the first quarter of the year under consideration the average proportion of unemployment among insured men was 23.9 per cent., and among insured women 20 per cent. During the fourth quarter the average for men remained at approximately the same figure (23.6), whereas that for women fell to 13.8. It is possible that the previous figures erred on the side of exaggeration, and probable that the present ones err in the opposite direction. But in any case it is safe to say that the statistics of the unemployment funds do not provide a very reliable basis for comparisons of unemployment.

Another common method of measuring unemployment is to record the applications for work which the public employment

<sup>1</sup> An additional difficulty in finding employment for these women is that most of them are obliged to change their occupation, their former one being closed to them by marriage.

exchanges have not been able to satisfy. This method obviously contains the germs of numerous errors, some affecting both sexes more or less alike, and some women workers in particular.

Errors of omission may arise from the fact that the unemployed ultimately give up registering at the employment exchange when they have lost all reasonable hope of obtaining employment through it. This factor presumably operates in regard to both sexes alike, and an attempt has here been made to eliminate it by including in the tables given above only the placing statistics of countries in which the unemployed must register at an employment exchange in order to obtain unemployment benefit. In reality, however, it is probable that this factor still has an appreciable effect in lowering the unemployment figures for women, since, as a result of the measures adopted in many countries against persons in receipt of multiple earnings (i.e. persons with means other than their own earnings, including married women whose husbands are in employment), married women workers who are dismissed have no chance of finding employment by registering at an employment exchange and are not entitled to unemployment benefit, so that they usually drop this useless formality. Logically, however, they could be counted as unemployed, since it is owing to the general unemployment situation that they are out of work. The same factor also affects the accuracy of the trade union statistics of their unemployed members, since, according to the experience of the German trade unions, women who have been out of work for a considerable time, and particularly married women, show a greater tendency than men to leave their unions. In an article recently published in the *Gewerkschaftszeitung*<sup>1</sup>, this fact is attributed to several causes. Membership fees are a heavy charge on these women if they no longer have any practical value, and as married women belonging to the unions have little hope of regaining employment owing to the measures adopted to exclude them from the labour market, they lose interest in the union and leave it.

Where persons seeking work may register at more than one office, and in particular at a public exchange and a private employment agency, it is obvious that if the figures are collected from all these offices they will tend to err on the side of

<sup>1</sup> *Gewerkschaftszeitung*, 5 Nov. 1932, pp. 706-708: "Die Frauen in den Gewerkschaften".

exaggeration and to be artificially swollen. If, on the other hand, they are collected from the public exchanges only and if the private agencies carry on a considerable business in the country concerned, a certain amount of unemployment will escape the statistics. As the tables given above deal only with the records of the official employment exchanges, errors of omission alone are here to be feared. The error from this source is practically negligible in Germany, where private employment agencies have been almost entirely abolished. In other countries it varies with the activity of these agencies, and probably affects the two sexes somewhat unequally. It is a well-known fact that private employment agencies cater in the main for women workers.<sup>1</sup> Hence the unemployed who seek work through the medium of private agencies, and thus escape the records of unemployment statistics, leave the largest deficiency in the women's columns of the tables. In the case of the countries studied in this article, such omissions can occur only for women in non-insurable occupations, since in all the countries selected the receipt of unemployment benefit is conditional on registration at a public employment exchange. Where there is no such rule the unemployment statistics obtained from the records of the public employment exchanges may be seriously falsified by this factor; the placing statistics of certain other countries have accordingly not been used here.

Trade union statistics, which are also sometimes used to measure the volume of unemployment, can give only incomplete results, their value depending on the extent of trade union organisation in the country concerned. For a comparative study of men's and women's unemployment these statistics have also the special drawback of being particularly incomplete for women, as it is much less usual for them to join the unions than it is for men. In many countries the female membership of the unions is proportionately so small as to render such statistics entirely useless for the purposes of this study. They are used here only for Germany, where the trade unions have a large membership of women, and only to show the percentage unemployed among the organised workers of each sex, an

<sup>1</sup> Cf. INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE: *Abolition of Fee-charging Employment Agencies* (report submitted to the International Labour Conference, Sixteenth Session, 1932), p. 114, and also the tables showing the activities of private employment agencies in different countries on pp. 44, 48-49, 61-62, 75, 89, 93, 100-101, 131-133, and 134.

interesting item of information which cannot be very greatly distorted by the differences in trade union organisation among men and women respectively. Here again, however, a reservation is called for in respect of a source of error already mentioned, namely, the resignation from the unions of women who have been out of employment for some time. If it is true, as the German trade unions have stated, that during the depression women have continued to join the unions in their former numbers while in employment, but leave them more readily during long periods of unemployment, this factor would tend to reduce the proportion unemployed among organised women workers.

It is therefore plain that none of the methods employed can be said to furnish really accurate information. In particular, it is quite probable that unemployment among women is in reality higher than appears from the statistics. Bearing these reservations in mind, however, we may attempt to compare unemployment among men and women workers respectively on the basis of the published figures.

