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RESEARCH REPORTS/ NOTES DE RECHERCHE

Times Were Hard: The Pattern of Women's Paid Labour in St. John's Between the Two World Wars

Nancy M. Forestell

"I LEFT WORK when I married William. By that time I was twenty, tired of working at the factory, and glad to be making a home for us."[1] With these words, Mary described the transition in her life from "working girl" to married woman. One stage in her life ended and another began. Born on 31 October 1900, this daughter of a Southside St. John's fisherman and his wife became a wage earner at the age of fifteen. Mary went to work at the city's Newfoundland Knitting Company factory on Alexander Street, sewing knitted garments for $4.00 a week. She gave most of her earnings to her widowed father to help feed and clothe the family. Within two years, she left the knitting mill for the White Clothing Company factory on Duckworth Street where she worked in the pants department, sewing zippers into trousers for a wage of $6.50 a week. After her marriage in 1920 to William, a presser at the White Clothing Company, Mary never set foot in a factory again. She did, however, earn money throughout her early married life by sewing and cleaning, as well as by wallpapering rooms for relatives, friends, and neighbours to supplement her husbands's meager income. She accomplished these tasks while raising her eight children. Mary's eldest daughter, Dorothy, started work at the Browning-Harvey confectionery factory in 1934 at age twelve. Although Mary did not want her daughter labouring long hours in a factory at such a young age, she realized that Dorothy's earnings were essential to the family. On more than one occasion, her daughter's wage of $3.50 a week had to sustain the household because William

[1]Interview with Mary N., May 1986.

Nancy M. Forestell, "Times Were Hard: The Pattern of Women's Paid Labour in St. John's Between the Two World Wars," *Labour/Le Travail*, 24 (Fall 1989), 147-166.

could find only casual employment, and domestic responsibilities prevented Mary from carrying out some type of paid labour.[2]

Mary's life experience was similar to that of many other women in St. John's during the 1920s and 1930s. Full-time, paid employment outside the home was just a temporary interlude for most between leaving school and getting married. It was part of one stage in their life cycles. While some wage-earning women came from middle-class backgrounds and pursued employment in such occupations as teaching, nursing, or office work, the majority came from working-class backgrounds. For these women, the small wages they earned as domestics, factory operatives, tailoresses or sales clerks, were often an important contribution to the financial support of their families. Once wage-earning women decided to get married, it was fully understood that they would leave their place of employment. Women seldom considered that they would ever have to return to wage labour after marriage, for they expected that their husbands would assume the role of breadwinner and earn a "family wage" while they took on the role of homemaker.[3] Such notions often proved to be the ideal rather than the reality. For many women, their husbands' earnings were insufficient to support their families, and as a result, they had to find some means to earn additional money in order to maintain their households. This paid work usually was performed at home and combined with domestic duties as well as childcare. In certain circumstances such as unemployment, illness, or death of the primary male wage-earner, a small number of women did return to the work force as full-time wage earners. Whether as a daughter or a wife, the decision of an individual woman to seek wage labour was most often linked inextricably with the well-being of her family.

This paper examines the pattern of women's paid labour in St. John's during the 1920s and 1930s. Particular emphasis is placed on changes in women's life cycles as they affected their participation in the city's work force. The argument is made that a woman's age, marital status, and class background were the most important factors in determining whether she worked outside the home or engaged in some form of paid labour within the household. A number of other related factors (including number of children, stage of the family cycle, as well as age and religion) are considered, however, in terms of their impact on women's labour-force participation and the type of work they performed.

I

THE 1920S AND 1930S were years of tremendous political upheaval and unceasing economic depression in the Dominion of Newfoundland.[4] In St. John's, the

[2]Interview with Dorothy F., May 1986.

[3]For a discussion of the concept of the family wage see M. Barrett and M. McIntosh, "The Family Wage: Some Problems for Socialists and Feminists," *Capital and Class*, 2 (Summer 1980), 51-72; H. Land, "The Family Wage," *Feminist Review*, 6 (1980), 55-77.

[4]See P. Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949* (Kingston 1988); J. Overton,

unemployment rate was high, and many of those with jobs received low wages and worked only a portion of the year.[5] Despite poor economic conditions, women not only remained in the labour force, but their participation actually increased from 21.4 per cent in 1921 to 26 percent in 1935.[6] The number of women in wage employment rose 36.5 per cent from 2,822 to 3,866 (see Table 1).[7] An increase in work-force participation by women occurred in most North American urban centres during the 1930s because so many men, especially those of the working class, received such small wages, or could not find any steady work.[8] This made it imperative that their daughters and wives engage in some type of paid labour. In fact, women sometimes found it easier to secure waged employment than the men in their families because of the greater availability of jobs that were stereotyped as women's work.[9] Men would not even have considered taking such positions. Women were relegated primarily to jobs as saleswomen, typists, garment workers, and domestic servants. This last occupation accounted for more than a third of the

"Public Relief and Social Unrest in Newfoundland in the 1930s: An Evaluation of Piven and Cloward," in G.S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology*, (St. John's 1988), 143-69; D. Alexander, "Newfoundland's Traditional Economy and Development to 1934," *Acadiensis*, 5 (1976), 56-78.

