



Travail féminin: Retour à l'ordre! L'offensive contre le travail des femmes durant la crise économique des années 1930 [Women's work: Back to order! The offensive against women's work during the economic crisis of the 1930s]

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Diane Perrons joined the LSE (London School of Economics) in 1995, having previously taught at London Guildhall and Sussex Universities. She is author of *Globalisation and Social Change: People and Places in a Divided World* (Routledge, 2004); co-editor of *Gender Divisions in the New Economy: Changing Patterns of Work, Care and Public Policy in Europe and North America* (Edward Elgar, 2007); and *Making Gender Work* (Open University Press, 1995) as well as co-author of *Arena of Capital* (Macmillan, 1983). Her latest book, *Gender, Migration and Domestic Work: Masculinities, Male Labour and Fathering in the UK and USA* (Palgrave), co-authored with Majella Kilkey and Ania Plomien, was published in 2013. Her research and teaching focus on globalization, gender and inequality; and economic transformation, regional development and social change.

Travail féminin: Retour à l'ordre! L'offensive contre le travail des femmes durant la crise économique des années 1930 [Women's work: Back to order! The offensive against women's work during the economic crisis of the 1930s], by Céline Schoeni. Lausanne: Éditions Antipodes, 2012. 622 pp. ISBN: 978-2-88901-055-4. €50.00.

Changes in women's participation rates are still in need of good explanations. The proposition of orthodox economics, on the other hand, that women's place in or out of the labor market is the result of their own decisions seeking to maximize utility is questioned by an increasing number of works by historians that describe women's and men's position in the labor market as a social construct. *Feminist Economics* has recently devoted two symposia to this debate and how it is developing in European history (see [Jane Humphries and Carmen Sarasúa 2012](#) for the introductory article). This volume is a splendid example that helps us to understand the complex set of economic, institutional, demographic, and cultural variables

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shaping women's labor force participation rates. It does so by analyzing the archives of the International Labour Organization (ILO), founded in 1919, as well as a large amount of archival material and publications of unions, political parties, and feminist organizations.

The book focuses on Switzerland and France in the late 1920s and 1930s, an excellent period to observe women's employment because of the unusually rapid and dramatic changes that shaped the world's economy (from intense growth to Depression, and again to fast recovery) and politics (with World Wars I and II). In this context, women workers were seen guilty of increasing unemployment by taking jobs from heads of households and leaving their homes and children – only to be pictured as national heroines later, when they took over the jobs of men at war and helped to sustain national economies.

The volume is an important contribution to the history of feminism and the feminist organizations defending women's right to paid work (since the foundation of the Conseil International des Femmes [CIF] at Washington in 1888, the first women's organization to defend an international program), the connections between feminist organizations and political parties, and the feminist response to the offensive against women's work. It is also a history of international economic organizations that goes beyond its official history and a history of the economic crisis of the 1930s and its sociopolitical background.

The volume, which focuses on women civil servants as an example of the service sector expanding as part of the massive structural change both in GDP and employment, is organized into three parts. Part 1, "Le travail des femmes fonctionnaires: un 'problème' international" [The work of women civil servants: An international problem], describes the international dimension of the "problem" of women's work in civil service, presenting legislation against women's employment: From Canada, Australia, and the United States to every European country, governments legislated against women's employment, particularly against married women's paid work. The catalog of restrictive measures included all possible restrictions in relation to their entrance to, and exit from, the labor market: limited percentages when hiring; restrictions to women's participation when married to male civil servants (justified by the refusal to pay "a double salary"); reduction of women's wages; lower or no unemployment subsidies for married women; massive firing of women in postal, telephone and telegraph (PTT) services in relation to budget restrictions since 1934, and so on. Women lost all work-related allowances (now granted only to the "head of the household"), while new allowances were implemented for women staying at home and/or having children.

Formal discrimination was parallel to widespread informal discriminatory practices, such as women's contracts not being renewed and women not

being promoted, and by campaigns and state programs to teach home economics to girls. De-legitimization of women's work, particularly of married women's right to work, gained new strength in the 1930s with the argument of the economic crisis and high unemployment rates.

This part also analyzes the two responses to the backlash. The institutional response (such as that of the ILO and its Bureau International du Travail) advocated, since its first international conference in Washington in 1919, "protective" legislation for women, including the prohibition of night employment of women only. Feminist organizations were deeply divided around this protective legislation, and it was precisely against ILO's protective policies that the more advanced feminists, such as Open Door International (ODI), organized themselves. ODI was for economic equality, which defined as unacceptable the restrictions to married women's work and rejected the argument of married women having other duties, since family responsibilities should be shared equally by husband and wife. Their idea of equality deconstructed the norm of the traditional family, dominant even among feminists, based on the division of roles. In the transition from theoretical equality to actual equality, ODI advocated equal wages as a means to achieve equal right to work; the argument was used to send married women home would this way be dismantled. Equal wages would end the gendered management of the labor force and the subsidiary character of women's wages.