As the general army of workers in all countries contains a much larger proportion of men than of women, the volume of unemployment among women, in absolute figures, is naturally much smaller than that among men. What is interesting, therefore, is not so much the absolute numbers unemployed, but rather, for each sex, the relation between the number unemployed and the total number of workers normally employed in each country. This relation is difficult to determine, since it requires an accurate knowledge not only of the number of persons of each sex out of employment—and the difficulties of obtaining this have already been pointed out—but also of the total working population of the country, which is nowhere known exactly. An attempt may however be made to approach the truth by several avenues, in the hope of finding some terms for comparison.

Some of the elements of a comparison are provided by the unemployment statistics drawn up by the competent official bodies in certain countries. The insurance funds of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for instance, calculate the percentage of unemployed men and women among their members, and even give separate figures for total and partial unemployment as well as for both together.<sup>1</sup> But, as already noted, the recent

<sup>1</sup> See table on p. 15.

amendments to the regulations for the receipt of benefit have made such an enormous difference to the statistics of women's unemployment that their accuracy as an image of the real situation is somewhat open to question. Are the percentages published under the old or the new regulations the closest to reality? It is difficult to find reasonable grounds for a trustworthy opinion on this point.

The statistics of the German trade unions furnish a more reliable basis of comparison. They give the percentage wholly and partially unemployed among the men and women members of the unions.<sup>1</sup> In order to eliminate an arbitrary factor that might possibly affect comparisons between the men's and women's series, only the percentages for permanent industries have been used, excluding seasonal occupations, so that the unemployment recorded is that due to the economic situation. The figures for 1931-1932 are so stable, or rather so regular in their movements, that they seem to obey certain fundamental laws and thus enable us to trace them.

In regard to total unemployment, the figures for men are uniformly somewhat higher, the difference varying only between 2.6 and 3.9 per cent., with an average of 33.2 per cent. for men and 29.9 per cent. for women. This represents a difference of 3.3 per cent. in favour of women, who thus appear to be hit less hardly than men; but in view of the experience of the German trade unions mentioned above as to the tendency of women to leave the unions after a long period of unemployment, the real divergence between the two averages is quite probably even narrower. As to partial unemployment or short time, the percentages indicate that it is considerably more prevalent among women than among men. The difference between the two series reached 9 per cent. in May 1932, and never fell below 5.5 per cent. (November 1931). The average for the year as a whole was 24.8 for men and 32.7 for women, or a difference of 7.9 per cent. against women. Adding these results to get the mean proportion of all members of German trade unions affected by unemployment of any kind, we find that during the year 1931-1932 an average of 62.6 per cent. of the women and 58.0 per cent. of the men members employed in permanent industries were hit by the depression.

<sup>1</sup> See table on p. 14.

To obtain really comparable data and exact particulars of the respective positions of the two sexes on the labour market, it would of course be necessary to study the various occupations separately. Several enquiries of this kind have already been made by the German trade unions.<sup>1</sup> But even the general calculations given in this study are enough to show that the depression can hardly be said to have left the women workers unscathed.

The figures showing the proportion of unemployed workers among the members of Swiss insurance funds<sup>2</sup> lead to substantially the same conclusions as the German trade union statistics. Here again there is a great deal of partial unemployment among women workers. These statistics, however, are less detailed. In the first place, they have the disadvantage of giving figures for quarterly intervals only; they have the still more serious drawback of making no distinction between permanent and seasonal occupations, thus causing considerable fluctuations in the unemployment curve. These fluctuations are further exaggerated by the fact that insurance is not compulsory in all cantons, and that where it is so it sometimes applies only to certain seasonal occupations (building workers in the town of Fribourg), so that workers employed in seasonal trades probably form a large proportion of the total number insured. This accounts for the abrupt movements of the unemployment percentage.

The statistics of the Polish employment exchanges furnish interesting data of another kind. They give the number of applicants of both sexes per hundred vacant jobs.<sup>3</sup> Here it will be seen that the figures for men applicants, with two exceptions, are consistently higher than those for women. In two of the months considered there were more than 36 men applicants for a single job, whereas among the women the highest figure reached was 28.84; for women the lowest figure was 10.49, as against 10.86 for men. It may be concluded from these figures that in Poland it is slightly less difficult to find employment for women than for men. But with such competition for jobs it can hardly be said that women are better off than men as regards the balance between supply and demand on the labour

<sup>1</sup> Cf. in particular *Gewerkschaftliche Frauenzeitung*, 15 April 1931, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> See table on p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> See table on p. 16.

market; the most that can be said is that their position is slightly less deplorable.

For the countries in which the official statistics provide no direct basis of comparison an attempt has been made to find a partial substitute by comparing the percentage of women among the total number of unemployed, as shown by the statistics, with the percentage of women among the total employed population, as shown by the most recent census. This method has the serious drawback of comparing figures that do not refer to the same date. Census returns are published some time after the census was actually taken, and those on which these calculations are based are in some cases ten years old or more, so that the comparison can be only a rough one. However, the more recent census returns available for some countries offer some assurance that, in the aggregate at least, the size of the employed female population has not varied to any considerable extent in the last few years. The data provided by special censuses or the reports of labour inspectors can also be used to supplement the information derived from the general censuses. In spite of the shortcomings of comparisons of this kind, therefore, they seem capable of adding to the significance of the absolute figures contained in the official unemployment statistics.

