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Résumé de l'article

En recourant au cadre théorique des débats féministes sur l'égalité et la différence, cet article dissèque les arguments auxquels les féministes et autres ont fait appel pour défendre le statut des femmes en tant que travailleuses pendant la Crise, une période reconnue pour la manifestation de sentiments allant à l'encontre du travail des femmes. Les résultats révèlent la fausse polarisation des droits à l'égalité et des traditions maternalistes et trace le portrait de chacune de ces notions en 1930 en démontrant leurs points de rencontre et en questionnant en définitive leur présence à l'état pur.

Equality and Difference: Feminism and the Defence of Women Workers During the Great Depression

Margaret Hobbs

IN THE SUMMER OF 1931, as Canada slipped deeper into economic depression, a male contributor to the *Canadian Congress Journal* commented on the angry turn of public sentiment against women and girls holding jobs. "Nowadays, any stick seems good enough to beat the business girl with," he observed with alarm. This writer, while sidestepping the controversial question of whether female employment was socially desirable in itself, nonetheless felt obliged, if only from a chivalrous impulse to defend the "weaker" sex against all those brandishing sticks, to point out that most young women in business had little choice but to work for pay. The depression, he argued, was paralyzing fathers' abilities to keep their daughters at home and preventing young men from marrying them. Business "girls" would most certainly prefer to stay at home, but they could not. A young unmarried typist in an insurance office had personally assured him of this, describing wistfully the life of leisure she would choose if she were supported by some well-to-do man, either father or husband:

> If I could stay at home and have my early tea brought me by a smart parlor-maid, or butler, or whoever does these things, and get up when I liked, and spend all day playing golf or tennis, or motoring and have all the frocks I wanted, I should imagine I was in heaven.[1]

The emphasis given by both the man and the young woman to economic necessity as the magnet drawing females into employment was shared by many of those, feminist or not, who rushed to the defence of wage-earning women and girls in the 1930s. It is this line of defence which has been most noticed by feminist historians looking at the right to work debate, particularly in the United States where the work of Lois Scharf on married women between the wars has been so

[1] "Why Girls Work," *Canadian Congress Journal* X, 8 (August 1931), 88.

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influential.[2] Scharf found that in the 1920s a vocal group of white-collar 'career and marriage' advocates resuscitated the 19th-century equalitarian tradition of feminism, a tradition which by the turn of the century had been overshadowed by the popularity of maternalist claims to women's unique nature, their "difference" from men, rather than their abstract natural rights. Equal rights arguments, bouyed in the 1920s by new economic opportunities for women and by the entrance of more wives into employment, proved too difficult to maintain once the economy collapsed and jobs were scarce. Supporters of women workers were forced on the defensive, Scharf claims. They watered down their feminism, de-emphasizing women's "right" to choose employment and avoiding the celebration of work as personal fulfilment. Instead they highlighted the financial pressures that left most female workers with little choice but to work for pay.[3] Scharf assumes that in backing away from the language of rights and preference and embracing the language of need, 1930s feminists and others articulating this position were helping to swing the pendulum of feminist ideology from "equality" back to "difference," for the need rationale relied on a stock of traditional images of femininity. According to this interpretation, female autonomy was submerged, especially for the married woman worker, under a rhetoric that played on her familial ties and priorities, her self-sacrificing responsiveness to the economic needs of her family.

In Canada too the minority of individuals who defended women's economic roles in the 1930s more often than not framed their argument in terms of necessity not rights or choice. Through instrumentality or personal conviction, most promoted a gender conservative image of wage or salary-earning wives as nurturant, self-sacrificing wives and mothers taking work outside the home only to meet the material needs of their families, and of working girls as unfortunate daughters forced to work by the absence or impoverishment of the usual male provider.

Yet it is easy to overstate ideological shifts. Although in Canada the need justification, presumed by historians to be steeped in the language of difference, gained popularity in the period, the equal rights tradition proved more resilient than one might assume. The ascendancy of one rationale need not entail the demise of

[2]See Lois Scharf. *To Work and To Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Wesport 1980), especially chs. 1-3. This interpretation is also apparent in Scharf and Joan M. Jenson, "Introduction" to Scharf and Jenson, eds., *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940* (Boston 1987); Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston 1982), ch. 4; Winnifred Wandersee, *Women's Work and Family Values, 1920-1940* (Cambridge 1981), 120.

[3]Although the choice and fulfilment argument seems more feminist to Scharf, one has to wonder, given the crucial importance of wages to working-class families and the poor conditions under which most women laboured, how relevant it was to all but an elite group of women in certain business occupations and the professions. However, for the purposes of this paper I am more concerned with the implications of her thesis for feminist debates over equality and difference.

the other. Nor is there always a neat separation between those using need arguments and those articulating the legitimacy of women's choices and preferences independent of their needs. The two often overlapped.[4] Moreover, the concepts of need and choice are to a great extent relative. Clearly food and clothing constitute basic human necessities, but those who can afford to will often view holidays and entertainment as the stuff of necessity. Although one might lean to one side or the other, it was quite possible, then as now, to argue from both sides of what Ann Snitow has called the enduring feminist "divide" of equality versus difference.[5] As many scholars are currently pointing out, the splits among self-identified feminists that repeatedly occur across the divide should not obscure the fact that most people are not anchored immovably to either perspective, but are pulled in both directions. Feminists find themselves emphasizing gender differences more or less depending on the issue and the political climate, and also on which argument is most likely to win the cause. The elusiveness of philosophical consistency should be neither surprising nor lamentable. Since feminism depends on articulating the needs and interests of a gendered subject, "woman" or "women," while at the same time questioning the substance of those very categories, the tensions and inconsistencies between equality and difference are an intrinsic part of feminism as a political movement and ideological outlook.[6] I have attempted to approach the question of the defence of women workers from a perspective which recognizes these tensions, paying heed to Joan Scotts's suggestion (though not taking it as far as she would) that feminist historians stop imposing the equality versus difference construct in ways that lock one into writing a misrepresentative history of constant oscillation from one mutually exclusive pole to the other.[7]

[4]See Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto 1988), 45-6. On Canadian suffragists' use of both maternalist and equalitarian arguments a few decades earlier see Strong-Boag, "'Ever a Crusader': Nellie McClung, First-Wave Feminist," in Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* (Toronto 1986).

[5]Ann Snitow, "A Gender Diary," in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York 1990). Snitow reminds us that the equality/difference divide has been variously named and re-named by feminist theorists in the past as the debate between "minimizers" and "maximizers" of gender, between radical and cultural feminists, between essentialists and social constructionists, between cultural feminists and poststructuralists, and between "motherists" and feminists. Karen Offen's identification of "relational" and "individualist" traditions also invokes this dualist paradigm. See Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14, 1 (1988), 119-57.

[6]See Snitow, "A Gender Diary" and many of the other articles in Hirsch and Fox Keller, *Conflicts in Feminism*. See also Denise Riley, *'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis 1988).

[7]Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988), 176.