[5]For a more detailed discussion of the local economic context of women's wage employment in St. John's, N. Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour in St. John's Between the Two World Wars," M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1987, ch. 2.

[6]Census of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1921, 1935 (Nominal). Their participation rate was significant although slightly less than that of most Canadian cities during those decades. See, Canada, *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921*, Volume IV (Ottawa 1929), Table 5; Canada, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, Volume VII (Ottawa 1942), Tables 41 and 57. It seems probable that women in St. John's lagged a little behind their counterparts elsewhere because of the structure of the local economy, with its heavy reliance upon the waterfront where male workers were exclusively employed; moreover, the secondary manufacturing sector which employed a substantial proportion of women was in a constant state of crisis.

[7]The figures provided in the text and tables of this article are derived from the Newfoundland manuscript census records for 1921 and 1935. It should be noted that the figures provided in Table 2 and Table 8 do not represent the entire population; rather, they are taken from a sample of every third household containing a working woman. For a discussion of the methodology used, Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour," Appendices A, B, and C.

[8]There has been some debate in the American literature on the impact of the Depression on working women. Alice Kessler-Harris and Susan Ware argue that in spite of public resistance to the employment of women, particularly those who were married, the Depression solidified their position in the work force. See A. Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United Sates* (New York 1982), 250-70; S. Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston 1982.) Other historians such as Lois Scharf stress that no substantial gains were made by working women. Instead, they view the Depression as a time of hostility and discriminatory practices, as well as diminished employment options. See, L. Scharf, *To Work or to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, Conn. 1980).

[9]Kessler-Harris has suggested that the segregation of women into specific female occupations creates an inflexibility in the labour market which prevents their expulsion during an economic crisis, thus refuting the theory that women form a "reserve army." Kessler-Harris found that during the Great Depression women in the U.S. were actually less affected than men by the contraction of the labour force. See Kessler-Harris, "Women's Work and Economic Crisis: Some Lessons of the Great Depression," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 8, (1976), 73-97.

female labour force in 1921 and again in 1935.[10] The majority of women continued to be blue-collar workers as opposed to white-collar workers.

TABLE 1
Occupation Groups — Female Labour Force 1921 and 1935

Occupation Groups	*1921*		*1935*	
	N	Per cent	N	Per cent
Proprietor	78	2.8	139	3.6
Professional	285	10.1	453	11.7
Office Work	433	5.3	592	15.3
Retail Work	445	15.8	498	12.9
Service	1100	39.0	1607	41.6
Semi-skilled	181	6.4	104	2.7
Unskilled	300	10.6	473	12.2
	2822	100.0	3866	100.0

Unlike men, women's labour-force participation in the inter-war period was directly related to their age, and more importantly, to their marital status. In general, female workers can be characterized as being young and single. The majority of working women in St. John's at this time were between the ages of 15 and 24 (see Table 2). More than two-thirds of the female wage-earners fell within this age group in 1921, and over 56 per cent in 1935. As these figures indicate, however, a noticeable reduction did occur in the proportion of working women under 25, particularly those between 15 and 19; the latter age group accounted for 32.1 per cent of working women sampled in 1921, but only 16.9 per cent in 1935. This shift towards slightly older workers resulted from single women remaining longer in the labour force because of the bleak economic conditions, and from the rising participation of married women who tended to be older than their single counterparts. Another reason for this shift can be attributed to changes in the city's female population as a whole. Between 1921 and 1935, a reduction occurred in the number of females in the age group 15 to 19, while a sizeable increase happened in the age group 20 to 24.[11] This trend should not be over-emphasized, because women between fifteen and twenty-four continued to represent a substantial proportion of the city's wage-earning women. It should be mentioned that wage-earning women in St. John's tended to be younger than those elsewhere.[12] The youthfulness of the

[10]The proportion of women in domestic service in St. John's during the inter-war period was much higher than that found in any Canadian city. Lack of other job opportunities in St. John's seems to account for the large number of domestics employed there.

[11]In 1921, young women 15 to 19 numbered 2,421, and in 1935, 2,331. Women ages 20 to 24 numbered 2,286 in 1921 and 2,727 in 1935.

[12]See, Canada, *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921*, Volume IV; Canada, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*,

St. John's female labour force was due to the disproportionate number of young women living in the city, as well as the absence of child labour and compulsory education laws in Newfoundland.[13] Women's marital status had an even greater influence on whether they worked or not. Most women worked for a relatively brief period until they married. Single women constituted 93 per cent of the female labour force in 1921, and 91.2 per cent in 1935 (see Table 2). Perhaps the best evidence of the connection between age and marital status as factors affecting women's entry into the work force can be found by cross-tabulating them. In 1921, 85.3 per cent of wage-earning women were unmarried and between the ages of 15 and 34; in 1935, the comparable figure was 80.3 per cent (see Table 2).

The majority of single women who went out to work lived with their parents: 53.8 per cent in 1921 and 52.3 per cent in 1935 (see Table 3).[14] The available evidence suggests that only a small number of them came from middle-class backgrounds.[15] Only a few were the children of merchants, lawyers, doctors, or even of salesmen. Proprietors, professionals, commercial and state employees were the heads of only 21.2 per cent of the households with at least one working daughter in 1921. During the next decade and a half their numbers increased, but in 1935 they still comprised only 24.7 per cent (see Table 4). Working daughters were more frequently the children of carpenters, longshoremen, labourers, and of the unemployed. Skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, and service workers were the heads of 55.2 per cent of the households with a wage-earning daughter in 1921, and 40.6 per cent in 1935. This sharp decrease was due primarily to the substantial increase in the percentage of unemployed heads of households from 23.4 per cent to 34.7 per cent in 1935.