According to these calculations, the proportion of women among unemployed workers during 1931-1932 was 29.4 per cent. in France, 28.9 per cent. in Austria, 24.8 per cent. in Czechoslovakia, 23.5 per cent. in Poland, and 23.3 per cent. in Italy. Do these percentages represent a larger or smaller relative volume of unemployment among employed women than among men?

In France, according to the 1928 census, the percentage of women among the whole employed population was 36.6. The proportion of unemployment among women appears, therefore, at first sight to be appreciably lower than that of employment. But if agriculture is disregarded—an occupation in which, especially in France where land is very much subdivided, the women recorded as employed are mostly the wives and daughters of smallholders or farmers who help to run the family farm, but for whom there can be no question of unemployment in the strict sense—it will be found that among the rest of the employed population women represent a percentage of 26.3, or slightly less than the percentage of female unemployment shown by the official statistics for 1931-1932.

For Austria, where the figure for female unemployment works out at 28.9 per cent., the percentage of women's employment according to the last published census (1920) was 36.1. It remains approximately the same if agricultural workers are excluded, but here this is unnecessary, since in Austria the published figures for the employed agricultural population do not include members of the farmer's family. A census recently taken in agriculture (14 June 1930), the results of which have just been published, shows that in this branch of economic activity, at least, women's employment has varied little in Austria since 1920. The census of 1930 gives a total of 345,255 women employed in agriculture (132,547 heads of undertakings and 187,308 paid workers), as against 346,400 in 1920, or an absolute decrease of 0.4 per cent. and a relative increase of 1.8 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

In Czechoslovakia, where the percentage of women's unemployment is 24.8, that of women's employment, according to the 1921 census, was 28.5, or, excluding agricultural occupations, 26.7. As a matter of fact, the proportion of women workers seems to have increased slightly since that date, at least in industry. According to the reports of the Labour Inspectorate, the percentage of women employed in the undertakings inspected in 1925, 1926, and 1927 rose from 29.8 to 30.2 during the three years in question.

In Poland the corresponding percentages are 23.5, 44.3, and 26.9. Here the difference is enormous between the total percentage of women in employment according to the last census (44.3) and the percentage of women employed in non-agricultural occupations (26.9); this is due both to the very high proportion of women employed in agriculture, where they are almost as numerous as men (5,121,600 as against 5,148,300), and to the predominant place which agriculture holds in the general activity of the country, absorbing as it does over three-quarters of the employed population.

In Italy, where the percentage of women's unemployment was 23.3 per cent. in 1931-1932, the percentage of women in the whole employed population as shown by the general census of 1921 was 28.6, and for non-agricultural occupations alone 26.5. Between the 1921 census and the industrial and commercial

<sup>1</sup> In 1920 women formed 35 per cent. of the employed agricultural population, and in 1930 36.8 per cent., the total agricultural population having fallen from 940,000 to 937,269 persons.

census of October 1927, there seems to have been a slight increase in the employment of women, the percentage having risen to 27.2 in industrial and commercial work at the latter date (1,548,393 women out of a total of 5,649,096 workers). In Italy again, therefore, unemployment appears from these calculations to be slightly lower in proportion among women than among men, with all due reserves for the possible omissions which, as already noted, may occur in the statistics of the unemployment funds for several essentially feminine occupations.

But even if it is true that unemployment is slightly less among women than among men, this is no justification for jumping to the conclusion that women are affected less severely by the depression. This view would be false, and not only because any attempt to consider the two sexes separately is necessarily artificial, the network of family ties among the working classes being so closely interwoven that each member is affected by any change in the common circumstances. It would be equally false if women workers could be considered apart from their social environment as a mere arithmetical sum of independent units, since it would then become obvious that, while unemployment perhaps has slightly fewer victims among women than among men, yet it affects them individually even more severely because less adequate provision is made for their relief.

This statement must not be taken as a criticism of any given system of unemployment relief. Social insurance and assistance cannot operate in the abstract. With shrinking resources and ever-increasing demands on them, the funds cannot consider the rights of individuals to the entire exclusion of the social conditions of the time, and there may be practical reasons for restricting the right to benefit of certain classes of unemployed women, which must over-rule the claims of strict individual justice. Nevertheless, this is a fact which any study of women's unemployment is bound to point out, and which has in fact provoked lively protests from the trade unions in various countries.<sup>1</sup> Women's reviews, both trade union and others, have frequently called attention with unconcealed bitterness to the special reductions in the public assistance and even in the insurance benefits payable to various classes of unemployed women.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Industrial and Labour Information*, Vol. XLII, No. 12, 20 June 1932, p. 399.