I

DEFENDERS OF WOMEN WORKERS in Canada were well aware that the threats to women's economic rights were not self-contained within their own political borders. Reports of the international scope of the erosion of women's rights, especially in fascist countries where the face of antifeminism was most severe, were carried in the national and special interest press in Canada. Feminists in particular would have been paying close attention, for since the early suffrage battle they had kept a keen eye on developments in women's status elsewhere in the western world, particularly the United States and Britain. The largest women's organizations were affiliated with internationals that, through newsletters and correspondence, encouraged information and policy sharing as well as dialogue between member countries. Many national organizations also made a conscious effort to be represented at international gatherings of women — a practice they tried to maintain despite the squeeze on their budgets in the 1930s. The swelling tide of antifeminist reaction that set in across North America and Europe on the heels of the economic crisis could not have escaped the notice of Canadians concerned with the fate of feminism closer to home. Because feminists in the depression frequently saw their concerns in an international context and were called upon by international women's organizations to join the struggle to guard women's workplace rights, it is useful to begin this examination of the defence of working women with some analysis of the response of the international feminist community.[8]

Among the middle-class women's organizations, the International Council of Women (ICW) and the International Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (IFBPWC) were two of the most outspoken and consistent supporters of women workers in the western world. Established in 1888, the ICW had its roots firmly planted in the maternal feminist tradition, so much so that the organization has been dubbed by one authority "a gigantic maternal union."[9] Yet its historic investment in sexual difference did not stop it from endorsing all wives' right to paid labour in the mid-1920s.[10] The IFBPW, unlike the ICW, was only a fledgling organization in the 1930s, athough by 1937 its membership had climbed

[8]In this section of the paper I deal only with two influential middle-class international reform organizations and their national affiliates in Canada. Other organizations, however, in particlar those associated with the radical Left, were also active on behalf of working-class women workers. Single women and girls tended to receive the most attention, but many Communist women and the Communist Party of Canada newspaper, *The Worker*, can be found defending the working-class wife in industrial employment. The Left's response is only mentioned briefly later in this paper but receives fuller coverage in my dissertation.

[9]Veronica Strong-Boag, *The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women of Canada 1893-1929* (Ottawa 1976), 74.

[10]Provincial Archives of Ontario (PAO), Toronto Local Council of Women Papers, MU6373, series F, box 12, *Bulletin*, (ICW), July 1934, 8.

to about 100,000 commercial and professional women in 25 countries.[11] In the 1920s national and local Business and Professional Women's Clubs had been among the most active champions of the joys of work for wives. Together, the ICW and the IFBPW stood firm during the 1930s on the principle that women, be they married or single, wealthy or poor, had as much right to jobs as men.

Although both international organizations were monitoring discriminatory actions against women early in the depression, it was 1934 before the right to work issue dominated the agenda at their conventions. No doubt they were spurred to stronger action then by the frightening repression of women's rights underway in several European countries, but particularly in Germany, where Hitler was throwing the full weight of the state behind a campaign to eject women from the work force and bonus their maternity function.[12] At the IFBPW's June 1934 meeting, after listening to its Director, Canadian lawyer Dorothy Heneker, report on legislative action against women in Germany as well as in Austria, Hungary, Belgium, and Czecho-Slovakia, the Board formally registered its protest. Asserting "the right of all people to work, unhampered by restrictions of sex or social status," the conference called upon governments to cooperate and made a special plea to national affiliates to do everything in their power to fight against discrimination. One month later at the ICW's meeting in Paris, 14 international women's organizations staged a public forum on the right to work issue and passed three separate resolutions endorsing the principle of equality.[13] Over the next several years the IFBPW and the ICW reiterated their positions, calling on women's organizations, particularly their own affiliates, to be vigilant watch dogs poised to spring at any state or private employers acting against women's economic interests. IFBPW President Lena Madesin Phillips, founder of the organization and long time activist with both the National BPW and the National Council of Women in the US,[14] spoke with particular passion on several occasions at International Federation conferences. "The right of women to work and how to preserve this right may not be the most critical problem which faces the world today," she advised her audience in

[11]National Archives of Canada (NAC), MG30 C128, Dorothy A. Cummins (Heneker) papers (hereafter Heneker papers), vol. 1, file: Correspondence, 1932-1951, Heneker to Secretary General of League of Nations in Geneva, 16 September 1937.

[12]See Tim Mason, "Women in Germany, 1925-1940: Family, Welfare and Work," parts I and II, *History Workshop* (Spring and Summer 1976), 74-111, 5-32; Claudia Koonz *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York 1987); Leila J. Rupp, "Mother of the *Volk*: The Image of Women in Nazi Ideology," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, 2 (Winter 1977), 362-79; Gisela Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State," *Signs* 8, 3 (Spring 1983), 400-21.

[13]PAO, Toronto Local Council of Women Papers, MU6373, series F, box 12, *Bulletin* (ICW), July 1934, 3 and 8.

[14]Susan D. Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism Between the Wars* (Westport 1981), 198.

1935, "but it is one of supreme importance to business women." Echoing 19th-century American suffragists in their reliance on liberal rights rhetoric and slavery metaphors, she explained that what was at stake for women was far more than just the pay cheque:

> The fundamental question is whether women are entitled to those innate human rights for which men have fought and died or whether they, unworthy of freedom, belong in a slave class.[15]

Whatever else might divide members in the 23 countries represented in the Federation, Phillips insisted that "the underlying principle, the unifying purpose" of the Business and Professional Women's Clubs rested upon "the inherent rights and powers of every individual woman."[16]

By 1937 the language of economic need, which previously appears to have been absent from her addresses at IF conventions, had entered into Phillips' speeches. Yet, significantly, it did not overshadow her emphasis on the individualist equality principle. Even when asserting that "The business woman works because she must work," she was not restricting her understanding of "necessity" to economic matters: women, she clarified, must work "*either* for maintenance or self-expression, or both." "But whether or not economic interest is pressing," she continued, "she works because she must serve."[17] In these words one can see how Phillips drew simultaneously on equal rights and sexual difference, the latter particularly through the image of women as society's selfless handmaids.

With signs of an upturn in the world economy apparent by 1937, the IF President was anxious that women might prematurely let down their guard. Even if the return of prosperity should torpedo the more extreme of the antifeminist plans, she knew that women could easily find themselves targetted again at the first indication of another downturn. Campaigns to oust women from employment were among the "stark and primitive urges" that accompany poor economic times, Phillips reminded. A new strategy, nothing short of an international "united women's front" pledged to "eternal vigilance" was required to release women from the trap of historical repetition.[18]

[15]NAC, CFBPWC Papers, vol.82, file: IFBPWC — Proceedings ... , Proceedings of Board of Directors (IF), Brussels, 23-26 September 1935, 9. See also vol. 4, Acc.#81/401, file: *The Business and Professional Woman*, 1935, 1937-41, "14 Countries Attend International Meet," *The Business and Professional Woman*, December 1935, 6.

[16]*Ibid.*, 10.

[17]NAC, CFBPWC Papers, vol.82, file: IFBPWC — Proceedings ... , Proceedings of the 7th Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors, Stockholme, 15-18 July 1937, 28. (emphasis mine)

[18]NAC, MG28 I55, vol.82, file: IFBPW — Proceedings of Meetings 1930-53, Proceedings of 7th Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors, [Stockholme], 15-18 July 1937, 7-8.