Volume VII. For example, in 1921, only 52 per cent of the working women in Halifax were under 25, and in 1931, just 46.7 per cent.

[13]Prior to World War II, there was only one piece of legislation in Newfoundland which dealt with minimum age requirements for employment, and none at all covering age of school leaving. The "Mines (Regulation) Act" of 1908 stipulated that no boys under thirteen and no girls or women of any age were allowed to work underground in mines. See *Acts of the General Assembly of Newfoundland, 1908* (St. John's 1908), 28. In 1942, the "School Attendance Act" was instituted, which stipulated that all children under the age of fourteen had to enrolled in school. See *Acts of the Honourable Commission of Government of Newfoundland, 1942* (St. John's 1942), 135-44. The passage of the "Welfare of Children Act" in 1944 prohibited the employment of women under the age of seventeen from employment in restaurants and taverns, and waged work for all women between 9 at night and 8 in the morning. See, *Acts of the Honourable Commission of Government of Newfoundland, 1944* (St. John's 1944), 303-15.

[14]Single wage-earning women living at home accounted for 51.3 per cent of the entire female labour force in 1921 and 47.7 per cent in 1935.

[15]Determining the socio-economic class of working women in this study is fraught with difficulties. There has been a great deal of debate in the feminist literature on the question of ascertaining the class of women. See, P. and H. Armstrong, "Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex," in *Politics of Diversity*, R. Hamilton and M. Barrett, eds., (London 1987), 208-40; J. Gardiner, "Women in the Labour Process and Class Structure," in *Class and Class Structure*, A. Hunt, ed., (London 1977), 22-48. While realizing the weakness of this method, the class designation of working women in this study is determined by the occupation of the head of the household except in those cases where a woman is living with a relative, as a boarder, or as domestic. It is impossible to determine with any degree of precision the class of women living in those particular circumstances.

TABLE 2
Age and Marital Status of Working Women 1921 and 1935

	Single				Married				Separated				Widowed			
	1921		1935		1921		1935		1921		1935		1921		1935	
Age Groups	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Up to 14	16	1.7	11	.9	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
15-19	293	32.1	201	16.6	—	—	—		—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
20-24	321	35.2	474	39.2	—	—	2	.2	—	—	1	.1	2	.2	—	—
25-29	131	14.3	207	17.1	—	—	4	.3	1	.1	1	.1	3	.3	3	.2
30-34	34	3.7	89	7.4	1	.1	4	.3	—	—	2	.2	1	.1	3	.2
35-39	21	2.3	58	4.8	2	.2	5	.4	2	.2	1	.1	5	.5	9	.7
40-44	8	.9	23	1.9	2	.2	1	.1	—	—	2	.2	8	.9	12	1.0
45-49	9	1.0	11	.9	3	.3	7	.6	—	—	1	.1	5	.5	11	.9
50-54	9	1.0	11	.9	—	—	4	.3	—	—	1	.1	12	1.3	9	.9
55-59	2	.2	9	.7	2	.2	1	.1	1	.1	2	.2	1	.1	5	.4
60-64	—	—	4	.3	3	.3	3	.2	—	—	—	—	4	.4	4	.3
65 and up	5	.5	5	.4	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	6	.7	9	.7
	849	93.0	1103	91.2	13	1.4	31	2.6	4	.4	11	.9	47	5.1	65	5.4

TABLE 3
Relationship of Single Working Women to the Heads of Their Households, 1921 and 1935

	1921		*1935*	
Relationship	N	Per cent	N	Per cent
Head	16	1.9	33	3.0
Daughter	457	53.8	577	52.3
Servant	291	34.3	381	34.5
Boarder	42	4.9	41	3.7
Female Relative	43	5.0	71	6.6
	849	100.0	1103	100.0

TABLE 4
Occupation Groups of Heads of Households With Working Daughters Living at Home, 1921 and 1935

Occupation Groups	*1921*		*1935*	
	N	Per cent	N	Per cent
Proprietor	41	9.0	78	13.5
Professional	9	1.7	15	2.6
Commercial	33	7.2	38	6.5
State Employee	15	3.3	12	2.1
Service	14	3.1	12	2.1
Skilled	104	22.7	125	21.7
Semi-skilled	29	6.3	37	6.4
Unskilled	109	23.1	60	10.4
Unemployed	69	15.1	146	25.3
Unemployed, Age 65 and over	38	8.3	54	9.4
	458	100.0	577	100.0

The small number of middle-class women who worked did not have the same financial responsibilities as did those of the working class. Unlike most working-class women, their earnings rarely had to be handed over to parents as a necessary contribution to the household. They were freer to spend their earnings on clothing and entertainment. When middle-class women were laid off, few of them had to worry that members of their families thus might be denied food and clothing. One woman whose father was a planter[16] on the Southside, viewed her job as a waitress