Part 2, "L'offensive contre le travail des femmes fonctionnaires en Suisse" [The backlash against women civil servants' work in Switzerland], starts with the 1927 federal law regulating civil service, according to which "marriage could be a fair reason for firing women employees." It shows the catalog of formal and informal measures restricting women's work before the Depression, in the private and the public sectors, and the widespread implication of professional associations, local, regional, and federal governments, political parties, unions, churches, and even women's associations, all defending the social convenience of women back home. In "Crise économique et travail féminine: La polémique sur les 'doubles salaires' (1932–1934)" [Economic crisis and women's work: The debate on double incomes' (1932–1934)], the gendered management of the labor force during the crisis included measures such as the suppression of the unemployment allowance to married women whose husbands were employed. With regard to double-income couples, the federal project was finally discarded given the low impact that such a measure would have on public expenditure (among the 32,000 people working for the Swiss Federal government, there were only 82 couples that were civil servants; more cases existed in the railways, the typical being a male worker and his gatekeeper wife, with a very low annual income), and the fact that the 1927 law already permitted married women to be fired – or, even simpler, their contracts not to be renewed. Women civil servants who married

could be fired legally, and far-right groups sent the government lists reporting “double-salary” couples. The “double income” debate affected only qualified jobs, which allows Schoeni to affirm that it instituted a vertical segregation of the labor market. In fact, if more formal restrictions to women’s work were not passed, it was because the initial idea of replacing women workers with unemployed men implied that these jobs were auxiliary, typically female, low-paid jobs that the men would not accept.

Part 3, “L’ offensive contre le travail des femmes fonctionnaires en France” [The backlash against women civil servants’ work in France], discusses the case of France. Comparing the two countries helps to identify the different models of restrictions to women’s work: while in Switzerland the debate centered around double-income couples, in France part-time work became a popular solution for the “problem of women’s work.” Much common ground existed, however. In 1932, women were denied an unemployment subsidy when their husbands were employed, and in 1934, a meeting of the (all male) mayors of France, including socialists and communists, unanimously approved that “keeping women at home” should be a remedy for unemployment. The experience of the leftist coalition of the Front Populaire (1936–8) was frustrating, with women unable to condition the political agenda given their lack of political rights. The right to vote for women, approved by the Chamber, was denied by the Senate, and finally recognized only in 1944.

The volume illuminates several crucial questions. The first is the relation between economic conditions and policies regarding women’s work. By starting her research with the period before the Depression, Schoeni is able to show that the measures restricting women’s work were not simply part of the anti-crisis policies. Before high unemployment rates appeared, pro-family organizations, but also political parties of all sign and unions, were active all over Europe, advocating women’s return to home and questioning women’s work in qualified and well-paid jobs. This is consistent with what we know of the post-WWI period as a precedent for sending women home (Deirdre Beddoe 1989). The argument was not only women’s increasing competition in the labor market. Conservatives and religious sectors advocated policies promoting higher birth rates, which had fallen in Switzerland from 21.2 per thousand in 1920 to 15.9 in 1940, and in France, from 21.4 in 1920 to 14.6 in 1938. The demographic disaster of WWI and the continuous concern due to a densely populated Germany made pro-family policies very popular in France. Family allocations and even special allocations for women staying at home were instituted in the 1930s throughout most of Europe. The family became the center of social policy, and married women suffered the restrictions, especially wage reductions. Here decisive was the role played by the Catholic Church through the mobilization of its networks, inspired since 1931 by the

encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, in which Pope Pius XI defended the family wage and the return of married women to the home.

What were the causes of the backlash against women's paid work, in particular that of women civil servants? For the author, wages played a crucial role. A tendency existed since the early 1920s to a progressive equalization of men's and women's wages, particularly among civil servants. In France, wage equality had been enforced in elementary schooling in 1919, in secondary schooling in 1926, and in PTT services in 1927. Women's increasing education and entrance in qualified positions were not easily accepted. The Great Depression facilitated the reaction, although it "did not constitute the triggering factor of the backlash against women civil servants' work" (p. 24). The economic crisis acted, rather, as the catalyst of men's concerns over the new gender relations developing in the workplace. It was used to legitimize and facilitate the redefinition of sexual frontiers in the labor market through restrictive measures that provoked a massive deterioration of women's working conditions. The reduction in the number of women civil servants and their wages were justified by the need to free jobs that should "naturally" go to men in a context of unemployment and to reduce public deficit. As a feminist said in 1935 France, "It seems that for many people, the main solution to unemployment is sending women back home. . . . The number of women has not changed, what has changed is the type of jobs women do; before, they did harsh and badly paid jobs, jobs that men did not want" (p. 427).

One of the book's main achievements is to contest the idea that only fascist and authoritarian regimes were against women's right to paid employment. Democracies such as France and Switzerland used less dramatic measures (such as laws and administrative norms, and wage reductions, allowances, and so forth) to obtain the same result: insecure working conditions and limitation of women's work as civil servants.

Women's labor force participation rates (15–64 age group) decreased from 51.7 percent in 1921 to 48.4 percent in 1931 to 46.7 percent in 1936 in France, the European country with higher participation rates. In Switzerland, participation rates went from 44.6 percent in 1921 to 35.5 percent in 1941. This happened in a period when women were investing increasing amounts of money and time in their education. This volume shows convincingly that this decrease was not the result of women's decisions, no matter how much social pressure contributed to shape women's aspirations. In addition, this book is not only about how many women were able to stay in the labor market and how many were forced out, but about *where* they were allowed to stay. It is about the hostility against women having qualified and well-paid jobs and the long-term effects of this backlash, affecting girls' choices regarding their education and women's occupations in the next generations. It is also about the many women

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who, facing hostility and isolation, questioned what parties, churches, and governments said about their natural place; argued convincingly to defend their rights; and worked collectively to assure that gender equality be a mainstream goal today.

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