In the tables given above, the proportion of men and women workers in receipt of benefit has been given as a percentage of the total number of unemployed workers of each sex for two countries, Austria and France, whose statistics provided the necessary material. These percentages are considerably lower for women than for men.

Women are also especially severely affected by the depression on account of the wage cuts provoked by it. These hit them hardest when they have to maintain themselves entirely on their own earnings, which are normally so low that any reduction is enough to bring them below the subsistence level. In some cases, too, the cuts made in women's wages have been more severe than those in men's, though fortunately this phenomenon does not yet appear to be general. The wage statistics recently published by the International Labour Office<sup>1</sup> show a bigger drop in women's wages than in men's in three countries only, namely, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States. In Japan, where this movement is the most strongly marked, the daily wage rate for women appears to have fallen to 84 per cent. and for men to 89 per cent. of the daily rates in force in 1926, while the average daily earnings, also compared with 1926, have fallen to 70 per cent. for women and 91 per cent. for men. The difference is less in New Zealand. In the United States, it appears that the fall in wages has chiefly affected women's hourly earnings. According to the information published periodically by the Women's Bureau of the United States Department of Labour, this downward movement of wages is at present proceeding at an alarming rate, particularly in certain States and certain branches of production. In the manufactured goods industries of the State of New York, the wage cuts between June 1931 and June 1932 amounted to 19.2 per cent. for women and 16 per cent. for men. In the clothing industry the reduction in women's wages during the same period was 22.9 per cent.

In Germany, according to a recent study of the movement of wages fixed by collective agreement<sup>2</sup>, the fall in women's wages appears on the whole to have been less marked, although

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *International Labour Review*, Vol. XXVI, No. 5, Nov. 1932, pp. 716-727: "Movements in the General Level of Wages".

<sup>2</sup> "Die Entwicklung der Tariflöhne im Jahre 1932", in *Gewerkschaftszeitung*, 5 Nov. 1932.

in certain industries—e.g. cabinet making—there have been very drastic reductions.

Any aggravation of this movement would be fraught with the gravest consequences. It would increase the danger, rightly feared by the trade unions, of the presence on a slack labour market, already vastly overstocked with idle hands, of a plentiful supply of ill-paid female labour, which owing to the progress of mechanisation may be substituted in many kinds of industrial employment for the more expensive male labour. In some industries the disastrous effects of this situation have already made themselves felt. Examples have been given by the German trade unions, which cite cases in which preference in engaging labour was definitely given to the cheaper kind, that is to women.

The most striking examples are probably those given in an article in the *Gewerkschaftszeitung*<sup>1</sup>, analysing some unforeseen effects of the Emergency Decree of 5 September 1932. In order to encourage the engagement of extra workers, this Decree authorised employers to reduce by 50 per cent. all wages paid for the thirty-first to the fortieth hours worked each week, provided that at the same time they engaged additional workers equal to at least 25 per cent. of their whole staff. A bonus at the rate of 7.70 marks per week was also allowed for each extra worker so engaged. As the bonus was the same for both men and women workers, it was obviously definitely to the employers' advantage to engage women wherever possible. As a result of these circumstances, the following cases occurred. In one undertaking which had engaged extra workers under the terms of the Decree the bonus covered 44.7 per cent. of the weekly wages if the worker engaged was a woman and only 24.5 per cent. if it was a man; the result was that by engaging mostly women the undertaking was able to obtain 3,264 extra hours' work per week at an additional cost of only 409 marks. In another case a large metal works which engaged 16 extra men and 83 extra women workers was able, thanks to the combined effect of the reduction authorised in the wages of the whole staff and the bonus received for the 99 extra workers, to obtain 4,752 hours of work per week with an actual saving in wages of 94 marks.

<sup>1</sup> "Notverordnung, Frauenlöhne und Frauenarbeit", by Judith GRÜNFELD, in *Gewerkschaftszeitung*, 5 Nov. 1932, pp. 705 et seq. Cf. also an article by the same writer, "Frauenarbeit in Lichte der Rationalisierung", in *Die Arbeit* (Berlin), Dec. 1931, p. 911.



These cases are no doubt exceptional, and due to a miscalculation of the effects of an emergency measure. Nevertheless, they bring home the very serious danger to the welfare of the working class as a whole of the system of unequal pay for equal work as between men and women workers, a danger which is still greater when there is an abundance of labour available. Fear of its possible consequences has no doubt played some part in the campaigns for the abolition of women's employment, and goes some way towards explaining the movements of opinion which have sprung up to support them. Whether or not it provides a logical justification for these campaigns is the pressing problem which remains to be considered in the latter part of this article.

#### THE ABOLITION OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AS A REMEDY FOR UNEMPLOYMENT

The problem of abolishing women's employment as a remedy for the present unemployment situation leads us to dangerous and rocky ground, strewn with philosophical and sociological theories and prejudices as to woman's place in the family and in society, shaken by the conflicting tendencies of traditionalists and evolutionists, feminists and anti-feminists, and the passions aroused by all such movements of opinion; and torn by the more or less overt egoisms let loose by all catastrophes. It is the rather presumptuous intention of the following pages to discuss this difficult problem realistically, with special regard for economic facts and the probable effects upon them of any solutions proposed. And if on the way we stumble over a theory, we shall try to surmount the obstacle with all possible speed.

