

A Fair or a Minimum Wage? Women Workers, the State, and the Origins of Wage Regulation in Western Canada

Bob Russell

ONE OF THE MOST intractable problems to confront social analysis in recent years lies in accounting for the gender stratification that characterizes capitalist economic systems and labour markets. As is now appreciated, this large topic has received significant scholarly attention in the annals of feminist studies, social and labour history and sociology. A common point of departure in previous studies relates to male workers' privileged access to employment and wage-earning opportunities, which is counterpointed by the relegation of women to unpaid domestic work responsibilities, less desirable forms of employment, and lower wages. Control of wages, in turn, is seen to confer power on the male 'breadwinner' over household reproduction and ultimately to provide the material basis for patriarchal dominance. A fundamental query thus relates to the wage form and its gendered dimensions. While gender and economic power are not necessary economic correlates, they certainly are a sociological fact of everyday life in capitalist society.¹ This being so, how is a system of gendered wages produced and sustained over time?

To pose this question less abstractly, this paper examines a particularly clear cut case of gendered wage construction: the introduction of wage regulation by various political jurisdictions in the Canadian state. The case of wage administration is particularly interesting because in Canada, as elsewhere, women often were

¹Indeed, formal models of wage determination suggest that any form of discrimination in the labour market is, economically speaking, costly to the employer, who ultimately must pay a price when a "taste for discrimination" is exercised by employers or workers (G. Becker, *The Economics of Discrimination*, [Chicago, 1971]). Logically, labour markets should thus display a tendency to downgrade gender as well as racial discrimination according to orthodox economic doctrine. For a critique of this approach see, M. MacDonald, "Economics and Feminism," *Studies in Political Economy*, 15 (1984), 151-78.

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one of the first populations to be targeted as requiring political intervention to establish their wage rate. To take the best known case, minimum wage laws initially applied to women workers alone. In pursuing this, the present discussion explores the origins of minimum wage regulations. The processes by which wages were pegged are examined and compared with instances of state intervention that directly effected male wage levels. For this purpose, the federal Fair Wage Resolution of 1900 and successive provincial Fair Wage Acts, which regulated conditions in male dominated occupational categories, are examined and compared with the original minimum wage laws which ordered relations among female workers. The object here is not simply to provide a descriptive recounting, but rather to account for variations in the levels at which wage rates were pegged through explicit, consciously adopted political initiatives. In other words, why were "fair" wages largely reserved for men, while minimum wages were deemed sufficient for women? An appropriate response to this question may shed new light on questions about patriarchy and its historical manifestations in the world of work.

As noted above, this issue does not arise in a theoretical vacuum; indeed, previous analyses of patriarchy have focused on many of the general issues addressed here. It is thus important to be apprised both of existing accounts as well as the respective strengths and weaknesses associated with them. In part, an examination of fair and minimum wages provides an opportunity for reflecting upon the adequacy of previous analyses, while at the same time adds to existing knowledge.

As minimum wages were first introduced into the western Canadian provinces of Manitoba, British Columbia and Saskatchewan, the historical data presented in this paper derive from these sites.² Although the forces at work were regionally based, there are no compelling reasons to suspect that these significantly differed in the other provinces which in turn embarked on minimum wage regulation during the next decade.

Existing Approaches to Women's Oppression

EARLIER ACCOUNTS of women's oppression have stressed control of household resources as a prominent aspect in constructing gender relations. As most households today are wage-dependent centres of reproduction, the ownership and control of the wage becomes a vital concern in analyzing social relations within the

²Minimum wage laws were introduced into Canada in 1917 at the provincial level in Manitoba and British Columbia and shortly thereafter in Saskatchewan (1919). Other provinces followed suit in the next decade. Although a Federal Fair Wage resolution was introduced in 1900, more comprehensive fair wage laws date from the same period as the minimum wage provision, with Manitoba first introducing this measure in 1916. For a thorough historical discussion of the 1920 introduction of minimum wages into the province of Ontario, see Margaret E. McCallum, "Keeping Women in Their Place: The Minimum Wage in Canada," *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (Spring 1986), 29-56.

household. There are, however, several dimensions to this question. Thus, some writers have called attention to the institutional discrimination that women face in capitalist labour markets, through such features as segmented occupational markets and inclusion within the industrial reserve army, along with the consequent disadvantages which they suffer as actual wage earners.³ Other writers have expressed concern with the relegation of the household and housework to a devalued sphere of privatized labour, which remains subject to the exercise of patriarchal control and wage dependence.⁴ Similarly, differing levels of importance, each with its own implications, have been attached to the analysis of women in the labour force and women as domestic workers. Following from this, gender has effectively been counterposed to class,⁵ reconstructed as class,⁶ or extended so that the definition of class takes into account such elements as social reproduction practices.⁷

To some extent, the particular aspect of women's oppression that a given writer fastens upon, follows from the explanatory frame of reference, which is used to account for it. To risk oversimplification, two broad orientations have emerged and may be summarized as follows.⁸ The first is represented by the domestic labour approach, which seeks to extend the methods of political economy into the arena of women's work. The second is represented by a focus on social exclusion and the mechanisms that support it. In domestic labour analyses basic Marxian concepts such as labour time, surplus labour and labour values are redeployed to the situation that confronts women in the household.⁹ While this collective approach has tackled

³H. Armstrong and P. Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto* (Toronto 1984); P. Connelly, *Last Hired, First Fired* (Toronto 1978).

⁴B. Fox, ed., *Hidden in the Household* (Toronto 1980).

⁵M. Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today* (London 1980); P. Connelly, "On Marxism and Feminism," *Studies in Political Economy*, 12 (1983), 153-61.

⁶V. Burstyn, "Masculine Dominance and the State," in V. Burstyn and D. Smith, *Women, Class, Family and the State* (Toronto 1985), 45-89.

⁷D. Smith, "Women, Class and Family," in V. Burstyn and D. Smith, *Women, Class, Family and the State*, 1-44; H. Armstrong and P. Armstrong, "Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex," *Studies in Political Economy*, 10 (1983), 7-43.

⁸Although initially the theories of domestic labour and gender exclusion which are summarized below were constructed as alternatives (to the extent that the latter was partially developed out of a critique of the former), it would be erroneous to view them as static, separate, polarized frameworks. If anything, there has been a growing convergence between such approaches that signifies a broader rapprochement between historically grounded and theoretical modes of analysis.

⁹The domestic labour literature has become sizeable and will only be highlighted here, while the important debates within the domestic labour debate are abstracted from in this article. For a more thorough treatment of the issues readers may consult such works as, W. Secombe, "The Housewife and Her Labour Under Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 83 (1974), 3-24; J. Gardiner et al., "Women's Domestic Labour," *Conference of Socialist Economists Bulletin*, 4 (1975), 1-11; M. Coulson et al., "The Housewife and Her Labour Under

such questions as underemployment and wage differentials, its principle theoretical innovation has focused on the articulation of the domestic and waged realms of social life. Domestic labour theorists conceptualize this articulation as the relationship between reproduction and production in capitalist economies, and resulting debates have gravitated around such relatively abstract issues as the applicability of value theory to domestic labour, the presence of labour transfers between the domestic household and capitalized spheres of industry, as well as the directionality of such flows. At issue were the effects of the sexual division of labour on capitalist political economy, while most participants in the debate argued that such consequences were of positive value to the capital accumulation process, which remained their ultimate focus. In short, the performance of domestic labour in privatized households rebounded to the advantage of capital, although the various contributors to the debate differed about the exact mechanisms through which this subsidization effect took place.

Whatever the eventual outcome, many of these controversies are now judged to be too abstract and largely passé; in turn, the whole political-economy project, as applied to domestic labour, has come under closer scrutiny from feminist theorists. Of concern here is what is seen to be a side tracking of the most important concerns of the women's movement and a subordination of such issues as gender-based occupational exclusion to the political-economic analysis of capital. Deriving from this are the principal objections of economism and functionalism which are said to ensnare the whole domestic labour debate.¹⁰ Stated simply, structures of gender domination are not immediately derivable from the conditions for a capitalist market economy's existence. Rather, patriarchy possesses its own autonomous existence as a system of domination *sui generis*. And it is from this starting point that feminist theory has argued for the importance of sexist ideologies and the practices that flow from them in reconstructing gender domination. To an extent, the results have been appropriated by capital, but are not solely attributable to the prevalence of capitalist productive relations. Rather, where already-existing patriarchal relations have presented themselves, capital has taken advantage of the fact. Following from this, appropriate notions of mothering, of 'the home', and

Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 89 (1975), 59-71; P. Smith, "Domestic Labour and Marx's Theory of Value," in A. Kuhn and A. Wolpe, eds., *Feminism and Materialism* (London 1978), 198-219; J. Harrison, "The Political Economy of Housework," *Conference of Socialist Economists Bulletin*, (1973), 35-51; B. Curtis, "Capital, the State and the Origins of the Working Class Household," and E. Blumenfeld and S. Marn, "Domestic Labour and the Reproduction of Labour Power," in B. Fox, ed., *Hidden in the Household* (Toronto 1980), respectively 101-34 and 267-307.