II

HOW DID CANADIAN WOMEN'S GROUPS respond to the directives and pleas coming from these international federations? In the United States, according to Scharf, apologists for working women may have toned down the feminism in their reasoning, but women's organizations nonetheless pulled together, in a manner unparalleled since suffrage, to hold on to past gains in female labour force participation.[19] In Canada, however, the married woman wage-earner proved no symbol of unity for women's groups in the depression. As I have shown elsewhere, many women reformers, some of whom were long time supporters of women's rights in other matters, joined in the attacks on employed women who were either married or from well-to-do families.[20] The NCWC and its locals proved particularly timid on the question, with many women and several locals standing firmly in opposition to the employment of wives. Even in the 1920s, a decade generally more sympathetic to the presence of women in public work, the National Council, slightly more progressive than some of its locals, would risk only cautious support for the working wife through argumentation that avoided any mention of "natural rights" or personal preference. A 1928 report prepared for the International Council on why married women worked, while acknowledging the trend for women to look increasingly to employment as an "outside interest," was nonetheless adamant that very few of even these women were working for the "purely selfish motive of a desire for personal adornment or for living in more luxurious surroundings;" rather, they were only trying to improve their standard of living or enhance their children's educational achievements. Moreover, it seemed that the bulk of the married female work force had much more modest aims: they took jobs to ensure their families had food on the table and clothes on their backs.[21]

By 1933, however, the NCWC's Trades and Professions Committee (the one most directly involved with employment and unemployment issues) underwent a change of heart. No longer was the Committee so confident about the legitimacy of working wives' motives. Undoubtedly influenced by prevailing popular opinion, nagging suspicions were voiced that married women were working for luxury and stealing jobs from the needy: men and single girls and even many older unemployed women dependent on their own resources and experiencing special hardships due

[19]Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 59. See also Scharf, "'The Forgotten Woman': Working Women, the New Deal, and Women's Organizations," in Scharf and Jenson, eds., *Decades of Discontent*. Scharf, in her insistence on the unity of feminism, seriously underplays the significance of the splits that divided interwar feminists on the question of the employment of wives.

[20]Margaret Hobbs, "Rethinking Antifeminism in the 1930s: Gender Crisis or Workplace Justice? A Response to Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gender & History* 5, 1 (Spring 1993), 4-15.

[21]NCWC *Yearbook*, 1928, 95-6. This study of why married women worked was continued the next year and included a survey of 300 married women stenographers. See *Yearbook*, 1929, 109-10.

to age discrimination. Under the convenership of Mary MacMahon, a confirmed adversary of working wives, the Committee all but withdrew completely its former modest support. Except when employment was a financial imperative, MacMahon insisted, a married woman's "spirit of fairness should whisper for her to remain in the home."[22] Similar sentiments surfaced the following year at the annual meeting when the ICW's trio of married women resolutions and clear call for supportive action from National Councils caused a flurry of debate.[23]

Later in the depression, a change in leadership of the Trades and Professions Committee (and possibly in its membership as well), encouraged greater tolerance. As convener, Eva McKivor used her authority in 1936 to try to sway hesitant or hostile Trades and Professions Committees within Local Councils to stand behind the wage-earning wife. "Even though we may or do believe she should not be at present in this competitive field," she reasoned in a circular to local conveners, choosing her words carefully in anticipation of resistance, "we must not criticize her right to be there."[24] If she was able to change some Council women's attitudes, the NCWC still did not accept the challenge posed by its international parent, the ICW, to form a "united women's front" in defence of women's economic rights.

A few Local Councils, however, stood apart from the National in exercising a stronger commitment to gender equality in the workplace. The Vancouver LCW, living up to its reputation as one of the boldest Councils on feminist issues, lent unqualified support to the ICW married woman resolutions, as did Councils in Victoria, Moose Jaw, Niagara Falls and Owen Sound.[25] Yet support for the principle did not necessarily mean that the employment rights of wives was thrust to the forefront of their political agendas in their own communities. Pressured by the absence of government response to unemployed women and girls, many women's organizations felt obliged to direct their limited resources towards the provision of relief services for women. The Vancouver Council, for example, was so preoccupied with pragmatic relief-related activities, especially those concerning single jobless girls, that it seems to have had little energy left over to put much concrete action behind its various resolutions demanding all women's right to jobs.[26]

The Local Council in Montréal launched probably the most vigorous defence of women workers, despite the fact that its Trades and Professions Committee, which would normally deal with such issues, was defunct during the early years of the depression and not too active in the later years, its members apparently

[22]NCWC *Yearbook*, 1933, 105.

[23]NCWC *Yearbook*, 1934, 121, 137.

[24]NAC, RG27, vol. 3350, file 10, McKivor to Local Conveners, 16 October 1936.

[25]NCWC *Yearbook*, 1934, 121.

[26]See Mary Patricia Powell, "A Response to the Depression: The Local Council of Women of Vancouver," Michael Horn, ed., *The Depression in Canada: Responses to Economic Crisis* (Toronto 1988).

preferring to work closely with the local Business and Professional Women's Club.[27] Unlike many of its sister organizations in other communities, the Montréal Council did not back away from the ICW's directives on women's employment rights. In fact the Local Council sent a copy of at least one of the ICW's controversial 1934 resolutions to Montréal's mayor, Camillien Houde, after the mayor utilized the public air waves to encourage the replacement of female workers by men.[28] The Houde incident was only one of a series of antifeminist provocations prompting Montréal Council women, along with other local women's groups, to denounce publicly discriminatory attitudes and actions by 1934-5. Indeed, it was only two years before that Québec politician Mederic Martin had tried to fan the flames of antifeminism across the country by printing in *Chatelaine* an outlandish appeal to women to vacate the work force en masse in the name of patriotism.[29] Montréal Council women watched nervously but not passively over the next few years as Martin's dream of a legislative solution to the problem of women workers came perilously close to realization with the successive introduction of discriminatory bills in the Québec legislature.[30] The similarities between trends at home and events overseas in countries where drastic gender policies were gaining ground could not have escaped notice. Clearly the Montréal Council's more spirited campaign was fueled by fears about where the erosion of women's economic autonomy was leading in other countries.

The sympathy of the Montréal Council with the ICW's equal rights argumentation — with its emphasis on the right to work as essential to the dignity and the liberty of human beings — was consistent with its past tendency to favour equalitarian thinking over the gender-soaked maternalism of most feminists and reformers affiliated with the NCWC. On the issue of protective legislation for women workers, for example, the Montréal Council, since the late 19th century, had distanced itself from the majority stance of Canadian women reformers by rejecting the principle of special protection based on sex. Granted, some early Council members may have favoured equality of the sexes in labour matters out of a conservative reluctance to interfere with employers' "rights." Others, however, like the influential Carrie Derick, were more worried that special "protection" only encouraged the replacement of female workers with men and boys not covered by the legislation. Apart from these practical concerns, Derick also embraced equality

[27]NAC, MG28 I164, Montreal Council of Women Papers, vol. 5, file: Annual Reports ... , *Fortieth Anniversary Issue and Annual Report 1933-34*, November 1934, 57; NCWC *Yearbook*, 1936-1937, 55.

