

# Working Women's Centre

Melbourne 3000

Telephone

Discussion Paper No. 7

May 1976

## SHOULD UNIONS SUPPORT A MOTHER'S WAGE ?

"Wages for housework" is a demand of many sections of the community in order to provide economic independence for women. The ACTU, at its 1975 Congress, recommended that the Trade Union Movement "press for a mother's allowance which would provide mothers with a real choice between caring for their children at home or undertaking employment".

There is a world of difference between an allowance and a wage. An allowance is a "hand-out" - usually for some misfortune such as sickness, unemployment or the inevitable old age. It assumes that the recipient does not make any contribution to the gross national product. The work which women do in the home is not included in the GNP either because it is unpaid.

### WHO WOULD BE ELIGIBLE FOR A MOTHER'S WAGE ?

A mother's wage is usually assumed to be only for a mother who looks after her own children in her own home. (1) This definition tends to be fairly narrow as it assumes that women are (and will remain) totally responsible for running the home and caring for any children.

A broader definition - "wages for persons looking after dependants<sup>\*</sup> in the home", while providing for payment to men who assume full family responsibility and thus demonstrating no sex bias, hides the fact that it is women who mainly do this work.

Most women do two jobs - one at home and one outside the home. Most mothers - and some fathers - have to mind their children and do housework as well as work outside their homes. Therefore it would be morally wrong to pay an allowance to those who stay at home and not those who do not.

Another alternative which has been suggested is to pay people according to their marital status and number of children. This raises the question of whether men should be paid according to whether they are married or not and whether those who are married should pay a wage to their wives. It is unlikely that single men would agree to take lower pay for performing the same work as married men.

### WHAT IS A MOTHER'S WAGE ?

On the basis of "equal pay for work of equal value" a person who does all the work entailed in housekeeping and caring for young children should be paid at the proper rate.

From a number of studies and a discussion on the ABC's "Four Corners" programme (29/9/73), it has been estimated that a woman spends an average of 90 hours per week at mothering and housework. Based on equivalent rates of pay at the time for cleaning, child-minding, cooking, chauffeuring etc., her wage should have been about \$191 per week.

### WHAT CHANCE IS THERE OF A MOTHER'S WAGE OR ALLOWANCE ?

No government could pay a reasonable wage for the job to every woman who wanted to stay at home to mind her children. The money would have to come out of the pockets of the workers who did not stay home in the form of taxation.

According to a Department of Social Security feasibility study, the cost of paying a "benefit" of only \$20 per week to women with one or more children under 16 and not in other employment would be about \$1,200,000,000 per year - almost half the total cost of all social security and welfare in Australia for 1973.

(1) Windshuttle, E. - "Should the Government pay a Mother's Wage?" - *Social Security Quarterly* - Winter 1974.

\* The term "dependants" can refer to children, the aged or invalids.

were housewives - an incidence much greater than any occupational group - but these workers are not covered by workers' compensation.

Surveys have shown that 83.1 per cent of Australian homes have analgesics available and 14.7 per cent of women (almost double that of men) take them every day, i.e. one woman in seven is an analgesic addict. Post-natal depression is fairly common among women yet some unions have only claimed (and won) five days' paternity leave and many unions have only recently requested maternity/paternity leave in their logs of claims.

While a woman remains at home caring for her family her self-confidence steadily declines. She loses skills and professional competence. When she does seek a job, as so many do, she finds the job market offers only unchallenging, low-paid dead-end jobs. If she could keep up her skills by part-time work while her children were young she would have much better employment prospects when her children grew older than if she were paid a nominal allowance to stay home and mind them when young.

#### A MOTHER'S ALLOWANCE WILL NOT GIVE EQUALITY

Union support for a mother's allowance will only reinforce the role which women are taught from birth - the role of housewife/mother. The case for a mother's allowance does not rest on the right of women to be paid for the work which they do but on the fact that they are expected to do housework, that housework is their true vocation and that they do not need education or training or equal opportunity.

So long as women accept this role the labour force will be divided into male and female sectors, women will not join trade unions, they will be easily intimidated and will be used as an unemployment pool to undermine union solidarity.