¹⁰A. Miles, "Economism and Feminism," *Studies in Political Economy*, 11 (1983), 197-209; M. Barrett, *Oppression*; M. Molyneux, "Beyond the Domestic Labour Debate," *New Left Review*, 116 (1979), 3-27.

of 'men's and women's work' have effectively excluded women from a range of occupations, activities and opportunities in the labour force.¹¹ In particular, such ideological representations have been imported into working class culture where they have been seized upon opportunistically to enforce the avowedly-exclusionary practices of trade union organizations.

This has a long history. Mariana Valverde traces gender-focused exclusionary practices from the early 1830s in the British cotton industry, the largest industrial employer of female labour at the time.¹² And indeed, attempts to include women workers in British trade unions appeared to be more the exception than the rule throughout much of 19th and early 20th centuries.¹³ Often, such exclusions occurred under the guise of protective legislation authored by the state, which in singling women out as in need of special protections, (the weaker sex, etc.), has effectively barred them from key sectors in the primary labour market. This, in turn, has fostered a dependence upon the male wage and has established the objective conditions for the forms of male privilege and domestic tyranny that constitute patriarchy.

Many of the complaints registered against the early domestic labour contribution can be assented to readily. The conscious and unmediated analogies with the concepts of classical political economy did produce a de-politicization effect, while an exclusive concern with the analytical mechanisms of women's exploitation led away from the broader historical concerns, which would account for this exploitation in the first place. It is equally significant, however, that the gender exclusion alternatives to domestic labour analysis have, in turn, come under greater critical scrutiny. Here, two points are of consequence. First, theories of social exclusion often rely upon an under-theorized notion of the state, which usually acts as the agency enforcing gender exclusion through specific pieces of restrictive (protective?) legislation. In such accounts, protectionism is identified with social exclusion. It remains, however, to specify how political resources were mobilized to allow for the reservation of job rights through practices of gender exclusion. This question becomes all the more interesting when we recall that we are dealing with an era in which trade unions had yet to obtain significant political influence in the corridors of power. Additionally, gender exclusion potentially may have damaged

¹¹M. Barrett, *Oppression*; H. Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex," in Z. Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, 206-47.

¹²M. Valverde, "'Giving the Female a Domestic Turn': The Social and Moral Regulation of Women's Work in British Cotton Mills, 1820-1850," *Journal of Social History*, 21 (1987-88), 619-34.

¹³See S. Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions* (London 1987), but also J. Brenner and M. Ramas, "Rethinking Women's Oppression," *New Left Review*, 144 (1984), 33-71 for a critique of the effectiveness of trade union exclusion in structuring a patriarchal division of labour in industry.

the immediate, profit-oriented interests of a significant section of the business community.

This sort of question has recently been posed in important extensions of domestic labour analysis to the realm of social history. In later work, Wally Secombe, for example, argues that as labour became more individuated with the development of a mature labour market "strong sentiment arose against wage labour for women.... In sum the transition from a joint to an individual wage together with the widespread employment of women outside their homes was unsettling to patriarchal norms."¹⁴ We must be careful, however, not to assume the continued viability or unproblematical status of such norms, or the ability to dredge them up again when convenient. In short, did the exclusionary principles of craft unionists become and remain hegemonic within both the labour movement, civil society, and state circles, and if so, how was this the case?

It should also be noted that, as in the domestic labour analyses, there has been no final consensus with respect to the net benefits which flow from a gendered division of labour in the protectionist/exclusion arguments. The most frequent conclusion finds that such rewards are differentially appropriated by male wage earners within the domestic domain in the guise of male wage ownership and the forms of power which it assumes within the household.¹⁵ In another scenario, however, the single male-wage earning household is thought to increase the standard of living of the household as a whole and of its constituent members through the higher wage-levels which reduced labour force competition brings about.¹⁶ According to this logic, the household is better off as a result of higher male-wage levels.

Many of these criticisms point in the direction of a larger issue that so far has remained submerged in the debates over the origins and reproduction of patriarchal relations. Here, I am referring to the use of social-exclusion theory as the basis of analysis in the study of gender relations. The notion of social exclusion hails from a distinct sociological tradition in which the objective basis of social interest groups is premised on nothing more than the ability of certain groups to draw tight boundaries around their memberships, thereby marking them off from other groups in society.¹⁷ Theoretically, then, any body which is discriminated against by any other group has a co-equal status, even though the theory does not assume the

¹⁴W. Secombe, "Patriarchy Stabilized: The Construction of the Male Breadwinner Wage Norm in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Social History*, 11, 1 (1986), 53-76.

¹⁵See for example, H. Land, "The Family Wage," *Feminist Review*, 6 (1980), 59. Here it is argued that "The concept of the family wage based as it was on the bourgeois family form, carried with it domestic advantages to men." Also see Valverde, "'Domestic Turn.'"

¹⁶J. Humpheries, "Class Struggle and the Persistence of the Working Class Family," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, (1977), 241-58.

¹⁷M. Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley 1978), Ch. 9.6; F. Parkin, *The Marxist Theory of Class: A Bourgeois Critique* (London 1979), 44-54.

burden of specifying the foundations of exclusion, nor the mechanisms which fulfil it. In short, social exclusion explanations require greater specificity if they are to account satisfactorily for such basic social divides as gender division.

Noteworthy by its absence in the preceding accounts is a sustained analysis of the state and its contribution to the construction of existent gender relations. Perhaps most obviously, the state does not enter into the political economy literature and the study of domestic labour and its articulation with capitalist production, although most contributors would concede the critical importance of the state in other social realms. In turn, this neglect has authenticated charges of economism and reductionism which critics have levelled at the domestic labour approach. In feminist research, the state is explicitly brought into the analysis as the medium through which economic protection and exclusion is promoted. However, the intersections of class and gender politics, which would permit the state to serve as an apparatus of gender oppression, have yet to be tested. By actually examining a significant example of political intervention in the construction of gender relations, such as the case of fair and minimum wage regulation, new insights into some of these dynamics may be obtained. First, however, greater clarification of the different wage forms and their connection to types of economy and household will provide some useful analytical tools of the later analysis of fair and minimum wage regulation.

Capitalism and Wage Forms

ON THE SURFACE, no concept could be more straightforward than the wage form. Thus from the annals of political economy, we discover that wages are revenues paid for services rendered by a particular factor of production, namely labour. The price of labour, like that of other goods, is regulated by the vagaries of supply and demand. Furthermore, labour is labour of a definite type or use: in classical political economy, as in the ideal world of contemporary economic theorizing, the gender of the worker does not really enter into the determination of wages.¹⁸

Marx's critique of classical political economy on this score is by now familiar:

Labour is the substance and the immanent measure of value, but has itself no value. What economists, therefore, call value of labour is in fact the value of labour-power as it exists in the personality of the labourer, which is as different from its function, labour, as a machine is from the work it performs.¹⁹

Nevertheless, as Marx was quick to point out, a full examination of wages "belongs to the special study of wage labour, not, therefore, to this work."²⁰ And in fact, the section devoted by Marx to the study of wages represents only a scant contribution

¹⁸See Note 1.

¹⁹K. Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (Moscow 1974), 504.

²⁰K. Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (Moscow 1974), 504.

of twenty pages or so to his analysis of capital. This material is of interest both for what is included and for what is neglected. Here, Marx considers wage forms as a means of payment. His discussion, however, is largely restricted to considering the technical forms that such payments may assume. As such, this extends the analysis of the labour process which occupies large sections of Marx's manuscript, and which emphasizes such issues as the most advantageous forms of payment from the vantage-point of capital, where the wage form is utilized as an element of control in specific labour processes. This being the case, Marx had less to say about the social manifestations of the wage from the perspective of the labourer. No doubt this is because he rightly understood the wage to embody a social relationship between labour and capital. Nevertheless, it is still possible to specify this relationship more fully by examining the social forms as well as the technical dimensions of the wage category. To consider the wage as a complex social relation that involves more than the labour/capital relationship is one way to bring gender back into the picture.