[28]NAC, Montreal Council of Women Papers, vol. 5, file: Annual Reports ... , *Forty-First Year Book and Annual Report 1934-35*, November 1935, 23.

[29]Mederic Martin, "Go Home, Young Woman!" *Chatelaine* (September 1933), 10 and 37.

[30]NAC, Montreal Council of Women Papers, vol. 5, file: Annual Reports ... , *Forty-first Year Book and Annual Report 1934-35*, November 1935, 45, and vol. 6, file: MCW History, "Areas of Interest of Montreal Council of Women," compiled by A. Hooper.

in principle.[31] Conceptualizing equality and difference as fundamentally contradictory, Derick counselled women not to expect equality in some arenas and special treatment in others. Yet despite her plea for ideological consistency, on occasion the Montréal Council could be found endorsing protective measures for women and, for whatever reason, Derick does not seem to have stood in the way.[32] Still an active member during the 1930s, Derick was the force behind a 1934 resolution denouncing the firing of women to make room for unemployed men,[33] and she undoubtedly used her influence to ensure that the Council did not lose sight of an equal rights perspective even if it also spoke at times with an affirmation of sexual difference.

Except in a few pockets like Montréal, NCWCers were hardly the most reliable or forceful allies of women workers nervous that public resentment could cost them their jobs. More up to the task was the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (CFBPW). The Federation was founded early in the depression when seven local BPW clubs banded together to promote the economic, educational and social interests of its members and to encourage cooperation among this sisterhood of white collar workers that had mushroomed during the economic developments of the previous decade.[34] Employment issues had always been of key interest to members, the majority of whom were not the privileged professionals who were often the spokespersons, but rather secretaries, stenographers, clerks, bank workers and other low pay, low status white collar workers.[35] The move to federate and the dramatic climb in the number of clubs and in their membership in the first two years — all against the background of pervasive public

[31]On Derick's struggle for equal treatment in her own scientific career in academe see Margaret Gillett, "Carrie Derick (1862-1941) and the Chair of Botany at McGill," in Marianne Gosztonyi Ainley, ed., *Despite the Odds: Essays on Canadian Women and Science* (Montréal 1990), 74-87.

[32]On the Montréal Council's involvement in the ongoing debate over protective legislation see Margaret Hobbs, "'Dead Horses and Muffled Voices': Protective Legislation, Education and the Minimum Wage for Women in Ontario," MA thesis, University of Toronto, 1985, 27-30.

[33]NAC, Montréal Council of Women Papers, vol. 6, file: MCW Resolutions 1916-60.

[34]NAC, CFBPWC papers, vol. 1, Acc. #81/401, file: Annual Convention — Programmes — 1930-33, 1939, Program of First National Convention, Winnipeg, 2-5 July 1930.

[35]Although I was unable to locate data indicating the precise occupational distribution of members, the predominance of office workers is apparent from the minutes of Canadian Federation meetings. In the US too this class of worker predominated: Nancy Cott claims that almost half of the total membership of the American Federation were in clerical employment. Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven 1987), 91. Apart from the clerks, stenographers and secretaries, there were also waitresses and other working or lower-middle class women in similar low pay, low status fields. Susan Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism Between the Wars* (Westport 1981), 225.

unease over female employment — reflects a determination to hold on to workplace opportunities they believed were rightfully theirs.[36] The relative strength of the federation, in spirit if not in dollars, may also suggest how great was the need among white collar women for mutual emotional support against shared financial anxieties and the sting of public tirades directed at girls and women with jobs.

Unified in their commitment to single women's workplace rights, local clubs were frequently split over the place of married women in business.[37] The majority of club members were, after all, unmarried women, mostly employed but some unemployed, in an economic and ideological climate which pitted women against each other based on their marital status. Nevertheless, internal disputes about married women, particularly apparent at the local level, were not extensive enough to block the Canadian Federation from officially and strongly endorsing their presence in the workplace. By the second annual meeting, in 1931, a resolution was passed formally registering disapproval of workplace discrimination based on women's marital status.[38] The resolution stated the Federation's position simply, without couching it in the language of either need or rights.

Whatever sympathy was forthcoming from the membership for married women workers was probably due less to a political commitment to sisterhood or a feminist analysis of economic dependence than to a gut level understanding of their own vulnerability to antifeminist attacks. The minutes of the Canadian Federation's annual meetings reveal a pragmatically motivated membership aspiring to economic security and trying to carve out for themselves — be they secretaries or medical practitioners — a legitimate claim to "professional" status. During a mid-decade thrashing out of the married woman issue at a Federation convention in Calgary, what quieted disagreements was the observation of one member that moves to cast married women aside were only "the thin edge of the wedge to get women out of positions in the professional and business world."[39]

[36]The number of clubs in the Federation doubled by the second year from 7 in 1930 to 13 in 1931. (The number for 1931 is listed variously in the records as 13 or 20, but the former figure is more likely to have been correct.) Affiliated clubs increased to 19 in 1932 and 20 in 1933. The combined membership rose from 732 in 1930 to 1132 in 1931, 1595 in 1932, and then dropped to 1451 in the bleak economic year of 1933. NAC, CFBPWC papers, vol. 43, Minute Book, Annual Conventions, "Minutes. First Session of the Fourth Annual Convention," Hamilton, 10 July 1933, 5.

[37]The BPW Clubs in Kamloops and Brantford, for example, proved especially unwilling to lend support to married women. NAC, MG28 I55, CFBPW Papers, vol. 10, Acc. #81/401, file: Newsletter of CFBPWC 1932, "Actions and Re-Actions," *Newsletter*, 2,1 (June 1932), 15; NCWC *Year Book* (1936), 122.

[38]NAC, CFBPWC Papers, vol. 1, Acc. #81/401, file: Annual Convention — Minutes 1931, Minutes of the Second Session of the Second Annual Convention of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Montreal, 4 July 1931, 2.

[39]NAC, CFBPWC papers, vol. 43, Minute Book 1, Minutes of 5th Convention, CFBPWC, Calgary, 3-6 July 1935.

This was not depression-induced paranoia. It was fear based on an astute sense that femaleness itself was potential cause for suspicion in the work force of the depression.