[16]Planters were middle men in the fishing industry. They did not catch any fish, but instead bought quantities of fish, prepared it for market, and then sold it to fish exporting merchants.

in a small restaurant as a temporary position which she could leave at any time. "Problems at work never bothered me much because I knew I could leave whenever I wanted to go home."[17] In sharp contrast, the far greater number of working-class women who worked did so because their wages were essential to the economic well-being of their families. Their wages had to handed over directly to their parents, and were often used to subsidize the earnings of their fathers. The wages of most working-class males did not reach levels high enough to support their families comfortably. Seasonality only made the plight of working-class families yet more difficult. Having a daughter out working and bringing home an income proved to be a great benefit to many. In 1921, President James Caul of the Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU) explained the important contribution made by the children of men who worked on the docks:

> The question of cost cannot be taken into consideration in dealing with the question of wages. Between 95 and 98 percent of the members of the union do not earn enough under the present scale to keep body and soul together. Were it not for the fact that the daughters and sons supplement the earnings of the household a very large majority of the members would be compelled to seek able-bodied relief.[18]

A member of the Newfoundland House of Assembly stated in a 1925 session that, "Families who formerly were in straitened circumstances because they had no breadwinner but a man, are now in comfort through the industry of young women and girls."[19] One informant, Jenny, was only fourteen years old when she secured her first job in 1926. Her wages were vital to the family because her father did not earn enough as a longshoreman to pay the rent and buy sufficient food for his family. As Jenny explained, "I went to help out our family. I was the oldest girl and my older brother couldn't get work. Times were hard so I went out to work and it seemed as if that was all I did."[20] Her earnings alone had to feed the family when her father went out on strike in autumn 1932.

The wages of daughters were generally used to supplement the earnings of their fathers. Nevertheless, there were numerous instances in which the support of the family was fully a daughter's responsibility, or was shared with another sibling. In most instances their fathers were unemployed, or their mothers were widows. Unemployed fathers became more prevalent between 1921 and 1935. In 1921, only a small proportion of households (3.7 percent) with a working daughter present included a father without waged-employment. By 1935, this type of household had increased to 13 per cent.[21] A contemporary observer noted that in situations where "the young girl finds employment and her father is at home without a job, she is

[17]Interview with Hazel S., February 1987.

[18]Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL), Newfoundland Board of Trade, P8/B/11, Box 11, File 13, Letter from James Caul to the Employers' Protective Association, 16 August 1921.

[19]Newfoundland, *Proceedings of the House of Assembly, 1925* (St. John's 1926), 300.

[20]Interview with Jenny F., November 1986.

[21]Census of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1921, 1935 (Nominal).

the first to bring home her earnings."[22] A much larger proportion of households in 1921 (23.2 per cent) were without the primary male breadwinner altogether, and in 1935 this figure had reached 30.8 per cent. In these particular cases, widows held the position as head of the household. The overwhelming majority of these widows (84.9 per cent in 1921 and 83.3 per cent in 1935) did not have any visible source of employment. Under such circumstances, their working daughters and their working sons must have been important sources of family income.[23]

Middle-class women living at home were more likely to be employed as teachers, nurses, stenographers, and saleswomen. [See Table 5.] A retired librarian trained in the early 1930s indicated that there were very few occupations deemed suitable for middle-class women. "You see, by choosing to be a librarian, I was eliminating only teaching, nursing, and office work [as possible job options.] At that time there weren't too many openings, too many avenues. They were the basic options."[24] Working-class women on the other hand, were more likely to be employed as tailoresses, waitresses, and factory operatives, as well as saleswomen.[25] This latter occupation was one of the few which attracted both working-class and middle-class women in large numbers. A woman's class background could determine to some degree the work she ended up performing in the labour force. Training for a profession dictated that a young woman had a certain level of education, time, and money. It was difficult for most working-class women to meet all three of these requirements. Some were able to surmount these barriers but they were few in number. In order to enter a program in maternity nursing at the city's Grace Hospital in 1924, a young woman had to have passed Intermediate Grade, and to pay a fee of $50.00.[26] Training took twenty months, at the end of which candidates had to write an exam. Women wanting to train at the Grace Hospital or at the General Hospital faced stiff competition because the number of positions were limited. The General admitted only ten to twelve nursing students each year, and the Grace, only fifteen to twenty students annually.[27] A substantial number of St. John's women travelled to the United States or Canada to train as nurses. This type of venture most often required the financial assistance of young women's

[22]Newfoundland, *Proceedings of the Newfoundland House of Assembly, 1929* (St. John's 1930), 235.

[23]Widows did receive a small payment of $5.00 a month from the Newfoundland Government if they could prove they were deserving. In regard to old age pensions which totalled $50.00 a year, only men seventy-five years of age or older qualified. The act governing old age pensions did not include any specific provisions for surviving widows until 1926. In 1926, an amendment to the old age pension act stipulated that if a widow had reached the age of sixty-five years she was entitled to have one until her death or remarriage.

[24]Interview with Agnes O., August 1986.

[25]Relatively small numbers of working-class women from St. John's sought employment as live-in domestics. The ranks of domestics were primarily filled by outport fishermen's daughters. For a more detailed discussion of this situation see, Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour in St. John's Between the Two World Wars," ch. 4.

[26]*Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 10 June 1924.