Approaching the problem from this purely practical standpoint, we are at once struck by the perversity of a solution which proposes to cure unemployment—that is, lack of work—merely by taking work away from some of those who have it. This obviously results only in shifting the incidence of unemployment, not abolishing it. By ceasing to describe as unemployment the state of forced and permanent idleness to which women formerly in employment had been reduced, the level of unemployment recorded could of course be lowered; but this process would not add a single new opening to the opportunities for work of mankind as a whole. To any unprejudiced observer it is

obviously wrong to present the problem in these terms. If a solution of this kind is to be described as a remedy for unemployment, it must be postulated in advance that the right to work, to earn one's livelihood by one's own activity, is an exclusive prerogative of the masculine portion of humanity, instead of being recognised as a fundamental right of every human being.

Let us for the moment accept this postulate, as some people appear to do. A number of questions at once arise in regard to the proposal to abolish women's employment (gainful employment being of course implied) as a remedy for unemployment. Is this in fact possible, and if so to what extent? Since it is proposed as a remedy for the economic situation, we must ask whether it would prove an effective remedy, and what its probable effects would be.

The first question is fundamental, for it is obviously useless to do battle for a plan which is quite impracticable. Attempts have been made to answer it by a survey of the facts of the situation. In Germany, when this idea first began to attract attention two years ago, several reviews published detailed studies of the effects of women's employment with a view to estimating the practical value of its abolition. In an article published in December 1930<sup>1</sup>, Lorenz Popp analysed the returns of the last occupational census in Germany as follows. In 1925 there were 11,478,000 women in gainful employment. Of these 6,802,000, or 59.3 per cent., were unmarried, 1,030,000, or 9 per cent., were widows or divorced, and 3,645,000, or 31.7 per cent., were married. Thus 7,832,000 women and girls were dependent on their own work for their livelihood, and in many cases had to support dependants as well, so that there could be no question of excluding them from the labour market and thus depriving them of their means of support. There remained, therefore, the 3,645,000 married women; would it be possible to evict these from their employment and transfer their work to men? It should be noted in the first place that 2,501,335 of them, or over 75 per cent., were merely helpers in the family business—farmers' wives who help their husbands to run the family farm, wives of small shopkeepers or handicraftsmen, or even of wage-paid home workers who share their husbands'

<sup>1</sup> Lorenz POPP: "Kann durch die Abschaffung der Frauenerwerbsarbeit die Arbeitslosigkeit beiseitigt werden?", in *Gewerkschaftsarchiv*, Dec. 1930, p. 356.

work during part of the day. No legislation against women's employment could touch these women, who are not bound by a contract of employment, nor could it affect independent women workers, of whom there were 309,160. According to these calculations, therefore, any compulsory transfer of paid work from women to men would affect at the most only 835,600 married women.

But even among these the qualifications of the workers concerned must be taken into account. They include, for instance, 44,233 domestic servants in private houses. It would be obviously impossible to replace a children's nurse by an unemployed glazier or mason, and it would even be difficult to substitute tailors and hatters for dressmakers and milliners. Finally, among married women, the question of means must also be considered. Many of them have families which the husband's wages are definitely inadequate to support; it appeared from various enquiries carried out in Germany at that time that 80 per cent. of the married women in employment were driven to it by stern economic necessity. Taking everything into account, therefore, Lorenz Popp concluded that there were perhaps some 200,000 women workers at the very most who could be replaced by men. Other writers placed this figure at 80,000. Could this reasonably be proposed as an effective remedy for an unemployment situation which at that time counted 4,380,000 victims, and was subsequently to become considerably worse?

The same conclusions have been reached in a number of other countries after a careful analysis of the facts.

In the United States, for instance, the Women's Bureau of the Federal Department of Labour and various other official or scientific bodies have devoted a number of analytical studies to the economic aspects of women's employment.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for

<sup>1</sup> WOMEN'S BUREAU: *The Family Status of Breadwinning Women* (Bulletin No. 43, 1922; 43 pp.); *The Share of Wage-Earning Women in Family Support* (Bulletin No. 30, 1923; 170 pp.); *Married Women in Industry* (Bulletin No. 38, 1924; 8 pp.); *Family Status of Breadwinning Women in Four Selected Cities* (Bulletin No. 41, 1925; 145 pp.); *Facts about Working Women* (Bulletin No. 46); *Women Workers and Family Support* (Bulletin No. 49, 1925; 10 pp.); *What the Wage-Earning Woman contributes to Family Support* (Bulletin No. 75, 1929; 21 pp.); *Wage-Earning Women and the Industrial Conditions of 1930: A Survey of South Bend* (Bulletin No. 92, 1932; 84 pp.).

CHILDREN'S BUREAU: *Children of Working Mothers in Philadelphia: The Working Mothers*, by Clara Mortenson BEYER.