Knowing full well the disastrous repercussions of gender discrimination for white collar women already marginalized in the labour force, the Canadian Federation remained committed to winning gender battles for the women it represented. Especially wary of employer initiatives to masculinize the workforce, locals were urged to study and report on the nature and extent of discrimination in their communities. In 1933, the ugliest depression year, the President of the CFBPWC lashed out at employers and politicians using sometimes "subtle" and other times "open" propaganda to replace females with males and lower women's salaries, a practice found to be most prevalent in teaching and banking. Speaking with a passion reminiscent of the earlier generation of suffrage reformers, and nodding at their efforts on women's behalf, she impressed on her audience that female gains in the public sphere were "ours by right of a difficult conquest and painstaking labor." "O! foolish people, do they think they can stay the March of progress?" Women, she predicted, would not easily give up their hard-won trophies and crawl back to their homes in defeat, antifeminists could be certain of that. Female energy repressed in one place would erupt elsewhere with equal force. Women, for example, would counter discrimination by setting up their own all-female businesses; there were already signs of such a trend underway.[40]

The CF President was combining here an appeal to historical inevitability — an old centrepiece in feminist argumentation — with a vision of women's essential role in creating their own history. Several years later, at the 1937 meeting, discussions about women's employment seemed much more defensive. The Federation President opened the meeting insisting that "It is not so much women's right to work with which we are concerned as it is her need to work."[41] A Québec representative, still stunned from the near victory of anti-working women forces in the provincial legislature two years earlier, thought it essential to "prove to the men" that the lingering depression was not the fault of women. Certainly appeals to the march of progress or to women's right to work for fun and self-fulfillment would not have helped exonerate women from blame. Not surprisingly, it was the economic imperative for wives to work that was referred to repeatedly by then. It constituted, for example, the backbone to a Saskatchewan report responding to the International Labor Organization's request for information about male/female wage rates and women workers' responsibility for dependents. Married women only work for necessity, the western representative told the convention, adding that there couldn't be more than fifty wives working in Regina just "because they want

[40]NAC, CFBPWC Papers, vol. 43, Minute Book, Annual Conventions, Minutes, Fourth Annual Convention of the CFBPWC, Hamilton, July 1933, President's Report, 2.

[41]NAC, CFBPWC Papers, vol. 43, Minute Book 2, Minutes of 6th Convention, CFBPWC, Niagara Falls, 12-16 July 1937, 5.

to."[42] If there were any married women present at the meeting with husbands securely employed or independently wealthy (and there may have been some), they did not draw attention to themselves by objecting or insisting on their right to work for fun or self-fulfillment.

Women's organizations with any inclination to defend women workers in the depression had to contend with a major obstacle: a social and cultural milieux largely sympathetic to rigorous questioning of the economic rights of women, especially married women. The increasing timidity of the Canadian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and even more so the NCWC testifies to the widely felt "gender jitters"[43] that underlay much of the campaign to oust women from jobs in the thirties. It is no coincidence that the most active organized resistance to incursions on women's earning power took place in parts of the country where antifeminism seemed to be gaining the strongest foothold, as in Québec. More support might at least have been squeezed out of some of the fence-sitters had the threat throughout Canada appeared as great as it did in the U.S., where discriminatory legislative proposals and actions were legion.[44] Without such an immediate and tangible threat, Canadian women interested in mobilizing support for the married woman worker had to contend not only with direct opposition within their membership, but also with a certain amount of apathy. While moves against women in the U.S. and much more so in parts of Europe prompted some response from women's reform organizations, many women must have felt distanced from the clouds that were gathering "over there." Certainly this was the observation of Gwethalyn Graham, who in 1936 complained to readers of the *Canadian Forum* that

> Partly because of the urgency of other issues considered more vital, partly because what has been happening to the women of Germany and Italy is so much more obvious that similar conditions in our own country seem negligible by comparison, the retrogressive movement has got under way here without receiving much notice or comment.[45]

[42]NAC, CFBPWC Papers, vol. 43, Minute Book 2, Minutes of 6th Convention, CFBPWC, Niagara Falls, 12-16 July 1937, 80.

[43]The phrase is a variation on Ruth Pierson's "wartime jitters over femininity." See Ruth Roach Pierson, *'They're Still Women After All': The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto 1986). For an analysis of the gender crisis affecting both masculinity and femininity see Hobbs, "Rethinking Antifeminism."

[44]The discriminatory Section 213 of the National Economy Act together with the rash of proposed married persons' clauses that swept through state legislatures served as a focal point for concrete feminist action. Women's organizations were successful in repealing the offending Section 213 and only one state managed to pass a married persons bill. See Scharf, *To Work and To Wed*, 46-59.

[45]Gwethalyn Graham, "Women, Are They Human?" *Canadian Forum* XVI, 191 (December 1936), 21.

Clearly disappointed by the relatively weak-kneed response of the Canadian women's movement, Graham thought "the whole subject of Feminism" was wanting "a good airing."

III

FEMINISM, and in particular the question of married women's employment, had in fact received an airing in forums other than the liberal women's organizations. Debates about women's place raged in the popular press of the early 1930s, especially in the letters to the editor sections, and although the overwhelming majority of writers were camped with the forces of opposition, there were a few brave souls who dared to defend the beleaguered woman worker. A few were well known public figures, but others were not, and some joined in the debates only under the veil of anonymity. A brief sampling of some of these voices appearing in the mainstream Toronto press as well as in national magazines like *Chatelaine*, *The Canadian Forum*, and *The Canadian Home Journal* reveals at first glance a preponderance of arguments compatible with conservative gender assumptions, reflecting the rising popularity of the politics of gender difference. But a closer look reveals an array of arguments drawing on either equality or difference, or weaving the two together. Equal rights thinking was still alive in Canada, and not just within the Montréal Local Council of Women. Moreover, an analysis of the opinions expressed by defenders of employed women points up some limitations of sticking to a polarized frame of equality and difference to understand the contours of feminism in the period.

In the social and economic context of the depression, writers trying to defend women workers were forced into building their argument at least in part around a rebuttal of the most common charges laid against women. Accusations that women were stealing jobs from male breadwinners whose children were starving, that married women were taking jobs away from single girls who were then forced onto relief or into prostitution, that married women were driving to work in limousines past lines of jobless outside soup kitchens, that young girls were only working for good times and fineries — these were allegations with tremendous inflammatory power that demanded response.

On a purely practical level it was important for defenders to counter the erroneous assumptions and faulty logic behind such claims. Thus the case was repeatedly made in the pages of the press, as it was often at conventions of women's organizations, that women's earnings were crucial for self or family support, especially in the working class. And when cornered all but the most narrow-minded antifeminists had to concede that a great many single girls were "legitimate" breadwinners and that there were also certain economic circumstances that necessitated married women's workforce involvement.[46] Besides, even if women could

[46]See for just a few examples Letter to the Editor from Trade Union, Toronto *Telegram*, 19 January 1931; Letter to the Editor from "Auntie," Toronto *Mail and Empire*, 4 October 1930,

be persuaded to go home, what men would be willing to take their mainly low paying, sex-typed jobs? Moreover, how many men used to manual labour or even office work were properly skilled to step right in to a job that one married white collar worker said she had spent "a lifetime learning?"[47] And what would become of the new army of unemployed women? Who would support them, especially if they had no male relatives? The state?[48] Surely that was not desirable. It was also expedient for defenders of working women to argue that far from causing the unemployment crisis, employed women, of the middle class at least, were in fact contributing to job creation, most particularly for domestic servants, but also for men who could be hired to do odd jobs around the houses of busy double income earners.[49] Some pushed the point to emphasize how married women's employment benefitted the economy since women were the country's major consumers:

> It is generally admitted that it is women's needs and tastes and extravagances that make the wheels of industry turn. Just think of the slump in business there would be with no women on the payrolls — more men out of jobs.[50]

If it made good practical sense for working women and their sympathizers to refute the image of the selfish pin money worker by drawing on these economic arguments, not all correspondents were writing in this vein merely to score political points; many were reacting on a personal level to a deeply felt sense of grievance that they should be depicted as bread snatchers and home wreckers. One woman who had recently lost her job because her husband had one wanted to share with readers of the Toronto *Mail and Empire* her difficulties in keeping a family of six going when her husband made only $26 a week and had no steady work all winter. In producing her monthly budget for critics to scrutinize she appealed for understanding of her family's need of additional income.[51] Another woman, married and

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8; Letter to the Editor from "Live and Let Live," Toronto *Mail and Empire*, 23 October 1930, 6.