[27]*Observer's Weekly* (St. John's), 4 May 1937. See also J. Nevitt, *White Caps and Black Bands: Nursing in Newfoundland to 1934* (St. John's 1978), 148-50.

parents to pay for their tuition and their passage to such places as New York or Montreal. One alumna of a private school for girls in St. John's stated in 1928 that, "Many of the pupils leaving Spencer College in recent years have aspired to one of the noblest and highest professions of womanhood — that of a nurse."[28] She went on to mention some of the places where these women chose to train: Toronto, Halifax, Boston, Englewood, New Jersey, and Providence, Rhode Island.[29]

To work as a stenographer or a bookkeeper, a woman needed specialized skills which she could acquire only by taking commercial courses. Although all of the high schools in the city offered commercial programmes that were separate from their regular academic curriculums, they were expensive. At the Academy of Our Lady of Mercy, the tuition fee for one term was $10.00 in 1923.[30] (The entire commercial program took three terms.) This amount only included general courses in "stenography, typewriting, and office routine." There was an extra charge for courses which taught students how to use a dictaphone or a calculating machine. That same year full-time enrolment at the newly-opened United Business College cost students $12.00 a term.[31] Commercial courses remained expensive through the 1930s.[32]

Why did the majority of single working women reside with their parents? To begin with, their incomes generally were so low that most could not even consider renting a place of their own or boarding somewhere else. For a substantial number of wage-earning women, their parents needed them living at home contributing to the household economy. While there was the possibility that a woman could reside elsewhere and send money to her parents, the sum involved would have been smaller than if she had lived at home. Most parents did not like daughters to live someplace else, where they would be away from their supervision and protection. Concern for the protection of young women, particularly those who worked, remained central. Many people thought that women who worked had a much greater exposure to the evil elements in society, particularly to the dangers of sexual immorality, than women who remained within the confines of their households. Such concerns were rarely articulated in regard to young men working outside the home. Given such prevailing ideas, it is not surprising that parents were reluctant to allow their daughters to move beyond the bounds of their guardianship. Employment did not afford many single women greater independence as it did for single men. In most instances, the parents of wage-earning daughters had a great deal of control over the type of employment they sought, what they were allowed to do with their time away from work, and how much money they had to hand over on

[28]*Evening Telegram*, 18 December 1928.

[29]*Ibid.* Some women who could not afford the cost of taking nurses training or teachers training worked for a couple of years to save enough money. Brief notices occasionally showed up in local newspapers indicating that employees of a particular firm were hosting a going away party for a co-worker. Evening *Telegram*, 23 August 1928; 31 June 1931.

[30]PANL, Eric Ellis Papers, PN55, Box 1.

[31]*Evening Telegram*, 19 September 1923.

[32]*Evening Telegram*, 21 April 1929; 9 November 1935.

TABLE 5
Occupation Groups of Single Working Women, and Occupation Groups of Parents, 1921 and 1935

Occupation Groups Working Women	*Occupation Groups Heads of Household* Proprietor, Professional, Commercial, State				Skilled, Semi-Skilled Unskilled & Service				Unemployed			
	1921		1935		1921		1935		1921		1935	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Proprietor	19	4.1	21	3.6	5	1.1	8	1.4	8	1.7	16	2.8
Professional	37	8.1	63	10.9	57	12.4	40	6.9	30	6.6	67	11.6
Clerical Work	28	6.1	35	6.1	89	19.4	66	11.4	30	6.6	47	8.1
Retail Work	2	.4	13	2.2	7	1.6	17	2.9	6	1.3	18	3.1
Service	11	2.4	9	1.6	94	20.5	100	17.4	33	7.2	55	9.5
Semi & Unskilled	97	21.1	141	24.4	252	55.0	233	40.3	109	23.8	203	35.1

pay day. One woman recalled, "Most times I knew when I could have spending money because if my father wasn't working, I always used to get things for my sister."[33] In one extreme case when a widowed mother could not exercise any control over her daughters (both worked at a city clothing factory) to give her some of their earnings, she took them to court. The judge ruled that, "the young women had to pay their mother $1.50 and $2.50 per week respectively."[34]

Few single working women lived with relatives, as boarders, or on their own: 11.9 per cent 1921 and 13.3 per cent in 1935 (see Table 3). Female wage earners who resided with relatives were small in number. They accounted for a mere 5 per cent of the unmarried women in the labour force in 1921. Over a decade later their numbers had risen marginally to 6.6 per cent. In most instances these women did not have parents living in the city. Either their mothers and fathers were deceased, or their parents remained behind in outports while they sought employment in St. John's. In the vast majority of such cases these women lived with an older married sibling.[35] Female wage-earners living with a relative could contribute some of their earnings toward household expenses, but likely not as much as they would have paid if they were boarding with a stranger.