Several categories of the wage form have been identified and elaborated upon previously. These include the family wage and the social wage, although this is not an exhaustive listing. Equally significant are what such forms imply for household structures, reproductive processes, and gender relations. In this respect, the so-called family wage has received the most attention. It refers to wages which are turned over to a single income earner, but which are sufficient to cover the subsistence costs of all family members. This was evidently the norm which Marx had in mind when he argued that the value of labour power necessarily exceeded the individual wage earner's costs of reproduction. For some, the struggle for the family wage has been one of the principal achievements of the industrial working class.²¹ Through the exercise of control over labour supply, often by means of restrictive state legislation, entailed in the family wage concept, (that is, one, and only one, wage earner per household), working-class living standards have been enhanced. This reading of working-class history, however, has not gone unchallenged. The division of household labour, which is built into the basic structure of the family wage, (male wage earner and female domestic worker), can be construed to confer either differential benefits or net benefits and sacrifices on different household members. As well, the empirical perspicacity and, particularly, the applicability of the family wage concept beyond a narrow stratum of relatively affluent working-class families has been questioned.²²

²¹J. Humpheries, "Class Struggle."

²²M. Barrett and M. McIntosh, "The 'Family Wage'," *Capital and Class*, 11 (1980), 51-71. See also Holley's study of skilled and unskilled workers in Scottish textile and paper making industries. In this particular case study, the author shows that family wages were restricted to the category of skilled crafts workers. J. Holley, "The Two Family Economies of Industrialism: Factory Workers in Victorian Scotland," *Journal of Family History* (1981), 57-69. Lewis also cites studies, which show that even as late as 1921 only 41 per cent of working class households in Britain were able to survive solely on a male wage, Lewis, *Women in England* (Sussex 1984), 47-8.

The other aspect of the wage question, which has received some attention, is to be found in discussions of the social wage. This term refers to the socialization of wage costs that are pursuant to capitalist development and the creation of a welfare state. In these arguments, labour power is perceived as a commodity which cannot be fully included under the normal laws of commodity production.²³ Household wages, despite the possible existence of a family wage, are deemed insufficient in economies where unemployment and significant wage variations are experienced during the course of family formation and the life cycle.²⁴ In these circumstances, a portion of household expenditures are socialized throughout the working-class by specified substitute-wage programs such as the social insurances, family allowances, and public pension plans.²⁵ Under such plans, the state organizes the production of public goods and income transfers which, when taken together, constitute the extension of a social wage to designated sections of the labour force. While the political economy of the welfare state has been a popular theme in this work, with one or two notable exceptions, the problem of social wages and gender relations has been totally ignored.²⁶ Specifically, the political constitution of a gender bias in the social wage has barely been documented, let alone accounted for in analyses of the welfare state.

Family and social wages do not exhaust the wage forms known under historical capitalism. Juxtaposed to the family wage is the multiple-wage household, which is structured around a family labour system. As implied by the term, the family yields several wage earners who pool their incomes together into one social unit. This household form arises with capitalism itself in the putting-out system where various family labours meet together in a simple division of labour to perform handicraft work.²⁷ With the rise of factory production, family labour systems are retained, albeit in a truncated fashion. Women and children often contribute to household finances by seeking wage employment in areas of domestic labour that recently have been taken over and centralized by capital. Textile production is, of

²³This point was first made in K. Polanyi's, *The Great Transformation* (Boston 1957), and has recently been given new emphasis in such contemporary analyses of the welfare state as C. Offe's *Disorganized Capitalism* (Cambridge 1985), and F. Block, *Revising State Theory* (Philadelphia 1987), Ch. 1 and 9.

²⁴J. Dickinson, "From Poor Law to Social Insurance: The Periodization of State Intervention in the Reproduction Process," and J. Wayne, "The Function of Social Welfare in a Capitalist Economy," in J. Dickinson and B. Russell, eds., *Family, Economy and State* (London 1986), respectively 113-49 and 56-84.

²⁵For more on this process see B. Russell, "The Politics of Labour Force Reproduction," *Studies in Political Economy*, 14 (1984), 43-73.

²⁶For novel treatments of this largely-neglected issue see, E. Wilson, *Women and the Welfare State* (London 1977) and J. Ursel, "The State and the Maintenance of Patriarchy," in Dickinson and Russell, *Family*, 150-91.

²⁷D. Levine, *Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism* (New York 1977).

course, the primary example of an industry built up on this basis.²⁸ Such practices both were facilitated by the use of subcontracting, whereby the master workman possessed the authority to hire his own kin as helpers,²⁹ and undermined by the growing individualization of labour and wage forms in the economy. While labour force participation among women was significant in the multiple wage household of both mercantile and early industrial capitalism, it was restricted largely to the younger age groups of unmarried women.

These general patterns appear to have characterized Canadian industrialization as well. In his study of a mid-19th century commercial city, for instance, Katz finds between one-fifth and one-quarter of all adult women worked outside the home, most frequently as domestic servants, but also in textile manufacturing. Labour participation rates outside the home peaked at age nineteen, after which they began declining.³⁰ Similar trends are reported later by Copp in the industrial environment of late-19th and early-20th century Montreal, where one-fifth of the labour force was composed of women workers, the majority of whom were under 25 years of age, and by Brandt, who underscores the importance of young, unmarried women to the Quebec cotton industry.³¹ Very similar patterns pertained in other industrializing Canadian cities as well.³²

The family labour system also assumed other dimensions. A certain proportion of married women and widows, and sometimes a significant minority in given occupations, continued to work for wages on an intermittent or full-time basis (see below). Perhaps more important was the extension of the domestic labour performed in the household to various income-generating and other subsistence activities. Most common in this regard was domestic food production (gardening)

²⁸I. Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* (London 1969); L. Tilly and J. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York 1978); M. Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (London 1971). In the case of Toronto, Piva records that some 8,000 women were employed in the clothing industry in 1911, and that this constituted a majority (58.6 per cent) of that industry's labour force, M. Piva, *The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto* (Ottawa 1979), 18.

²⁹N. Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (London 1967), 188-93.

³⁰M. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West* (Cambridge 1975).

³¹Approximately one-third of working women were employed in the manufacturing sector of Montreal with the largest proportion (45-51 per cent) under 25 years of age. Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty* (Toronto 1974). Women workers constituted a majority of the labour force in the cotton industry of Quebec, where participation tended to be governed by the changing life cycle of women and their families. Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "Weaving it Together": Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (1981), 113-26.

³²In Toronto the majority of women in the labour force were single, although Piva does note an increase in the participation rates of married women over the first two decades of this century, M. Piva, *Condition*, 40, 43. For a general overview, see V. Strong-Boag, who confirms these general trends in "The Girl of the New Day": Canadian Working Women in the 1920s," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), 141-64.

and small-scale forms of animal husbandry (keeping a small number of animals), along with the taking in of boarders. The latter practice secured additional income for working-class households in exchange for additional expenditures of women's domestic labour. Indeed, it appears as though boarding was a common expedient, with one-fifth of Bradbury's sample of mid-19th century working-class households in Montreal undertaking this arrangement, and between one-fifth and one-third of Katz's population group in Hamilton doing so.³³

Subsistence production was another means adopted by many 19-century women to supplement household wage packets, by allowing families to reduce their reliance on purchased commodities or market exchange values. As with boarding, however, opportunities for domestic gardening or husbandry declined with the growth in urbanization, urban crowding, and the advent of public health laws.³⁴ By the turn of the century, women's contribution to household reproduction was increasingly assuming new forms that included waged work and the introduction of new 'domestic efficiencies' such as sharing accommodation with other impoverished families.³⁵

The basic wage forms outlined above often are portrayed in terms of a sequential development, which reflects changes in capitalism and, particularly, altered living standards within the working class. Early accumulation is aided by the multiple wage/family labour system which is equated with low unit-labour costs distributed among numerous household members. In turn, these conditions are seen to be supplanted by monopoly capitalism, Taylorism at the work place, and the family-wage ideal. Monopoly capitalism's crisis in the 1930s provides the impetus for the modern welfare state, social wages, and a 'Fordist' regime of enhanced family wage-levels, developments which are held to be undergoing challenges in the current era of economic restructuring.