Several articles have also appeared in Germany, among which the following may be cited: A. GEYER: "Die Bedeutung der Erwerbsarbeit verheirateter

which married women go out to work, the extent of the family responsibilities of women workers, and the economic value of the work they do have been carefully studied. These studies have led to the conclusion that 90 per cent. of the married women employed in industry in the United States work because they have to. In all these enquiries, in every part of the United States and in different industrial surroundings, the reasons the women gave for taking up jobs were invariably the same, where they had not been forced to work as the only breadwinner of the family. (The latter case is not exceptional; according to an enquiry carried out by the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in December 1931, 1,700 of the 4,000 families investigated were entirely supported by a married woman.) These reasons are: to supplement the husband's wages, which are too low to support the family, to pay for furniture, to pay debts contracted during sickness or unemployment, to pay doctors' bills, to help elderly parents, orphan brothers and sisters, or near relations in trouble, to save for a rainy day, as otherwise the family could never put anything by, etc. To read this litany of utilitarian reasons leads to the conviction that in the majority of cases to deprive these women of their employment in order to give it to men would merely mean that society would have to pay poor relief instead of unemployment benefit, with no gain to anyone, the only difference between these two forms of assistance being that the former is more demoralising to its recipients than the latter.

In Austria the enquiry recently carried out by Mrs. Käthe Leichter<sup>1</sup>, which has already been mentioned, gives a still higher percentage for the women who are driven to work by economic necessity. When asked whether they would prefer to go on working or to stay at home if their husband earned enough to support the family, 95.3 per cent. of these women replied that they would stay at home if they could.

This is not at all surprising if it is remembered that most kinds of unskilled manual work have no intrinsic interest and are merely breadwinning occupations rather than vocations. The

Frauen für die wirtschaftliche Lage und den Zusammenhalt der Familie", in *Die Arbeiter Wohlfahrt*, 15 Oct. 1930; Gertrud HANNA: "Vom Kampf gegen die verheirateten erwerbstätigen Frauen", in *Die Arbeit*, April 1931; "Zur Forderung: Kampf den Doppelverdienern" (unsigned), in *Die Gewerkschaftliche Frauenzeitung*, 15 March 1932.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

replies are not by any means the same in enquiries among women engaged in professional work. Here again, however, although they generally appear to be sufficiently interested in their work to want to continue it even if not forced to do so by financial circumstances, most of the professional women questioned nevertheless admitted that they worked because they needed the money to support themselves or their dependants. In the replies to a questionnaire circulated among the members of the American Association of University Women, which were used by Chase Going Woodhouse<sup>1</sup> to ascertain the reasons for which professional women continue working after marriage, 58.8 per cent. of married professional women holding a University degree gave financial necessity as their chief reason for working; for married women with children, considered separately, the percentage rose to 65.2 per cent. The particulars collected by the Bureau of Vocational Information<sup>2</sup> and a number of other enquiries also show a similar situation.<sup>3</sup>

In these direct enquiries, particularly among industrial workers, the monotonous list of reasons for going to work sometimes contains replies that perhaps make it easier to realise the loss the working classes would suffer if women were robbed of the possibility of acting as breadwinner as well as home-maker, not only when their livelihood depends on it, but simply in order to improve the family's standard of living. One of the reasons given, for instance, is to enable the family to live more decently than is possible on the father's earnings; another, to give the children a better education. It may well be asked whether the first effect of any measure to abolish women's employment would not be to bring about a considerable fall in the standard of living of the working classes, since the husband's wages would not at once be raised by 50 to 75 per cent. (the usual ratio of women's wages to men's) when his wife was deprived of her work. And reduction of material resources means reduced con-

<sup>1</sup> INSTITUTE OF WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS: *After College—What? A Study of 6,665 Land-Grant College Women, Their Occupations, Earnings, Families, and some Undergraduate and Vocational Problems.* Edited by Chase Going WOODHOUSE. Bulletin No. 4. Greensboro, North Carolina College for Women, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> *Marriage and Careers.* Edited by Virginia MacMakin COLLIER. New York, 1926.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. in particular Anne Byrd KENNON: "College Wives Who Work", in *Journal of the American Association of University Women* (Washington), June 1927, p. 100; Clara ELIOT: "Married Barnard Alumnae", in *Bulletin of the Associate Alumnae*, Vol. XVIII, Dec. 1928, p. 6.

sumption by the family, which is forced down to a bare subsistence level. Any general abolition of women's employment would certainly lead to a fall in the purchasing power of the working classes—a result hardly to be desired at a time when the world is suffering from a disquieting degree of under-consumption.