A slightly smaller proportion of women boarded than those who resided with relatives. [See Table 3.] These women tended to be older than other single working women. In 1921, 47.7 per cent of female wage-earners who boarded were 25 years of age or older; in 1935, 65.7 per cent were.[36] As the figures suggest, an increase had occurred between the two censuses in the ages of this particular group of working women. These female boarders were employed primarily in white-collar occupations which tended to offer marginally higher incomes than blue-collar occupations. A greater number of women might have boarded if inexpensive places had been available to them. There was a shortage of cheap accommodation where women earning low wages could board. When advertisements seeking boarders were placed in the newspapers, the weekly charge was usually between $4.00 and $6.00.[37] Few women held positions which paid more than $6.00 a week. In the early 1920s there were only two homes for "working girls" offering inexpensive room and board, one run by the Roman Catholic Church and the other by the Grenfell Association. The Catholic-sponsored St. Clare's Home, which had been open since 1912, was administered by the Sisters of Mercy.[38] The Home was often filled to capacity with Catholic women as the nuns only required boarders to pay

[33]Interview with Dorothy F., May 1986.

[34]*Evening Telegram*, 20 February 1925.

[35]Census of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1921, 1935 (Nominal). In 1921, 88.2 per cent of the working women how lived with relatives were either *sisters* or *sisters-in-law* of the head of the household, and in 1935 they represented 87.5 per cent.

[36]Census of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1921, 1935 (Nominal).

[37]*Evening Telegram*, 3 May 1921; 15 August 1923; 1 February 1924; 31 September 1926; 1 June 1932; 22 June 1934.

[38]J. Flynn, "The Catholic Church in Newfoundland," in J.R. Smallwood, ed., *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. III, J.R. Smallwood (St. John's 1937), 275.

what they could afford. Unfortunately, the home was closed in May 1922 to make way for the opening of the St. Clare's Hospital.[39] At the Grenfell Association's Seaman's Institute, which had been open since 1914, there was an overwhelming demand for accommodation. The matron of the "Girls Section" noted in her report for 1921 that "Applications have had to be refused for lack of space and there is a long waiting list of girls who would like to become permanent boarders."[40] In 1921 alone, the Seaman's Institute turned down 206 applications simply because it lacked space.[41] In 1926, the Grenfell Association handed over the Seaman's Institute to the YWCA/YMCA. The new administrator stated at the time that "The work of the girls' department so admirably performed under the direction of the Ladies Auxiliary will also be continued and if possible extended."[42] Under the guidance of the YWCA, a "House Department" was set up and as many as 55 women at a time boarded there.[43] This one residence could not even begin to fill the persisting demand for cheap places to board in the city. At the annual meeting of the YWCA in 1932, mention was made that the "House Department" could not accommodate all the women wanting and needing a place to board.[44] This issue continued to be raised at subsequent annual meetings during the 1930s.[45]

Women who headed their own households totalled just 1.9 per cent of all single working women in 1921, and 3 per cent in 1935 (see Table 3).[46] These small numbers emphasize the fact that working women during this period found it extremely difficult to live independently. These women were older than their other unmarried, wage-earning counterparts. By this stage in their lives it was likely that at least one or possibly both, of their parents were no longer alive. There was little prospect of marriage for these women, so they had to find some means of supporting themselves. The majority of these women were the sole wage-earners in their households (56.3 per cent in 1921 and 59.2 per cent in 1935). In the case of another substantial proportion (40.2 per cent in 1921 and 39.4 per cent in 1935) they shared the responsibility with another unmarried sibling.[47] Single working women who headed up households tended to be owners of small confectionery or grocery stores as well as dressmakers, occupations which allowed them to combine their places of residence and places of work, thus cutting costs, and making it easier for them to live on their own.

Religious affiliation was not a major influence on the occupations that single

[39]Nevitt, *White Caps and Black Bands*, 97.

[40]"The Annual Report of the Seaman's Institute," *Among the Deep Sea Fishers*, 24, (October 1921), 32.

[41]*Ibid.*

[42]"Seaman's Institute Administration Changes," *Among the Deep Sea Fishers*, 29 (April 1926), 14.

[43]*Evening Telegram*, 22 January 1927.

[44]*Evening Telegram*, 2 February 1932.

[45]*Evening Telegram*, 11 February 1937; 15 February 1938.

[46]Only sixteen single women were heads of their own households. Such a small sample size poses a problem when attempting to generalize for the entire population.

[47]These percentages were derived from data gathered for the quantitative study that relate to the men and women who were wage-earners in the individual households.

working women chose, but it did have an impact on the location of their work. St. John's was a city where religion created divisions and tensions amongst its inhabitants. City residents accepted the fact that an individual had a much better chance of being hired by a private firm whose owner or manager was of the same religion. In the city's major department stores, Methodists (later members of the United Church) were more likely to be hired by Ayre and Sons, Anglicans by Bowring Brothers, and Catholics by Royal Stores. Such preferments seem to have been an unwritten and often unspoken assumption of the population as a whole. As one women who worked for Ayre and Sons stated, "You just knew that Protestants looked after Protestants and Catholics after Catholics."[48] Only rarely did one see advertisements like the following in the newspapers: "Stenographer wanted immediately — must be quick at shorthand and typewriting; Protestant preferred."[49] When this type of preference for an employee of a certain religious denomination was stated publicly, it elicited some criticism. The reaction was quite negative when a sign was placed in the window of one St. John's store in the 1920s asking for female sales clerks with the added notation that "No Catholics Need Apply." The sign was not up very long before it had to be removed because of public pressure.[50] A denominational school system was also firmly entrenched in Newfoundland which meant that a teacher had to be of a particular religious denomination in order to be hired at a certain school. An Anglican woman, for example, could only teach at an Anglican school in the city. Furthermore, tradition dictated that the denominational composition of the Newfoundland civil service was supposed to match exactly that of the entire country. Therefore, approximately, one-third of the government employees in St. John's had to be Catholic, one-third Anglican, and one-third Methodist.[51]