But even this overly simple characterization begs certain questions. Did a family wage norm become generalized in the Canadian context? If so, to what extent was it dependent upon state initiatives in directing protectionist/exclusionary legislation, and how were political resources mobilized to bring about such an outcome? To examine fair wage and minimum wage regulation is instructive for

³³B. Bradbury, "Pigs, Cows, and Boarders: Non-Wage Forms of Survival Among Montreal Families," *Labour/Le Travail*, 14 (1984), 32-6; Katz, *The People of Hamilton West*, 226-7, 241. These observations do require some qualifications. As Bradbury notes, with the growth of urbanization, crowding, and substandard housing conditions among the working class, opportunities for taking in boarders diminished over time as her data indicates. Also, as both she and Katz observe, wealthier families were more likely to take in boarders than were working-class households.

³⁴B. Bradbury, "Pigs, Cows and Boarders," 14-9, who records that 12-15 per cent of unskilled and semiskilled workers kept animal stock (mainly pigs), in the Montreal wards which she studies, prior to the advent of prohibitive public health laws in the mid-1870s.

³⁵B. Bradbury, "Pigs," 41-6; Copp, *Anatomy*, 56, 70-3.

what it offers in an understanding of women, the state, and the social construction of unequal gender relations. Such a study also provides a useful opportunity to re-examine existing theories of gender inequality.

Origins of the Minimum Wage

POLITICAL ATTEMPTS TO REGULATE wage revenues and household income are far from recent. In the Canadian context, they date back to the turn of the century and passage of the Fair Wage Resolution of 1900, which was itself preceded by so-called fair wage contracts in government purchasing orders beginning in 1897. The Canadian resolution was, in turn, directly modelled on a British ordinance of the same type which had been introduced in 1891.

The expressed intention of the Fair Wage Resolution was simple enough:

all government contracts should contain such conditions as will prevent abuses which may arise from the sub-letting of such contracts and that every effort should be made to secure the payment of such wages as are generally accepted as current in each trade for competent workmen in the district where the work is carried out ... It is hereby declared that the work, to which the foregoing policy shall apply, includes not only work undertaken by the government itself, but also works aided by grant of Dominion Public Funds.³⁶

To contextualize this intent more fully, it is evident that state policy was designed to address abuses which accompanied the contract system of industrial relations.³⁷ Such labour systems, which included both the contracting-out of manufacturing jobs to small capitalist workshops and directly to 'home-workers', were a common legacy of industrial development in Canada as elsewhere. The 'sweating' system, as it was generally known, in reference to the long hours of work involved and the cramped unsanitary conditions under which it was often performed, was particularly well lodged in the clothing and apparel industries, where it often predominated.³⁸

At the behest of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (TLC), an investigation into the sweating system in the Dominion was undertaken in 1895. The study focused on the clothing industries of urban Canada while the results of the report served as the basis for the subsequent formulation of state fair wage policy. Among other things, A.W. Wright, author of the report, found that the conditions of labour deteriorated rapidly in subcontracting situations, partly because such arrangements seldom included an actual labour contract.³⁹ Wright

³⁶Canada, House of Commons, *Debates* (Ottawa 1900), 2466.

³⁷*Debates*, 2468.

³⁸Canada, House of Commons, "Report Upon the Sweating System in Canada," (Ottawa, Sessional Paper no. 61, 1896).

³⁹"Sweating System," 8.

recommended extending the Factory Acts to include all businesses that involved the labour of individuals other than husband and wife, specifically noting that

the right of parents to work their children is not so indisputable and indefeasible nor of a nature so sacred that society is bound to take the risk of illiteracy and moral and physical deterioration in deference to it.⁴⁰

Through such provisions as work-shop and tenement licensing, the initiation of a manufacturer's lien law, which rendered factory owners ultimately responsible for payment of wages in sub-contracting situations and the identification of home produced items through the use of mandatory tags, it was envisaged that the contract system would be regulated into a condition of unprofitability.

In effect, however, 'The Report Upon the Sweating System' remained a dead letter. Instead, the state chose to act by example through proclamation of the Fair Wage Resolution and prior to this, in individual contracts signed between the post office and its suppliers. Critics justifiably pointed to the gratuitousness of the whole exercise. Notably, as a simple resolution or statement of intent, the Fair Wage measure countenance neither the machinery for determining what a fair wage was, nor the mechanisms for insuring compliance beyond the domain of state tendering. Further undermining this initiative was the legislators' failure to recognize that the issue of working hours was inherent in any attempt to define equity. Also of interest, due to its omission from the whole debate over fair wage policy, was the question of who would benefit from regulation. This silence is indeed instructive. The commissioned report on sweating identified the clothing, fur, shirt, and necktie industries as the chief beneficiaries of the contract system. Furthermore, it was observed that

the number of females employed in the ready-made clothing trade is relatively greater than the number of males, and as a consequence, as the production of ready-made clothing increases in comparison with the making of ordered or custom clothing, the number of female employees becomes proportionately greater than the number of males.⁴¹

Thus, while women workers were one of the most vulnerable sections of the labour force on account of their location in industries which made frequent use of the contracting system, there was no specific acknowledgement of this point in the fair wage program. The recipients of fair wage contracts would be determined solely by state purchasing requirements. As was the case, most of these orders were reserved for the building, construction, and allied trades through contracts with the Departments of Public Works and Railways and Canals. These were exclusively male bastions of employment. Contracts tendered by the Post Office and Department of Militia for uniforms, etc., did cover women workers, but the numbers here

⁴⁰"Sweating System," 17.

⁴¹"Sweating System," 11.

were small when compared with either total female employment in garment production, or with the numbers of male workers employed in construction.

In sum, this first fair wage plan did not offer adequate protection to any group of workers who could not win such through their own self-organization. Only once fair wages had been achieved through independent industrial action, and had been made into a *de facto* 'average,' was the state prepared to sanction their extension to greater numbers of workers, and only then in the limited circumstances that involved state purchasing contracts.⁴² In the plan's actual application and coverage, women workers, as a group, largely failed to significantly gain under the measure. Most of these workers simply were not covered. At the same time, in terms of the rate of exploitation, women workers in Canada were amongst the least protected of any strata. As detailed in the *Report* on sweating, such conditions resulted from the existing division of labour in industry and the over-representation of women in manufacturing concerns which entailed homework and subcontracting — features which were themselves derived from the historical development of capitalism in these industries. Ironically, in the absence of adequate wage packages, and as the author of the report on sweating foresaw, the employment of women in the growing mass production industries would most likely be intensified, as was indeed the case.

To what extent were these biases reproduced or enlarged upon in later political initiatives? The question becomes more complex as the levels and degree of state intervention in labour markets assumed new dimensions. Essentially, in the era following proclamation of the fair-wage principle, state policies in Canada exhibited several noteworthy departures. First, increasingly systematic attempts were made to operationalize the fair wage doctrine. In time, the principle was extended beyond a pious resolution and became part of the statute books for selected provincial authorities. Secondly, women were identified as a separate category of the workforce, and specific wage policies — minimum wages — were constructed around this recognition. These developments did not immediately issue from the Federal Fair Wage Resolution of 1900. Instead, fair wage and minimum wage orders alike were introduced at the provincial level during the tumultuous years of World War I, first in Manitoba under the auspices of a reform-oriented Liberal government (fair wages in 1916 and minimum wages in 1918, respectively) and shortly thereafter in the neighbouring jurisdictions of Saskatchewan and British Columbia.