[47]"Can You Shackle Woman Again?" Response by W.A. Parker, *Chatelaine* (November 1933), 44; Letter to the Editor from "A Married Business Woman," Toronto *Mail and Empire*, 25 September 1930, 8.

[48]Letter to the Editor from "A Married Business Woman," Toronto *Mail and Empire*, 25 September 1930, 8.

[49]"Persecution of Married Women," Editorial, *Canadian Forum*, XII, 137 (February 1932), 164; Letter to the Editor from "A Married Business Woman," Toronto *Mail and Empire*, 25 September 1930, 8; Harriet Parsons, "Canada Needs Her Woman Power," *Canadian Home Journal* (July 1933), Harriet Parsons Papers, Metropolitan Toronto Public Library, Baldwin Room.

[50]Letter from Alice Brown in "Can You Shackle Woman Again?," Readers' Responses to Mederic Martin, *Chatelaine*, November 1933, 26.

[51]Letter to the Editor from "London, Ontario," Toronto *Mail and Empire*, 30 September 1930, 8.

employed, whose husband's 72 hour work week driving a cab pulled in only ten dollars if he was lucky, wrote in to the Toronto *Telegram* to let single girls know she was not working for fun or extras. "It's no picnic," she cried, especially when going out to work meant leaving her small baby for others to enjoy. What choice did she have, she asked, if she wanted her child to be fed and clothed?[52] One can read between the lines her fear of being judged not only an illegitimate worker but also a bad mother.

Defenders of working women possessed a good understanding that the attacks on women workers were not just motivated by rational assessments of who were and were not the rightful breadwinners. The "real" issue, the *Canadian Forum* editorialized, was the old belief "that woman's place is in the home."[53] Efforts by defenders to cast the working woman, especially the working wife, as selflessly bound to home and family, pursuing paid labour only out of economic necessity, reflect a desire to soothe public fears — and perhaps for some their own fears as well — that the traditional gender order and the family itself were not breaking down under the weight of the unemployment crisis. Some other common arguments tending to shore up conservative gender ideology were that employment keeps girls good and out of "trouble," that employment made wives better companions for their husbands, that discrimination against married women was contributing to the decreasing marriage rates confirmed by studies of youths (since not many youths could get by on just one income) and also to the increase of extra-marital sex.[54]

Despite the prevalence of what might be interpreted as a defensive and conservative retreat, an open embrace of gender difference, working women and their supporters can also be found appealing to the principle of equality and critiquing restrictive notions of masculinity and femininity, including the gender division of labour in the depression family. Perhaps unemployed men, not working women, should be the ones to go home, one woman boldly suggested in *Chatelaine*:

> Their mothers or sisters or wives who have jobs and are away from home all day would be only too glad if they would stay home and clean up the house, wash the dishes or look after the baby.[55]

[52]Letter to the Editor by Married Woman Worker, Toronto *Telegram*, 7 November 1930, 6.
[53]"Persecution of Married Women," 164.
[54]"Can You Shackle Woman Again?" Response from Patience Strong, *Chatelaine* (November 1933), 44; Letter to the Editor from "Experienced," Toronto *Mail and Empire*, 6 October 1930, 10; "Persecution of Married Women," 164; Parsons, "Can Youth Afford to Marry?" 14-5, 45-7 and "Canada Needs Her Woman Power," Harriet Parsons Papers, Metropolitan Toronto Public Library, Baldwin Room. Parsons referred in her article, "Can Youth Afford to Marry?" to a survey conducted by the YMCA of 184 young men in ten Ontario cities which fueled fears that the majority of youths could not afford to marry.
[55]"Can You Shackle Woman Again?" Response from "An interested reader," *Chatelaine* (November 1933), 26.

Other women declared that it was simply "unfair" to treat women differently from men, that this was a relic from an outmoded time when women truly were the economic dependents of fathers or husbands, and that discriminatory policies would represent an erasure of years of struggle by feminists and a denial of women's fundamental rights as independent beings.[56] Gwethalyn Graham, referred to earlier lamenting the slipping away of feminism, argued for a rejection of the narrow biologism poking its head through popular psychology, and urged readers to confront squarely the question of "whether or not women shall be entitled, as individuals, to work for the sake of the work itself."[57]

While Graham came down hard and clear on the side of the equalitarian tradition, many other writers drew simultaneously on equal rights and maternal thinking. Preferring to grab at whatever arguments seemed to do the trick, they showed none of the unease with the ideological contradictions that had prompted Montréal's Carrie Derick to advise women they could not have it both ways, expecting equality on the one hand and special privileges on the other. For example, one of the letter-writers who wrote to the Toronto *Star* in defence of women's hard-earned "rights" also thought it might be true that women's first duty was to home and family.[58] And it was commonplace to combine arguments based on "fairness," equality and individual choice with those based on the imperative of financial need. Harriet Parsons, a Toronto journalist for the *Canadian Home Journal*, utilized the language of rights, embraced the importance of women working for pleasure and fulfillment (observing "Not being needed is worse than not being fed"), argued that men and women shared identical interests in the economic crisis and that businesses should revoke any married woman bans. Yet despite her commitment to equality principles Parsons, like so many others, could also be found reasserting gender difference, suggesting for example that young men's salaries be raised as a strategy to encourage more youth to marry.[59]

IV

THE BLURRING OF BOUNDARIES between those arguing from an equal rights perspective and those relying on conceptions of gender difference can also be seen by looking at the thinking of two influential and highly visible spokespersons for women's interests in the interwar period, one from the west and one from the east: Helen Gregory MacGill and Agnes Macphail. MacGill, an outspoken Juvenile Court Judge in Vancouver for over 20 years (from 1919-1929 and again from 1934 to 1945), had also chaired the Mother's Pension Board in the 1920s, served on the

[56]Letter to the Editor from "Experienced," Toronto *Mail and Empire*, 6 October 1930, 10; Letter to the Editor from "A Woman," Toronto *Star*, 22 July 1931, 6.

[57]Gwethalyn Graham, "Women, Are They Human?" *Canadian Forum* XVI, 191 (December 1936), 22.

[58]Letter to the Editor from "A Woman," Toronto *Star*, 22 July 1931, 6.

[59]Parsons, "Can Youth Afford to Marry?" 14-5, 45-7.

B.C. Minimum Wage Board for 17 years, briefly sat on its replacement, the Board of Industrial Relations in 1934, and served on the Mayor's Unemployment Committee from 1930-1931. One of Canada's best known early feminist reformers, she has generally been portrayed as a maternal or "social" feminist, more concerned with welfare and other reform measures affecting women and children than with principles of women's rights, more interested in the vote as a tool for social reform than a symbol of women's equality.[60] Although she may have leaned more to this side, her public statements on female employment during the depression suggest that she cannot be parked too rigidly on the side of difference alone.