If, on the other hand, only a few women who are in easier circumstances were deprived of their employment, the effect on men's unemployment would be insignificant. The problem of finding employment for millions of unemployed men cannot be solved by the compulsory retirement of a few hundred married women civil servants or the dismissal of some of the higher women employees in the big administrative offices. It may even be argued that the dismissal of women workers, even when confined to those who are not absolutely dependent on their earnings, may nevertheless react on their less prosperous sisters. Most of the women employees who have been dismissed from administrative posts kept servants to help to run their homes. With enforced leisure and a reduced family income, they dismiss the domestic helpers—the maid, charwoman, daily dressmaker, etc.—whom they no longer need or can no longer afford. These results were to be expected; that they have actually occurred has been proved by enquiries. In France, where although there is no legislation to this effect some large private businesses have dismissed women on this ground, an enquiry was conducted among the regional employment exchanges to ascertain the effects of unemployment on the shortage of domestic servants from which France had been suffering for some years. The employment exchange for the Rhone Department replied that there are now large numbers of domestic servants seeking employment, and explained the changed position in the following words: "In the Rhone Department many households in which both husband and wife worked used to employ domestic servants. Owing to the depression, many of these wives have had to return home. They now have time to look after their own homes and have therefore dismissed their servants."<sup>1</sup>

According to the investigations of Miss Anna Campbell Davis, of the Economics Department of the University of Wisconsin, on the probable effects of the dismissal of married women from State employment, it appears that the dismissal of

<sup>1</sup> *Bulletin du Ministère du Travail*, April-June 1932, p. 135.

64 women would have the effect of throwing out of employment about 100 domestic helpers of various kinds employed directly or indirectly by these professional women.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, it may also reasonably be argued that to eliminate from human activities precisely those forms of work which are performed from free choice, vocation, or at least from inclination, and not solely under the spur of absolute necessity, would be not only to rob certain individuals of one of the noblest of all possible pleasures but to deprive society of the most efficient services at its command. What a waste of talents it would be, for instance, to relegate to household duties which can be performed by any domestic helper a fully-trained teacher who brings to her work whole-hearted devotion and an experience still further enriched by motherhood! Once again, viewed from the standpoint of the general interest, the value of any such measure seems to be more than doubtful.

If the dismissal of married women is to be looked upon as an exceptional measure, carefully limited to cases where it would not affect the vital interests of the worker and her dependants—the plan generally looked on with most favour—some method of discrimination would be needed to determine whether a woman really needs to work or not. What human tribunal would be competent for the eminently delicate task of assessing incomes and requirements, of invading the privacy of the home to ascertain the respective responsibilities of husband and wife and distinguish between those which can be borne by the husband and those which the wife prefers, and in the interests of domestic peace should be allowed, to bear herself, out of devotion to aged parents or affection for needy brothers or sisters? What tribunal could appreciate the anxiety for the future which leads many a wife to continue her work so that if necessary she may take the place of a husband whose health is precarious? Would it also be part of its duties to judge character and distinguish the cases in which a woman can safeguard her self-respect only by economic independence? All this is a formidable task to entrust to persons of average discernment, and would certainly be extremely distressing to the private feelings of the victims of the enquiry. These, however, are moral

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mary ANDERSON: "Women and their Job: Some Lessons of the Depression", in *Journal of the American Association of University Women*, Oct. 1932, pp. 10-11.

considerations which have been excluded from the scope of this study.

A circumstance which may well give rise to astonishment is the quarter towards which the most violent attacks on women's employment have been directed. The main targets of these attacks are employment in administrative services and in office work, both forms of work which have no physical drawbacks for women, and towards which it might logically be expected that a reasonable system of vocational guidance would direct them.

In connection with this question of vocational guidance, some curious facts may be observed. Any discussion during the depression of the efforts that should be made to provide more efficient vocational guidance for women almost always has in view the purpose of persuading more women to enter domestic occupations. In some cases this is based on logical grounds. During the last few years several countries (e.g. France, Great Britain, Switzerland) have suffered from an unusual shortage of domestic servants and have been obliged to import foreign labour to meet their needs; at the same time their own labour market has been flooded with other kinds of workers, and in some industries (e.g. machine embroidery in the Canton of St. Gall, textiles in Great Britain) with workers belonging to trades which have little or no hope of ever re-absorbing them. The requirements of the labour market are one of the elements in a practical system of vocational guidance, and it is only right that they should be taken into account. But there are other elements, too, which should not be neglected, and among them the physical and mental qualifications of the persons concerned are of essential importance. Domestic work is not always what is called light work, i.e. work that is not physically exhausting, and it would be a mistake to force it indiscriminately on all women manual workers. Indignation is sometimes felt, and quite rightly, at the performance by women of certain forms of industrial work notoriously dangerous to their health; but is anyone shocked at the sight of a daily washerwoman handling heavy tubs of water? There are many kinds of industrial work which mainly require manual dexterity and are much better suited to the physique of women than domestic work of this kind.

As regards office work, there can be no *a priori* reasons for excluding women from it. Further, in consequence of the

improvement in women's education, which in Western countries at least is now on a par with that of men, an ever-increasing number of women are now qualified to perform such work efficiently, a circumstance which should be cause for rejoicing rather than the reverse.<sup>1</sup>

Any attempt, on the other hand, to abolish women's employment on a sufficient scale to have an appreciable effect on the labour market for men, by forcing or persuading all married women to give up paid work, would probably be attended by a number of other economic consequences, which must be briefly indicated.