The juxtaposition of fair wages and minimum wages calls attention to the construction of unequal gender relations. Again, while the fair wage principle ultimately was strengthened to include all workers in the industries covered, it was operationalized chiefly with respect to the construction trades. Minimum wages,

⁴² As Craven notes, "the notion of fairness implicit in demands of this sort [for fair wages] embraced the essential legitimacy of the capitalist social order, and in meeting them the state would be both reaffirming that legitimacy and fostering the image of itself as umpire." P. Craven, *'An Impartial Umpire': Industrial Relations and the Canadian State 1900-1911* (Toronto 1980), 191.

however, as adopted by the various state authorities, were to apply only to women workers. The issue that first arises is the extent to which a minimum wage was also a fair wage. In point of fact, it patently was not. Throughout summer and fall 1918, the first minimum wage rates were established for the province of Manitoba, (city of Winnipeg), at levels indicated in Table One. For comparative purposes, representative fair wage schedules are also included. Standardizing for hours worked, such evidence indicates that the minimum wages established for women workers ranged between one-half and two-thirds of the fair wage schedules that were adopted for a variety of manual male occupations. While some of this variation undoubtedly may reflect skill differences which are attached to the different job categories, it would strain credulity to judge that this factor alone accounts for all of the differentials. Thus, one would be hard pressed indeed to suggest that the nature of the work alone determines that employment in male dominated occupations (for example, common labourer, building labourer, teamster), is still remunerated, on average, at almost one-third more than employment in manufacturing sectors that rely mainly on female labour, (for example, the food industry) as Table One indicates. And while it is entirely legitimate to query why, for example, women were not employed in the construction trades in the first place, by and large this was not a question which contemporaries, (women or men), posed, nor does it resolve the problem of why minimum wages were deemed appropriate specifically

TABLE 1
Comparison of Minimum and Fair Wage Rates
Prevailing in Winnipeg, 1918 (Hourly Rates)

Minimum Wages		Fair Wages	
Laundries	18.2 cents	Common Labourer	30 cents
Foodstuff Production	20.8	Building Labourer	40
Retail Stores	24.2	Teamsters	35
Paper Box Factories	24.4	Painters	55
Soap Factories	20.8	Carpenters	60
Bag Factories	22.4 - 24.5	Carpenter's Helper	40
Confectionary Industry	20.4		
Average Rate	21.2	Average Rate	57.5

Sources: *Manitoba Gazette*, Winnipeg: King's Printer, 1919

for women workers, but inadequate for male dominated trades.⁴³ Clearly, to attribute this to a question of skill differential alone is inadequate. For one thing, it does not indicate why work of equal or near-equal value was in fact evaluated so unequally. Accounting for this variation entails more than a simple and immediate appeal to discriminatory state policies, although clearly they were implicated. Rather, the origins of wage regulation must be adequately located in the interests, pressures and counter-pressures which brought them about and later, determined the practical functioning of state wage boards.

Fair Wage legislation had always enjoyed labour movement support. The ineffectiveness of the original fair wage measures, however, had been vexatious. Now, against the backdrop of a general upsurge in industrial conflict occasioned by the war, a return to full employment, and high levels of inflation and profiteering, came renewed demands for an effective fair wage policy.⁴⁴ These were only partially successful. At the national level, the TLC failed to obtain an extension of fair wage clauses to the major growth sector in the economy, the metalwork shops associated with the armaments industry.⁴⁵ But in local settings, workers were more successful. In Manitoba, for instance, fair wages were restored to the agenda after it was realized that government contractors had been building fair wage recommendations into their contracts without necessarily paying them to their workforces. Contract scandals, such as the fiasco which surrounded the construction of government buildings in Manitoba, in which both workforces and the public purse had been misemployed, pushed forward the cause of mandatory fair way agreements which now enjoyed a measure of public support.

The case of minimum wage legislation is not so easily accounted for. In this instance, two differing theoretical orientations offer alternate historical constructions. First, there is the argument, previously encountered, that minimum wage provisions are an example of the protectionism that had been placed upon women in the labour force.⁴⁶ There is much that is suggestive in this line of reasoning. After all, minimum wage laws initially applied only to women workers. And undeniably, labour was suspicious of the rapid changes which wartime mobilization was

⁴³As Lewis notes in her study of working class women in Britain, women unionists for the most part did not challenge the existing occupational division of labour in industry. Rather the debate there, as well as in Canada focused on the adequacy of wages for the work that women did. Lewis, *Women in England, 1870-1950* (Sussex 1984), 172, 200-4.

⁴⁴For a statistical and narrative overview of this period and the general upswing in industrial militancy, see Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984), 11-44.

⁴⁵On this particular struggle see M. Siemiatycki, "Munitions and Labour Militancy," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), 131-51 and D. Bercuson, "Organized Labour and the Imperial Munitions Board," *Relations Industrielle/Industrial Relations*, 28, 3 (1973), 602-15.

⁴⁶For the Canadian case see for example, Strong-Boag, "New Day," which emphasizes the protectionist themes in minimum wage regulation.

bringing to the Canadian labour force, particularly the entry of women into industry on a vast new scale. The TLC, for example, was on record as calling upon

government for the protection of women who enter industries to replace men and that they only should be put there after full investigation has proved that all available man-power had been absorbed. That inspection of working conditions should be carried on at all times ... in conjunction with representatives of men's organizations [sic] as to the advisability of women undertaking any class of work (with a view of their responsibility towards the nation, as the mothers of our future citizens) should be a contingent condition of their employment in any industry.⁴⁷

It would be difficult to find a more explicit statement in favour of exclusion on so-called protectionist grounds. This, it should be added, represented a considerable modification of earlier TLC planks, which simply refused to countenance the entry of women into industrial life.⁴⁸ Yet chronologically at least, it can be argued that support for the minimum wage concept appeared only after organized labour had become resigned to the full-scale participation of women in the economy. Thus, whereas such participation previously had been held to threaten the existence of the family wage regime, once full employment had been obtained a new offensive by labour called for the extension to benefits to all workers. Symptomatic of this shift was the following candid admission that,

Female labor is so firmly entrenched in so many branches of industrial life that such a demand [as the exclusion of women from industry], is impossible of realization. Should not that principle be eliminated and one for 'equal pay for equal work' be inserted in its stead?⁴⁹

Although hardly suggestive of an underlying philosophical reorientation, clearly a pragmatic adaptation to labour-market restructuring was underway. Accordingly, in the debate over the minimum wage proposal among, for example, the Winnipeg Trade Labour Council, the family wage idea received short shrift as an 'old position,' 'heard of ... long ago,' but not in accord with contemporary social or economic realities.⁵⁰ All of this is indicative of the market-driven pragmatism which guided many of the positions adopted by the organized labour movement. Thus, when unemployment was a serious concern, as in the period prior to 1916 or again, as it was expected to be when the war ended, labour organizations did move towards gender exclusion in an avowedly sexist fashion. When opposite conditions

⁴⁷Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Gazette* (Ottawa 1918), 833. In fairness, it should also be noted that the same 1918 TLC resolution called for the political equality of women as well as a the guarantee of the "right of women to protect themselves through trade unions the same as men."

⁴⁸*The Voice*, 21 April 1916, 3.

⁴⁹*Voice*, 21 April 1916, 3.

⁵⁰*Voice*, 18 January 1918, 5.

of labour shortage prevailed, as they did during World War I when minimum wages were introduced, equality of working conditions was the goal sought. Given this pattern, it would be difficult to construe the legislation of gendered minimum wages as emanating principally from the trade union movement of the day. Clearly, trade union expectations — ‘custom and practice’ — did constitute part of the larger environment in which wage provisions were legislated. But recognizing this is not to impute sole responsibility for the final results, a politically sanctioned system of gendered wages, to the trade union movement. While the TLC’s frequent shifts on the issue of women and work, and of equality versus exclusion were not especially helpful to the interests of female wage-earners, the organized labour movement cannot claim sole responsibility for authoring the minimum wage system via support for labour market dualism.

Nor was labour’s passive acceptance of novel conditions the only force at work in the adoption of minimum wages. Most definitely, a concern with protectionism entered the picture at other levels as well. Witness, for example, the rationale used to promote the investigation into the industrial conditions facing the women of working-class Winnipeg which preceded the minimum wage initiative. Old themes, including the poor physical condition of the male labour force which recruitment examinations for the armed forces had uncovered and ‘the need to assure the well-being of future mothers’ again made their appearance in the commissioning of the investigation.⁵¹ The report, which canvassed 228 businesses employing over 9,000 women, was conducted by the Manitoba Bureau of Labour at the instigation of labour representatives in the Legislature. Tabled as an unpublished sessional paper, it provides a thorough industrial census of existing wage rates for women workers, estimates of the contemporary cost of living, and some detailed notes taken from participant observation in work settings on the part of the investigators. Reviewing the findings, a sympathetic Secretary of the Labour Bureau found that:

From the report, there can be only one conclusion arrived at, i.e. that no matter what the causes determining wages are, the earnings of women in industry, in a great many cases, are hardly enough for subsistence, and the striking fact is that the great majority of women employed in industrial plants are over the age of 18 years. The question arises, should not something be done to change or improve these conditions?⁵²

It is unlikely, however, that the conditions which were disclosed by this investigation represented a totally unfamiliar situation. Rather, concerns over women’s working conditions spawned a report which, in turn, legitimated existing concerns and proposals for remedy. To this extent, the investigation was not

⁵¹*Voice*, 9 March 1917, 1.

⁵²Manitoba, Department of Public Works, “Return to an Order of the House,” Unpublished Session Paper no. 27, 7 February 1918, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM).

'innocent.' The more important question, however, involves the originating motivations or concerns.