Undeniably, she downplayed the joys of jobs for women and avoided arguing in the abstract about rights. Instead, led by a legal mind sticky about logic, MacGill first exposed the fallacious thinking of those who saw in women both cause and cure for economic depression, beginning with the fact that no exodus of female workers could make a dent in male unemployment since most men would not do "women's work" such as domestic service and stenography. Compelled to respond to prevailing cynicism about why women took work outside the home, MacGill chose to emphasize economic factors more than social and personal ones, portraying women and girls as crucial economic contributors to their families and as indispensible workers to industry. Drawing on her years of experience in the Juvenile Court and on the Minimum Wage Board she observed how much more familial in orientation were young working girls than boys; they poured their wages and their energies back into families which depended on the economic, social and emotional roles they took on. In her descriptions of employed wives she underlined a similarly selfless female preoccupation with family welfare, pointing to women who used their pay to put food on the table, to help with the bills, to give their children more opportunities for education and a higher standard of living, or to save for old age.[61]

But there is also an emphasis in her writing on women's "sameness" to men. Like men, she insisted, women have always worked — they have just not always been paid for it — and when they are remunerated they had a right to equal pay for equal work. Like men, women experience need: "Being jobless is not a matter of sex, and suffering caused by hunger or cold is not limited to either men or women."[62] Like men, women often had dependents to support. It angered her that married women were singled out as undeserving workers presumed to be living with male providers, and she reminded readers of the woman with an unemployed or underemployed husband, and of the woman with a sick, disabled, incompetent, irresponsible or lazy husband who, along with the children and often an older parent

[60]Naomi Black, "Introduction" to Elsie Gregory MacGill, *My Mother the Judge* (Toronto 1981), xix.

[61]See Helen Gregory MacGill, "The Jobless Woman," *Chatelaine* (September 1930), 5, 47-8, and "What of the Wage-Earning Wife?" *Chatelaine* (March 1930), 8-9, 64-6.

[62]MacGill, "The Jobless Woman," 48.

or relative, were dependent on her. Untroubled by the presence of a much smaller number of non-needy women in employment, MacGill pointed to the double standard that questioned the employment rights of women but not those of men, some of whom were independently wealthy or supported by others, and some of whom were without dependents:

> In the case of the man seeking a professional position, the firm does not ask if he needs the work or if he has an income of his own or if his wife inherited money....According to the theory applied to the married woman...unless he is penniless, should he be allowed to work, on the theory that if he was not working some other poorer man or some unmarried woman who needed it more might have his position.
>
> If he is wealthy it is still not held that he should not hold a position or job. He is not urged to stay at home and be the perfect husband helping with the dishes, firing the furnace and playing golf in the afternoon.[63]

Not only should we conclude that MacGill drew arguments from the feminist traditions of equality as well as difference, we should also notice how the economic need argument itself does not belong solely in the interpretive category of difference where it has generally been placed by feminist historians. If MacGill used the need rationale to breathe life back into the image of women as nurturing mothers and dutiful daughters, different from men in their selfless commitment to family life, clearly she also used it to establish women's sameness to men and so to reinforce women's claim to equal consideration and treatment. Given the strength of popular fantasies depicting men's wages feeding hungry bellies and women's wages buying frivolous extras from silk stockings to fancy cars, it was important to remind people of the basic economic realities that led the majority of women *and* men to view paid work as primarily, though not necessarily exclusively, a means to live. MacGill knew well from her own life, which was marked by financial insecurity,[64] that however enjoyable and stimulating work might be, it was the pay cheque, not the personal fulfillment, that enabled survival. In stressing the economic significance of work MacGill was also echoing the priorities of many

[63]MacGill, "What of the Wage-Earning Wife?" 9.

[64]MacGill supported her first husband through medical school in the United States. He died young, leaving her the sole support of her two small sons and her mother. These two years before she remarried must have been difficult, but interested readers will not find many details of this period in the biography by her daughter, Elsie Gregory McGill. Her second husband, initially a "good provider," later dove into financial difficulties that left him broke by the mid-1910s, and although he was able to pull himself up again he spent years paying off debts. When he died in 1939 he left no estate. Throughout their marriage and beyond, MacGill's public roles, though prestigious, offered limited financial security. In fact her 17 year stint on the BC Minimum Wage Board brought no remuneration, nor did her chairship of the Mother's Pension Board or many other of her public duties. See Elsie Gregory MacGill, *My Mother the Judge: A Biography of Helen Gregory MacGill* (Toronto 1981 [1955]).

working class women, whose paid work in no way matched the glamorous image held dear by "career feminists." In fact MacGill was joined in her emphasis on economic factors by some Communist Party supporters who defended married woman workers of the working class not from respect for their "choices," but from the understanding that their husbands' low wages left them no other alternative but to try to find work themselves.[65]

If MacGill is generally seen too one dimensionally as a social or maternal feminist, Agnes Macphail, Canada's first woman MP, pacifist, feminist, and advocate for farmers and labourers, has sometimes been classified too narrowly as an equal rights feminist. In his recent biography, Terry Crowley suggests the classic liberal texts of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill molded Macphail's understanding of feminism and she became by the late 1920s Canada's "foremost advocate of women's equality based on fundamental human rights." Her commitment to "absolute equality," he argues, remained unshaken during the depression; it was only later in her life, after World War II, that she modified her ideas slightly to embrace a politics of "equality through difference."[66]

Although her own decision not to marry reflected uncertainty about the possibilities for female independence within marriage, and more specifically a concern that the duties of wife and mother generally encroached on women's career plans, Macphail was uncompromising in her insistence on women's rights to both family and employment, regardless of the state of the national economy or their personal financial need. She assumed that increasingly most women wanted both marriage and paid work,[67] and that despite antifeminist attempts to restrict women

[65]For sympathetic portrayals of the plight of married women workers see the following articles in *The Worker*: "Working Women Support Communist Candidate," 26 July 1930; untitled piece, 4 January 1930; "Working Women Demonstrate!" prepared by the Women's Department, WUL, 4 April 1931; "International Women's Day," by Fred Raymond, 27 February 1932; "Organizational Problems a better Attitude Towards Women is Needed," by C.S., Port Arthur, 7 October 1933. Despite this evidence of support for married women, the Communist Party restricted its empathy for married women workers to those of the working class and never joined forces with middle class women trying to mount a wider campaign on behalf of married women. On the whole women and men in the radical Left in the thirties paid more attention to the needs of single women workers than married women workers. Because married women were not a real priority for Communists, I have not attempted a detailed consideration of their occasional efforts to defend the employment rights of wives.

[66]Terry Crowley, *Agnes Macphail and the Politics of Equality* (Toronto 1990), 90, 208. See Ch. 10 for his discussion of this shift, which he traces especially through her initial rejection of gender specific protective legislation and affirmative action as "special privilege," to her full support for pay equity.