Full equality in the labour market can only be achieved if the traditional housewife role is removed and if men accept equal responsibility for childcare and home duties. If men were to interrupt their careers to raise their children, employers would be equally at risk in investing in on-the-job training and experience for men and women, thus eliminating one major source of sexual discrimination.

There is no possibility that women who stay at home to keep house and mind children will receive "equal pay for work of equal value". Therefore if unions support payment of a nominal "mother's allowance" they will be condoning the exploitation of women workers and undermining the concept of a minimum wage for women won by unions in 1975.

Unions should adopt a different attitude towards the necessity for men to work all their lives and for women to stay at home. They should press for parental leave and childcare so that all parents will have a choice between work inside or outside the home.

*"Perhaps the greatest step women can take toward achieving equal opportunity in the labour market is to achieve real equality in the household . . . To ignore the labour market implications of the differences in household behaviour which society has forced upon men and women would be naive. Only when expected labour market behaviour is the same for both sexes can we expect occupational and wage differentials between males and females to disappear." (4)*

(4) Riach, P. - "Women and the Australian Labor Market" - The Other Half - ed. Jan Mercer (Penguin 1975).

SHOULD THE CHOICE TO STAY AT HOME BE FOR MARRIED WOMEN ONLY ?

The 1975 ACTU Congress resolution on "Women in the Workforce" recommended that, because of the high proportion of married women in the workforce, the trade union movement must strive for a 'real freedom of choice' for married women to enter the workforce or to stay home.

Why should the choice be for married women only? Why should it be taken for granted that all single women and all men should work eight hours a day for fifty years or so? Why should it be assumed that women's main role is to provide labour in the home and to provide a pool of womanpower for the labour market which can be called up when required and dispensed with at the employer's will?

WHAT REAL CHOICE DO WOMEN HAVE??

Of the 1,690,800\* women in paid employment more than 730,800\* are single, divorced, separated or widowed. Many of these women are the sole support not only of themselves but of children or parents. For such women the wage necessary to induce them to take a job is low since each additional dollar of income has high utility.

Despite the growing number of married women in the workforce, as a general rule women see work outside the home as something to do "for the time being" to fill in time between leaving school and getting married, between children or when the children are older. Employers share the same view and regard women workers as temporary with high turnover and absenteeism and a low level of ambition. This view can only militate against women obtaining equal opportunity in the workplace.

Surveys have indicated that married women work mainly out of economic necessity although other factors such as age and educational attainment also affect their decision to re-enter the workforce.

A recent study<sup>(2)</sup> has shown that over half the women surveyed considered economic factors the most important reason for working but many also considered that the nature of the job itself and the opportunity for social contact with others was important.

<u>Table I</u>		<u>Table II</u>			
Reasons why women work - %		By occupational background			
		Professional	Clerical	Manual	
Economic	54.1	Economic	38.8	37.3	51.6
Social	16.2	Social	16.6	25.4	25.8
Job-related	29.7	Job-related	44.6	37.3	22.6

Occupational background (thus educational status) is an important variable in a woman's decision to return to work. Professional women are more likely to give as reasons the need to use and keep up their skills, to be socially useful and to dispel boredom.

Many women who stay at home would like to work outside their homes but are unable to do so because there are no jobs available for which they have the necessary skills or experience. Other women think they should stay home to care for their children because they believe that children should have constant contact with their mothers.\*\* For all these women there is no choice. A realistic retraining scheme such as the original NEAT scheme could provide an answer for those who want to work but a mother's allowance would be only a pittance and quite impracticable to enable women to stay at home to mind their children.

Many women who stay at home have little social contact or community involvement and often feel extremely isolated. A University of NSW study<sup>(3)</sup> found in 1969 that 83 per cent of patients consulting doctors with emotional disorders

(2) Lansbury, Russell - "Why Women Work" - National Bank Monthly Summary Feb. 1976.

\* Latest figures available - 1971 Census.

\*\* For studies on this subject read "Maternal Deprivation Reassessed" - Michael Rutter (Penguin).

(3) Windshuttle, E. - *ibid.*