Social protectionism was certainly among them, but it was not the only factor at work. First, taken by itself, the protection-exclusion argument tends to discount the active role assumed by women workers in bettering their own conditions. In doing so, more influence is imputed to male trade unionists than was actually exercised. Secondly, the results that obtained from *minimum wage* legislation do not confirm the exclusion part of the thesis. That is, the minimum wage did not lead to a significant decline in labour force participation by women or a substitution of other workers for women, precisely because their wages still remained minimal. Let us examine each of these points in greater detail.

Examining the historical record, a less ambiguous case can be made for explaining the advent of wage regulation by referring directly to the dynamic role of women's struggles in Canadian industry. What is indeed impressive, although too often neglected, in the upsurge of labour militancy that accompanied the war is the unique role played by working class women in these developments. A simple catalogue of events is both insightful and not out of place in this respect. Thus, the following should be considered, not so much as a chain of haphazard events, but as an expression of a consequential historical moment.

Between summer 1916 and the passage of the Manitoba minimum wage bill in 1918, three well-publicized strikes involving women workers were organized and conducted in the Winnipeg region. Two of these disputes also involved female leadership while one was a province-wide show of strength. In addition, another four new industries, involving primarily women employees, were organized into unions. As part of this general upsurge, an overarching organization, the Women's Labour League (WLL) was born, while during the same period women won the right to vote and hold provincial office.

A number of these flashpoints can be directly related to the advent of minimum wages for women. The Women's Labour League, for example, a broad organization embracing women unionists along with the wives and daughters of trade unionists and sympathizers, announced its formation through the intention: "To protect the women workers of Winnipeg from an inadequate wage and extreme working hours through the organization of the workers and through such legislation as the Minimum Wage and the Eight-Hour Day."⁵³ Henceforth, the WLL became an active lobbyist for the cause of minimum wage legislation for women workers. Coincident with the formation of a 'labour central' for working-class women was the expansion of trade union organization to new layers of the female labouring population. This included extension into the communication sector (telephone operators), as well as organization among retail workers, laundry, hotel and household workers, and expansion into other sectors of the industrial proletariat

⁵³*Voice*, 23 March 1917, 8.

(for example, workers in knitting and paper-bag factories). As Winnipeg's labour paper summarily stated it in the spring of 1917, "The Labour Temple is no longer a masculine preserve."⁵⁴

The organization of women workers was immediately related to attempts at improving working conditions for the growing numbers of women who were entering the labour force during the war. In these efforts, the achievements of the telephone workers were the most spectacular. Growing from a local of some 300 female employees to a province-wide organization in a matter of two months, the telephone workers staged a highly visible May Day strike in spring 1917 to forward their demands for a new wage schedule. This show of resolve, which directly involved the day shift of 500 workers, impelled the intervention by a provincial conciliation board, which subsequently raised wages by an immediate 14 per cent and by over 70 per cent in a four-year contract.⁵⁵ In effect, the initial increase to \$40 per month became an explicit benchmark for the \$10 per week minimum wage which was adopted subsequently by such organizations as the Women's Labour League. Pointedly, state officials acknowledged that with the aid of the information that the conciliation inquiry into the telephone strike produced, "the provincial legislature will, at its next session, enact a law calling for a wage for female labour below which any employer will not be allowed to go."⁵⁶

One need not refer only to the successful disputes in order to gauge the impact of women workers' mobilization on state policy. On the heels of the telephone strike, 52 women employed by the F.W. Woolworth Co. of Winnipeg struck for higher wages and recognition of their newly created union. Once again, connections were drawn between this one incident and broader concerns. As reported in the local press, "The girls (sic) are not only winning a better wage for themselves, they are stirring up the public conscience to the realization that higher rates of wages for girls have got to prevail all through."⁵⁷ In this instance, the strikers' immediate objectives were not met. A wage increase from \$6 to \$8 a week was rejected by the workers as no allowance was made for union representation. Subsequently, rejection of the company's offer served as a pretext for securing an injunction and replacing the striking employees. This did not occur, however, before the strike had gained broad based financial and symbolic support from the community. In turn, the demise of the strike served as a launching pad for a new union of retail clerks, which placed the attainment of a provincial minimum wage high on its agenda.⁵⁸

None of this was lost on state officials. Strikes such as those conducted by the telephone workers and retail clerks of Manitoba, as well as the support which they

⁵⁴*Voice*, 25 May 1917, 8.

⁵⁵*Voice*, 1 June 1917, 8.

⁵⁶*Voice*, 18 May 1917, 8.

⁵⁷*Voice*, 1 June 1917, 8.

⁵⁸*Voice*, 22 June 1917, 8.

generated from the public, were impressive reminders of the grievances which had accumulated with Canadian industrialization. Nor was the connection between inadequate incomes and the unrest lost upon would-be reformers. Writing confidentially in support of a minimum wage policy to the Manitoba authorities, Mrs. Ralph Smith of British Columbia, a noted social reformer, stated the case in a manner which was bound to register with political officials: "if we, of the Western Provinces, can do anything to make it easier for our people and, at the same time, raise the standard in the East, we will do much towards doing away with the present industrial unrest."⁵⁹ In the immediate context, a minimum wage law was viewed as an acceptable price to pay for industrial harmony.

Given the important initiating forces which woman's struggles for adequate incomes exerted in the adoption of a minimum wage program, the practical effects of this measure still need to be identified. While higher wages for women were the professed target, there is no reason to assume their automatic realization. It could be argued just as easily, for example, that minimum wage provisions had unintended displacement effects: that by bidding up the price of female labour, male labour was hired on in substitution. Yet, the evidence at our disposal does not suggest that this occurred. Table Two examines the major sectors of Winnipeg's urban economy that were covered by the minimum wage provisions both prior to and following their enactment. The pattern is unambiguous. Only one sector — the laundries — demonstrates a downward trend in female employment. However, it is most likely that this reflects the decline in personal service employment that went hand in hand with the first stages of mechanization in the household. Alternatively, increases in female employment in three other sectors — the food, clothing, and retail industries — more than outweigh the losses in personal service employment. Minimum wage laws seemingly did not detract from the employment of women workers following their passage.⁶⁰

It would be misleading, however, to let the argument stand as is. Clearly, while some of the most exploited women workers were successful in their bid to force an increase in wages, and while this did not impact negatively upon labour force participation rates, it was a success, which requires strong qualification. As previously observed, women's wages, under the minimum wage provisios, still fell far short of male wages for unskilled labour. This raises the second point of concern: how to account for the silences and limitations which were placed upon the establishment of a regulated wage. A return to the comparison between fair wages and minimum wages provides a useful metric from which to start.

⁵⁹Mrs R. Smith to Premier W.M. Martin: Martin Papers, SAB, MR I102.

⁶⁰See also Jane Humpheries' interesting study in the altogether different context of the British coalmining industry, "Protective Legislation, the Capitalist State and Working Class Men," *Feminist Review*, 7 (1981), 1-32.

TABLE 2
Employment of Women Workers Prior to and
Following Minimum Wage Laws: Winnipeg

Industrial Sector	1917	1921	Percentage Change
Food	289	369	26.6
Clothing	908	933	2.7
Retailing	1362	2023	48.5
Laundries	369	141	-61.0

Sources: Manitoba Sessional Paper No. 27, 1918, (unpublished), Provincial Archives of Manitoba; Sixth Census of Canada, 1921, Vol. 4, Ottawa: King's Printer

The Wage Boards

FORMALLY, THE MECHANISMS which were established for fixing wages, either fair or minimum, were the same in both cases. This entailed following a tripartist procedure. With fair wage adjudication in Manitoba, a three-member board representing labour, capital, and a non-affiliated chair were appointed. The board was empowered to convene public meetings to gather information, subpoena witnesses, etc. Recommendations for fair wage contracts, including wage schedules and hours of labour, were then forwarded to the Minister of Public Works for final approval. This process was regularly renewed each year.

In appearance, determination of minimum wages followed a similar pattern. The wage board was expanded to five members, so as to include both gender and class representation.⁶¹ Again the board was empowered to conduct public investigations or summon witnesses for the purpose of fixing minimum wages, maximum working hours, and standards for working conditions. As such orders were legally binding, it can be argued that the minimum wage board possessed greater potential powers than the Fair Wage Directorate, which could only make recommendations. The intriguing question then is why this potential went unrealized. Why were gendered wage disparities not eliminated through the newly-devised wage boards?