[67]"Almost every woman," she wrote, "wants a mate, children and the opportunity of doing work which she enjoys and that is increasingly work outside the home." NAC, MG27 III C 4, Macphail Papers, Vol. 10, file #23, "What is Woman's Objective?" n.d.

to the former, there was not enough work left in the modern home to warrant women's fulltime presence.[68] In contrast to MacGill's concern that Canadians recognize women as economically needy and so worthy breadwinners, Macphail worried that such an argument could backfire, lending weight to the conservative notion that economic pressures were the *only* legitimate ground for female employment. This fear could lead Macphail on occasion almost to dismiss the economic signifigance of women's wages, even though her close work with farmers and labourers, and her well developed class politics, meant that in reality she was totally cognizant of the importance of women's contributions to family survival. "Nor is work a matter of bread and butter," she said to a gathering of women in Montréal in 1936, her real point being somewhat more subtle: that work means more than just wages to women. "Every person, man and woman, boy and girl, desires to find satisfaction and happiness through useful and purposeful work."[69] Every chance she got, she hammered home this message. While not disagreeing with the content of the MacGill argument, Macphail shifted the focus to legitimize women's spiritual and personal interest in work and so to support explicity the principle of equality itself:

> It is not because women are generous with their money to parents, children, nieces and nephews, brothers and sisters, an aged aunt or uncle — although these things are true — that I defend her right to work for pay.
>
> It is not that women are good spenders and spending keeps money in circulation that I defend women's right to work.
>
> It is that women, to be spiritually happy, must work — she must make her contribution to the highest good in any way that seems to her best."[70]

This was a courageous position to take amidst the social and economic conditions of the depression and she never backed away from it.

Despite her clear debt to equal rights thinkers, Macphail also espoused elements of maternalism that should not be overlooked. She was not adverse to drawing on the familiar housekeeping metaphors when pushing for women in politics, and especially when addressing the issue of women and peace, one can

[68]In a manner that must have been irritating to many full-time housewives exhausted with the demands of children and husbands, Macphail referred often to the modern home as the "workless home." See for example NAC, MG27 III C4, Macphail Papers, vol. 10, file #23: "Wither Woman," Address to the Canadian Alliance for Women's Vote in Québec, Montréal, March 1936.

[69]NAC, MG27 III C4, Macphail Papers, vol. 10, file #23: "Wither Woman," Address to the Canadian Alliance for Women's Vote in Québec, Montréal, March 1936.

[70]NAC, MG27 III C4, Macphail Papers, vol. 10, file #23: "Women — What Now?" Address to Hamilton Civic Women's Club, 2 October 1939. See also in the same file "How Far Can Women Help Solve National Problems?" CBC, 21 May 1939; "What Should Women do Now?" Address to Ottawa Local Council of Women, 20 March 1939.

see her making assumptions about women's unique capacity for nurturance and pacifism that borrowed not just on an analysis of social conditioning but also on women's different "nature." "Woman," she insisted, "is by nature, constructive — to produce and to preserve life is her great function — all destruction is an offence to her womanhood."[71]

Macphail's dues to both equality and difference are best combined in her reliance on familiar arguments about the historical inevitability of women's involvement in paid work outside the home.[72] As Nancy Cott has observed, this was an argument that bridged the equality and difference divide for it "gave weight to economic need, and demand factors in the economy, as much as 'rights,' bringing women into the labour market."[73] Indeed, Macphail, and for that matter MacGill, can be read as constituting what Mary Poovey has called "border cases," women who in thought and in life straddled the divide and so expose for us the artificiality of its binary construction.[74] Not only did some women draw on the broad traditions of both equality and difference, the cases of MacGill and Macphail suggest that we miss some of the complexities if we rigidly strap the need argument to difference and the fulfillment argument to equality. Both working for need and working for fulfillment could be read as assimilation to the male model and hence as expressions of women's sameness and equality to men, since ultimately a man's right to work was presumed to lie both in his need to support dependents and, although less acknowledged in the depression, in his obligation and desire to perform a useful job in society.

V

IN CANADA during the 1930s there was not as much of a unified defence of the woman worker as there was in the United States, but nor does there appear to have been such a unified campaign against women. Among defenders of working women a shift in emphasis is discernable during the depression from the language of rights and personal preference which received some attention in the twenties, to the language of economic need, but this shift is not as pronounced as historians

[71]NAC, MG27 C4, Macphail Papers, Vol. 10, file #23: "Women — What Now?" Address to Hamilton Civic Women's Club, 2 October 1939. See also in the same file "Women in the Present World," 1936; "Women in Government," n.d. [1939?], where she stated amidst a lengthy list of women's qualities, good and bad, that "Women are not good fighters" ... "Not too good at sustained mental effort."

[72]See for example, NAC, MG27 C4, Macphail Papers, Vol. 10, file #23: "Women — What Now?" Address to Hamilton Civic Women's Club, 2 October 1939; "Women in Government," n.d. [1939?]; "Whither Woman?" Address to the Canadian Alliance for Women's Vote in Québec, Montréal, March 1936.

[73]Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven 1987), 119.

[74]Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago 1988), 12.

have discovered in the U.S. Since equal rights feminism has never been as strong in Canada as it has in the U.S. or Britain, it is perhaps not so surprising to see less of a rigid break with the past in this period. But this paper reminds us that equal rights thinking is not entirely absent from the Canadian right to work debate.

Despite our tendency to impose the equality versus difference construct on both our writing of feminist history and our feminist activism, most organizations and individuals have not in fact argued consistently from one perspective or the other. Instead, as Scott observes, feminists (and, we might add, their supporters who may not always identify themselves as feminists), have tried "to reconcile theories of equality with cultural concepts of sexual difference." Certainly such reconciliation was evident in the defence of women workers in Canada of the thirties.[75] One might hypothesize that a rigid dichotomy between equal rights and difference has been forced on the past by contemporary feminist historians, for as suggested above although historians have commonly read the argument from need as an assertion of women's family ties, and hence a reinforcement of separate spheres ideology, it can also be interpretted as an attempt to assimilate the woman worker into the male worker model, since what was being demanded was women's right to work on the same economic grounds that men's right to work was presumed to rest, namely on the basis of his need to support himself and his dependents. So assimilated, it was hoped that women could establish their claim not just to jobs but also to relief. Since the very category "worker" was presumed to be male in the depression, with single women only included because their need for self support likened their situation to that of men, sharp reminders of women's breadwinner roles were necessary statements about the sameness of women to men. Thus, although the need argument came in the thirties to dominate the feminist defence of women's employment rights, this did not in itself signal a conservative retreat from feminist principles of equality advocated more boldly in the previous decade. Women's investment in employment in the depression needed to be articulated from an economic and a social perspective. Unfortunately, there were too few in Canada like Macphail who insisted on the legitimacy of both.

I would like to thank Ruth Roach Pierson and Joan Sangster for their assistance with this article.

[75]For another study challenging polarized conceptions of feminist politics of equality and difference in the interwar years in Canada, see the recently published biography of the well known Winnipeg public figure, Margaret McWilliams. Mary Kinnear. *Margaret McWilliams: An Interwar Feminist* (Montréal 1991).