In the first place, society would undoubtedly be saddled with a number of new and heavy responsibilities. If the family has only one pillar to support it, collapse of that pillar results in total disaster for the household. The State would therefore be obliged to take over the full maintenance of all widows and orphans, since a trade is easily lost when no longer practised and it would be almost impossible for a woman who had lost her job on marriage to find a suitable position after many years away from her work. This difficulty is still greater when widowhood comes to a woman of mature years, for age is a considerable handicap to the placing of all workers, even if they have been continuously in employment. This handicap has very much increased during recent years, for various technical and social reasons which cannot be studied here; it must at least be noted that it has become especially heavy in the case of women. The problem is serious enough to have been made the subject of a number of studies in the United States.<sup>2</sup> These show that for women workers age begins to act as a handicap in finding work as early as 25; from the age of 30 onwards (35 for men) it

<sup>1</sup> In the United States, for example, the increase in the number of women employed in office work was the salient characteristic of the 1930 census: the rise since 1920 was nearly 40 per cent., while the general increase in women's employment was 25 per cent. During this period the increase in the number of women in large-scale industries was 5.6 per cent., or considerably less than the increase in the population as a whole (20 per cent.), and the employment of women in workshops for hand or light mechanical work (clothing, etc.) had fallen considerably, in some branches by 30 to 40 per cent. Thus the distribution of women's employment over the different branches of economic activity in the United States has radically altered during the last ten years in favour of office work. The same change is taking place in many other countries.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Caroline MANNING: "Economic Old Age: The Industrial Woman Looks at the Problem", in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work, Boston, Mass., 8-14 June 1930*, pp. 290-294. Cf. also PERSONNEL RESEARCH FEDERATION: *Eleventh Annual Conference, New York, 17-18 November 1932*.

creates serious difficulties, while the woman over 40 has practically no hope of finding a situation. Women actually in employment, however, need not seriously begin to fear dismissal on the ground of age until they are 55 (65 for men).

In this respect the probable effects of a long gap in a woman's working life are easy to foresee. The widowhood of a woman who had lost her employment would mean both a burden on the State (a burden which when many times repeated would reach serious dimensions) and at the same time the condemnation of widows and their dependants to a life of poverty on an allowance that must necessarily be meagre. It may well be asked whether it is really to the interests of society to shoulder so grave a risk, and whether it has the right to condemn persons who are able to work to such a lowering of their standard of living.

If the practice of giving up work on marriage were to become general, it would very probably bring in its train yet another drawback: the progressive disappearance of all vocational training for women. No one is willing to spend money and time on training for an occupation which must shortly be abandoned. Families will not spend money on their daughters which will bring in little or no return. This consideration has always acted as a handicap to the establishment of women in employment, and its effect would be further intensified if it were definitely known that women must leave their work on marriage. The evil the proposed change is intended to remedy would therefore become still more pronounced: as unmarried women cannot be prevented from working, all occupations would be flooded with women workers who, although unskilled, would be capable of performing certain kinds of mechanised work and who by accepting starvation wages would help to pull down general wage standards.

This danger would be increased by the still greater difficulty of organising such floating labour, which is only loosely attached to its occupation, and of disciplining it to observe the conditions of collective agreements. And it has been noted above that trade unions which follow the movement of their membership closely and make a point of studying its causes have already seen the first effects of the campaign against the gainful employment of married women in a loosening of their ties with the unions.

It may also be expected that any regulations of this kind, which could be adequately enforced only in the more definite

forms of employment, would be evaded by a great many women who, being barred from employment in factories, shops, and offices, would carry on some clandestine trade at home. The result would be the development of the most undesirable form of paid employment—employment at starvation wages which drags down other wages by its competition.<sup>1</sup>

It appears from this analysis of the situation that the measure proposed in certain quarters as a remedy is, in fact, a nostrum which may be expected to produce more disastrous effects than beneficial ones. Throughout this article facts rather than opinions have been taken as the ground of discussion. Nevertheless, without departing from the realm of facts it may be pointed out that loyalty to an occupation which is both congenial and successful, the sense of responsibility which a woman derives from her work, the increased energy demanded of her by the performance of a dual task, in the factory or office and in the home, and even the desire for independence where this is the determining factor that leads her to be self-supporting—all these are progressive elements the disappearance of which might reasonably be regarded as a definite loss to society. Taken even at the lowest estimate, they are psychological realities of our age, hard facts which must be taken into account in the same way as the existence of a high degree of mechanisation. In the course of social evolution certain adjustments must always be made by those who are caught in its stream; but it is impossible to bring back forms of social organisation belonging to a bygone age.

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<sup>1</sup> This danger has been well brought out by Dr. Käthe LEICHTER: cf. "Internationale Krisen-Probleme der Frauenarbeit", in *Die Frau* (Vienna), July 1931. Cf. also the article by Mrs. Gertrud HANNA, already mentioned, in *Die Arbeit* (Berlin), April 1931.

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