Part of the answer to these questions must be sought by examining wage regulation as an active, dynamic process, which was historically contextualized. Under its mandate, the provincial Fair Wage Board (FWB) was to set wages on government contracts that were concordant with either the preceding twelve month

⁶¹Thus, the board's composition was as follows: two labour representatives, including one woman; two business representatives, including one woman; and an unaffiliated chairperson.

occupational average, if such had been established, or that paralleled the wage offer of 'good' employers. In other words, fair wages were tied to, and specifically tracked, the market rates that labour was able to enforce through collective organization. This could work to the advantage or disadvantage of workers depending upon existent market conditions. In the first round of Manitoba hearings in 1916, an hourly base-rate of 25 cents was offered by the Builders' Exchange, while labour officials countered with a suggestion of 32.5 cents.⁶² Specifically, noting the upward movement in construction wages over the preceding year, the Bureau of Labour moved to adopt a 30-cent schedule. These practices were reinforced in subsequent years. During 1917-18, the board did little more than ratify increases that had already been conceded to the unions through private negotiations with the employer. Thus, in the FWB's second year of operation, an impasse in board deliberations was broken only with the settlement of a building labourer's strike, which established the rate of increase for that year. In short, FWB practices rested upon a pre-existing collective bargaining process, which set the terms of condition for the labour contract. These were then sanctioned and extended through the actions of the FWB.

With minimum wage settlement, this frame of reference was largely absent. Counted amongst the intended recipients of minimum wages were the lowest-paid and most-exploited elements of the labour force — generally the non-unionized or those who had been organized only recently. Any notion of applying average wage rates or wages comparable to those offered by good employers, as in the charter of the Fair Wage Board, would have been completely out of place, for had such conditions existed initially, minimum wage legislation would not have been necessary. As a result, from the first consideration of minimum wage legislation, debate focused on the *form* that settlement of the wage question should assume. Spokepersons for women and labour, including the Women's Labour League, the Local Council of Women and the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council desired the establishment of a flat-rate minimum, applicable to all adult female workers. Business, on the other hand, wanted a separate wage board with rates set individually for occupations and localities across the province. This procedure, it was argued, was more amendable to 'scientific' investigation and regulation.

Through a somewhat fortuitous set of circumstances, the latter solution prevailed and an industry-by-industry approach was adopted in setting wage schedules. Disaffection was not long in setting in. Advocates of the minimum wage initially called for a \$10-weekly flat rate, the same schedule that had been won in the telephone strike. In a number of industries, this was extended, but in others it was reduced. Furthermore, where the \$10 minimum was introduced, it was attached to variable working hours (48-52 hours a week) and often represented a 'maximum-minimum.' That is, the \$10-rate applied only to adult workers of sufficient

⁶²*Voice*, 11 August 1916, 8.

experience. Those who were under 18 years of age and those who had not completed the required training periods (in some cases up to 18 months duration as in the knitting and glove making trades) were paid a 'minimum wage,' that was less than the minimum wage.⁶³ Under the regulations, such employees could legally constitute up to one-half of any employer's workforce.⁶⁴ These provisos gave rise to numerous possibilities for manipulation and undercutting, which did not exist with the fair wage schedules. Symptomatic of the problems are the complaints of one member of the Manitoba Board who was deluged

by letters from girls [sic] who were not getting the fixed minimum. Girls were required to serve two years as apprentices and then still another year as adult apprentices. It was true that the Minimum Wage Board had said that no employer should have more than 25 percent of their staff as apprentices. But they used this clause to their own advantage by moving girls from one department to another or by dismissing them and hiring others to avoid paying the full rate.⁶⁵

Without doubt, the complexity of the minimum wage regulations gave rise to problems of enforcement. As compared with fair wage provisions many more industries were covered, while greater numbers of employers and more employee categories within occupations were included under the terms of reference. In response to these issues, after one year of minimum wage regulation in Manitoba, the Women's Labour League came out in support of a flat schedule of \$12 per week to cover all categories of female labour. Implied in the demand was the dismantling of the minimum wage board and the method of regulation overseen by it. This initiative in turn precipitated a split with the Trades and Labour Council, which also supported a flat rate, but was unwilling to divorce from the Minimum Wage Board (MWB) until the realization of the more universalistic alternative. Inevitably, this strategic difference was to pose the question of who represented the interests and spoke on behalf of the minimum waged workers. Nominally, it was the Trades and Labour Council, but when strategic differences emerged between itself and the Women's Labour League, the issue became contentious. Not all, or even a majority of the workers covered under the Minimum Wage Act were

⁶³Manitoba Statutes, (Winnipeg, 27 July 1918 — 1 February 1919). The reasons offered for lengthy training periods often were only a pretext for reducing the minimum wage, as witnessed in the following argument constructed by a representative of the Retail Merchants Association before the Saskatchewan Minimum Wage Board: "They considered 18 months was not a sufficient lapse of time for sale ladies to become thoroughly efficient. Retailing is a science [sic]. At the end of 18 months, employees were really just becoming familiar with the line of merchandise." Saskatchewan Minimum Wage Board, Minute Book, 11 January 1923: SAB.

⁶⁴McCallum, "Keeping," notes that similar loopholes were written into the 1920 Ontario minimum wage legislation.

⁶⁵*Voice*, 21 March 1919, 1.

organized. Thus, the structural linkages between the Trades and Labour Council and the workers covered under the minimum wage negotiation process remained ambiguous. In the end, tripartist forms of determination were bound to produce even greater disempowerment when modes of representation were obscure or weak as was the case with the labour movement and the minimum wage earners.

On the other hand, many of these issues were obviated in fair wage negotiation. Standards were not to be set, but rather were only to be maintained in congruence with average conditions as established between workers' organizations and employers' associations. When the Fair Wage Board was expanded in 1917 to include members of the Building Trades Council and the Builders Exchange, the question of representation was completely foreclosed. The fair wage question had been converted into an exercise in centralized bargaining between an employer's association and a council of trade unions in the construction trades. A similar exercise simply was not possible in the more diffuse situation of minimum wage regulation, which covered many industries and most importantly, a largely unorganized labour force.

Similar experiences can be detailed for the Saskatchewan Minimum Wage Board, which was chartered along the same lines as the Manitoba Board, but one year later and for which more complete records have been preserved.⁶⁶ Repeating the Manitoba experience, the question of establishing a flat rate versus an adjudicating tribunal was debated. The problems associated with the Manitoba minimum wage already must have made an impression. The Saskatoon Trades Council, in making its representation on proposed legislation, came out "against the passing of a Minimum Wage Law, which has the Manitoba one for a basis,"⁶⁷ and instead supported a \$15-weekly flat rate. Despite this opposition, the same board-structure was adopted in Saskatchewan as elsewhere. Examination of the board's minute book confirms the problems of standards-setting and representation alluded to above.

Canvassing opinion on an appropriate minimum wage level, responses to the Saskatchewan board ranged from a low of \$10 a week (proffered by a merchant retailer) to a high of \$18 (Retail Clerks Association), with most recommendations falling within the \$15-\$16 a week band. Rates of \$14-\$15 were eventually adopted by the Board for experienced, adult workers in a range of occupations. These rates, however, marked a high point. During the next few years, minimum wage levels and working conditions alike were whittled back in the concerted employer's

⁶⁶One important difference did exist between the Manitoba and Saskatchewan boards. While the Manitoba legislation specifically required formal representation of labour and capital on the board, the Saskatchewan law only mandated a five-person directorate without additional specification.

⁶⁷Secretary A. Eddy, Saskatoon Trades Council, to Premier W. Martin: Martin Papers, SAB.

offensive which followed the war.⁶⁸ Reflected in the Saskatchewan board's deliberations, it is impossible to detect stable voting coalitions among the board's members, let alone a voting pattern which in any way could be defined as a defense of the interests of the minimum waged. Thus, during the first few years of its operation, the record chronicles five divisions over contentious policy issues, but on only two occasions were the same voting coalitions exhibited. In four out of the five divisions, the verdict went squarely against the interests of the women covered under the act.⁶⁹

In one sense though, much of this still begs the question. Why were women workers inadequately represented under the minimum wage legislation? Without doubt, the minimum wage provisos did distort the original demands of women and the labour movement by distinguishing between different age and experience categories of worker as well as different industries. Given this, however, it must be recalled that the minimum wage demands of such groups as the Women's Labour League and the various labour councils in western Canada, and the actual schedules established by the Manitoba and Saskatchewan boards, did not exhibit wide discrepancies. In Manitoba, a flat rate of \$10 was requested and in most industries, following investigation and hearings, a \$10-minimum was extended. A year later, when the Women's Labour League's disaffection with the Minimum Wage Board was nearing completion, representatives of the former organization called for the establishment of a universal \$12-minimum. As others had pointed out, however, the board had complied with this rate in its most recent decisions. What appears to have transpired then was a debate which focused more on form than on content: that is, on whether minimum wages would be extended on a piecemeal basis, with numerous exceptions, or through a uniform design. While far from unimportant, what is extraordinary is the absence of a thorough debate on the substantive issue of what rate was an appropriate, sufficient, or fair wage. The issue of representation in determining of minimum wages both masked and was symptomatic of a deeper problem.