The decision to get married almost always signalled the end of full-time wage labour for women. It was taken for granted by most women that once they married, they would no longer work full-time for pay. One informant noted, "You put your resignation in right away, as soon as you knew you were getting married. There was no such thing as working after you married."[52] Another emphasized:

> I gave notice as soon as we got engaged. I was happy to be getting married, that was the lifestyle then. You got married, reared your children and were a helpmate to your husband. That was what was expected of you and you were happy with it.[53]

[48]Interview with Jenny F., November 1986.
[49]*Evening Telegram*, 19 April 1921.
[50]Interview with Jenny F., November 1986.
[51]For a denominational analysis of the Newfoundland civil service see, Newfoundland, *The Civil Service in Newfoundland From a Denominational Standpoint, November 1st, 1928* (St. John's 1928). According to this government report, Catholics constituted 32.9 per cent of the civil servants, Anglicans, 32.2 per cent, Methodists 28.2 per cent, and other denominations 6.7 per cent.
[52]Interview with Stella W., May 1986.
[53]Interview with Jenny F., November 1986.

For many young working women, an impending marriage was eagerly anticipated. It was a time for celebration with friends and co-workers at wedding showers. St. John's newspapers frequently reported these ritualized events throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In September 1924, the female employees of a large book store "waited on Miss Mercedes Wadden and presented her with a handsome silver tea pot and salad bowl to match her contemplated marriage."[54] A Mrs. Dominy tendered a surprise shower for Miss Alfreda Winslow at her home in October 1928. "Lady employees of the Royal Stores clothing factory numbering about fifty" attended this social event. It was noted that Miss Winslow, along with a Miss Jean Redmond who was also present, would soon be leaving their jobs to get married. All the larger companies in the city had the unwritten rule that women could not remain after marriage even if they wanted to. No written regulations existed in private businesses or in the government prohibiting employment for married women until September 1933, when the Commission of Government instituted the following rule: "On marriage, a woman civil servant shall retire from office unless it is definitely in the interests of the Public Service that she should be retained for a further period."[55] This rule was enforced throughout the 1930s.

II

ONCE WOMEN MARRIED they entered an entirely new stage in their lives. They assumed respnsibility for managing their households. Their lives from that point onward became focused upon taking care of their husbands' needs, performing domestic labour, and eventually, bearing as well as raising children. Domestic responsibilities were immense for married women throughout this period, especially those from the working class. Advances in household technology had barely reached middle-class households in St. John's by this time. In addition, unlike middle-class women, few working-class women had the option to hire domestic servants to help them with their housework. Most working-class households still had wood- or coal-burning stoves which required a great deal of attention. A large number of homes also lacked running water, thus forcing women to take empty pails to a nearby tap, line up behind others getting water, and carry a heavy pail back to their houses. This process had to be repeated frequently every day.[56] Hard physical labour was necessary daily to keep working-class households running smoothly. Married women were also in charge of the family budget, which meant that they had to take their husbands' small wages and buy the most they could with them. Living on a low income, always anticipating periods of unemployment, working-class wives often demonstrated great skill in transforming their husbands'

[54]*Evening Telegram*, 14 September 1924.

[55]PANL, Executive Council, GN9/1, Minute Books, Minutes of Commission of Government, 4 September 1933, #633.

[56]*Evening Telegram*, 21 March 1927. In an article on housing conditions in St. John's mention was made of the fact that there were large areas of St. John's without running water.

scanty wages into decent living standards. In a letter written in 1923, "A Loving Mother" described how difficult it could be to keep a family fed and clothed:

> There is nobody knows more than the women what it costs to keep the home going. It is hard enough when times are fairly good; but it is awful when times are bad and employment is only to be had once in a while. The Women I Say, have the hardest end of it scraping and paring, mending and patching, and trying to make the few dollars that their husbands earn meet all the household expenses.[57]

In a letter one year later, another woman echoed some of the same sentiments. "It is the women indeed who know to their sorrow what it is to live in a city when hard times are upon us. There is the rent to pay, the coal to be got, the food to be bought, the children's school fees, and hardest of all, the boots and clothing to cover us decently."[58] It took extra time out of an already busy day for women to try to stretch their husbands' earnings as far as possible.[59]

Because most married women experienced such heavy domestic responsibilities, they were reluctant to seek full-time wage labour outside the home even when there was a strong economic impetus for them to do so. They tried to avoid it at all possible costs. The percentage of working women who were married in the inter-war period was extremely small: 1.4 per cent in 1921 and 2.6 per cent in 1935 (see Table 2).[60] Those few women who did were almost exclusively from the working class. For middle-class married women, waged work continued to be such a social taboo that their presence in the labour force was almost nonexistent. Unlike working-class women, there was little possibility that they would experience the pressure of economic necessity. Most husbands of the married women who worked were skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled blue-collar workers. A small percentage did not have a job at all.[61] These women's wages were needed to subsidize the earnings of their husbands. In a majority of the households with a married female wage-

[57]*Evening Telegram*, 12 April 1923.