When charged by the Bureau of Labour's investigation to offer recommendations for a base minimum wage rate, representatives of Manitoba's Women's Labour League suggested wages in the \$10 to \$12 range. As succinctly stated by one respondent,

I consider Twelve Dollars per week necessary as a minimum wage for women over 18 years: and \$10 for girls from 14 to 18 as the younger need nearly as much as the older women if she is entirely dependent upon herself. (my emphasis)⁷⁰

⁶⁸By 1924, the minimum wage for the various classes of employee covered in the Saskatchewan orders stood at a lower level than that which had initially been set in 1919, while hours of work had been systematically extended.

⁶⁹Saskatchewan Minimum Wage Board, Minute Book, *passim*.

⁷⁰Manitoba, Department of Public Works, Sessional Paper No. 27, 1918.

This is an interesting way of phrasing the problem, which can be extended to cover two hypothetical cases. Either the recipient of the minimum wage is not 'entirely dependent upon herself,' or else she is assumed to be totally independent in the sense that she has no dependents. In either case, a definition of the family, which invokes male headship, figures as the implicit benchmark for establishing a minimum wage. In other words, in the one scenario of self-dependence, the possibility of female-headed households (with dependent members — children, elderly, etc.) is excluded. In the second instance, financial support through the earnings of a father or husband is assumed. Residually, minimum wages were designed only to cover the 'transitory anomalies' (that is, temporary, single female wage earners), which fell outside the scope of the patriarchal household.⁷¹

At exactly the same time as the first minimum wages were being pegged, spokespersons for the building trades put forward the following interesting appeal in support of a higher fair wage schedule for their membership:

A bricklayer getting 80s cent an hour for an 8 hour day makes only \$6.40 in a day. He would do pretty well if he gets 150 full days' work in a season. That will give him only \$960 — little enough to keep a family under present conditions of living.⁷² (my emphasis)

In this instance, and undoubtedly in many more, an equivalent assumption as informed the setting of minimum wages was explicitly denied. This factor — the assumption of family support through the male breadwinner — plus, the organizational power to struggle realistically for such a norm, accounts for the divergences in fair and minimum wages. Thus, ideally, the fair wage was to be a family wage, while it was unthinkable to all of the actors involved in the formulation of minimum wage policy that it should ever allow for more than the most immediate reproduction costs of the single earner.

Having recorded the distinct reference points with which fair and minimum wages were set, it is also crucially important to recognize that the family wage was an ideal which clearly was not omnipresent in the Canadian economy. This was demonstrated by a study undertaken by the British Columbia Minimum Wage Board a few years after the introduction of minimum wages for women in that province. The BC study examined the household status of minimum wage recipients and found that approximately one-quarter of the population covered by minimum wage provisions either were married women or widows (19 and 4 per

⁷¹In a similar fashion, Lewis has also noted tendencies for such groups as the British Women's Trade Union League and the Women's Labour League to take the family wage ideal as an uncritical benchmark. J. Lewis, "The Working Class Wife and Mother and State Intervention," in J. Lewis, ed., *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family 1850-1940* (Oxford 1986), 106. Similarly, she finds that for the most part British women unionists did not challenge the existing gender based occupational division of labour in industry. *Women in England*, 172, 204.

⁷²*Voice*, 12 April 1918, 1.

cent respectively). Figures for the different sectors covered under the minimum wage articles are detailed in Table Three.⁷³ Clearly, for a significant proportion of Canadian workers, female and male, the assumption of a family wage level and the premising of minimum wages upon it was a dubious assumption.⁷⁴

TABLE 3
 Marital Status of Minimum Wage Employees,
 British Columbia, 1925

Industry	% of Married Female Employees
Laundry and Dry Cleaning	31.1
Public House Keeping	30.5
Fishing Industry	39.1
Fruit and Vegetable Industry	44.8
Telephone and Telegraph	3.9
Clerical	8.1
Mercantile	16.5
Manufacturing	17.0
Personal Service	24.3

Source: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Minimum Wages, File MG14 B36

Conclusions

WHILE CONCERNS with the conditions of women workers, or social protectionism, did play a role in western Canadian state wage-policy, there is no evidence that such policies were a cloak to exclude women from the labour market. In this instance, social protectionism was not equivalent to exclusion; nor did it lead to this result, as some earlier analysts of state protective legislation (for example,

⁷³British Columbia's minimum wage was also administered by a minimum wage board, composed of men and women who represented different economic interests. The act's provisions were applied to the main occupational groupings in Table Three.

⁷⁴Piva also notes a steady increase in the number of married women in the labour force from 1900 onwards. This phenomena was clearly related to the inadequacies of existing wage levels and the need for additional household income. As Piva notes, "It was only with a second wage earner that the family could earn enough weekly to rise above the poverty line." Piva, *Condition*, 43. That the family wage was only a ideal rather than a reality is also stressed by Land, "The Family Wage," 57, and *passim*, and by Lewis, "The Working Class Wife and Mother," 102-3, and in *Women in England*, 47-8, 57.

factory laws) have suggested. If anything, the legislation and payment of minimum wages continued to make female employment an option sought after by Canadian employers. At the same time, a one-sided focus on social protectionism detracts from the significant economic and political struggles that women workers in western Canada engaged in as part of the effort at improving upon their material circumstances: efforts, we might add, which were undermined by state policy on wages.

The role of the trade unions on gender and wage policy was mixed. During the period in which minimum wages were adopted, there is little evidence to indicate that the trade unions actively pursued or effected a policy of industrial exclusion. On the other hand, under conditions of wartime mobilization such policies would have been futile, as the Trades and Labour Congress explicitly recognized. If anything, the unions showed themselves to be relatively pragmatic institutions which adapted to the altered labour market circumstances. Part of this strategy took the form of supporting women workers in their quest for improved wages and working conditions by supporting, and participating in, the minimum wage boards. Significantly, this came once a state of full employment had been attained. Given this, the major problem faced by women workers was that they were not yet organized in trade unions, and for this the trade union movement of the day must bear a considerable measure of responsibility. Ultimately, women workers were able, through their resistance, to take advantage of the favourable economic conditions that were presented by the war effort and full employment. But once set in motion, control over the contents of reform was quickly ceded to state officials and other groups, including labour organizations, that did not have strong organic links with the minimum wage earners. The differences that developed between the Women's Labour League and the Winnipeg Labour Council over the operation of the Manitoba Minimum Wage Board, was one particularly clear example of this dynamic.

Dominant ideologies concerning the issue of gender relations were important in determining final results, *but* only insofar as they permeated important struggles between women workers, women's groups, trade unions, employers and the state. Such ideologies as the 'family wage norm' were rooted in specific material relationships of production and reproduction which were staunchly defended by existing social policy. In this, as in other arenas of civil society (for example, capital/labour relations) public policy gave effect to and sanctioned a specific regime of social reproduction which limited the emergence of true alternatives. Crucial to its accomplishment, however, was the existence of a dominant ideology, which included amongst other things, the acceptance of family forms premised upon an existent division of labour by the actual participants themselves. This assigned reproductive tasks to married women in households and the best wage opportunities to men in paid employment. State policies were not intended to disturb this division, but rather to solidify it by providing minimal incomes to the increasing number of workers who fell outside of the ideal — in this instance, single working

women. Gendered wage policies, therefore, were both an indication of the growing presence of women in industry, rather than their exclusion from it, and an expression of the absence of a socialist feminist presence in industry.

As to the rhetorical question of who benefitted from this state of affairs: minimum wages, as the term implies, did represent a minimal improvement over that which had passed before. They also represented a further entrenchment of wage discrimination on the basis of gender within the Canadian economy. Finally, they were predicated upon an ideological vision of the family insofar as not all male wages were family wages and not all minimum wage earners were single women. Given these realities, it is difficult to construe how gendered wages could rebound to the advantage of a very significant proportion of the Canadian working class.

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