[58]*Evening Telegram*, 22 January 1924.

[59]Relying almost entirely on oral testimony, historian Elizabeth Roberts has constructed a richly textured picture of the lives of working-class women in three towns in northern England between 1890 and 1940. She maintains that most married working-class women devoted their time to domestic labour while also doing everything possible to "make ends meet." See E. Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (London 1984), 125-68.

[60]For the 1921 census, only thirteen working women in this sample were married and in the 1935 census only thirty-one. Such a small sample size creates problems for generalizing about the entire population. Since the enumerators' instructions for the 1921 and 1935 censuses have not yet been found, it is difficult to determine how they defined whether a person was employed or not. From working with the census closely over a long period of time, it seems to me that there is a significant undercounting of married women who were wage-earners, especially those who were shopkeepers, laundresses, and charwomen.

[61]Census of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1921, 1935 (Nominal). The occupation of heads of households with a working wife in 1921 are as follows: Proprietor (1) 7.7 per cent; Commercial (1) 7.7 per cent; Skilled (6) 46.2 per cent; Semi-skilled (1) 7.7 per cent; Unskilled (2) 15.4 per cent; Unemployed (2) 15.4 per cent. In 1935 the occupation of heads of households are as follows: Proprietor (2) 6.5 per cent; Professional (2) 6.5 per cent; Commercial (2) 6.5 per cent; Skilled (5) 16.1 per cent; Semi-skilled (4) 12.9 per cent; Unskilled (9) 35.5 per cent; Unemployed (7) 22.6 per cent.

earner, the husband and wife supported the family (53.8 per cent in 1921 and 52.1 per cent in 1935), while in a large proportion of other homes one other child aided the family economy.[62]

The married women who did work were substantially older than single wage earners (see Table 6). Relatively few married women worked at an early stage in their family's life cycle while their children were young. The burden of domestic work and childcare at this time made employment all but impossible. Most married women worked when at least half of their children were aged fifteen or older. By this time, their children were already in school (see Table 7). These older, married women tended to be employed primarily as owners of confectionery and grocery stores, and to a lesser extent, as charwomen, boardinghouse keepers, and dressmakers (see Table 8). These occupations allowed women to pursue paid employment while maintaining a close supervision of their own residences. In fact, domestic labour could be interspersed with duties related to their paid employment. Such women could tend children while working. None of these jobs would have provided the women with a large income, but it was enough to make a difference to their families' comfort.

TABLE 6
Age Groups of Married, Separated and Widowed Working Women, 1921 and 1935

Age Groups	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Up to 14	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
15-19	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
20-24	—	—	2	6.5	1	25.0	1	9.1	2	—	—	—
25-29	—	—	4	12.9	—	—	1	9.1	3	6.4	3	4.6
30-34	1	7.7	4	12.9	—	—	2	18.2	1	2.1	3	4.6
35-39	2	15.4	5	16.1	2	50.0	1	9.1	5	10.6	9	13.8
40-44	2	15.4	1	3.2	—	—	2	18.2	8	17.0	12	18.5
45-49	3	23.1	7	22.6	—	—	1	9.1	5	10.6	11	16.9
50-54	—	—	4	12.9	—	—	1	9.1	12	25.5	9	13.8
55-59	2	15.4	1	3.2	1	25.0	2	18.2	1	2.1	5	7.7
60-64	3	23.4	3	9.7	—	—	—	—	4	8.5	4	6.2
65 and up	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	6	12.8	9	13.8
	13	100.0	31	100.0	4	100.0	11	100.0	47	100.0	65	100.0

Although working-class married women tried to avoid full-time wage employment outside their homes, there is some evidence to suggest that they were quite willing to pursue part-time paid labour. Resourceful at procuring extra income for their families, women took in boarders, washed laundry, and sewed garments. While only a small number of married women appear in the census as boarding-

[62] *Ibid.*

house keepers, quite a few had boarders. Keeping a boarder meant additional labour for women who probably were already overburdened, but it was work they could do at home. Washing clothes for others was much more labour-intensive and time-consuming than taking care of boarders.[63] While the work was disadvantageous because the women had to go out to get the clothes, it was a form of paid labour that could be performed at home. The clothing industry in St. John's employed a substantial number of married women as outworkers. Testifying before a royal commission on tariffs, William White of the White Clothing Company stated that until 1920, the industry employed 500 persons in various factories and an additional 200 homeworkers. The economic depression of 1921 impelled clothing manufacturers to cut their staffs drastically, but as many as 65 outworkers remained employed.[64] A large proportion of these workers must have been married women. Constrained by lack of alternatives, the necessity for extra income, and the need to remain at home, married women nevertheless continued to do such poorly paid work.

TABLE 7
Life Cycle Stages of Married, Separated and Widowed Working Women, 1921 and 1935

Stages	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Up to 45, No child	2	15.4	4	12.9	2	50.0	3	27.3	7	14.9	7	10.8
Child 11 and under	—		4	12.9	—	—	1	9.1	5	10.6	3	4.6
11-15 None over 16	2	15.4	5	16.1	1	25.0	2	18.2	4	8.5	6	9.2
Some or all 16+	7	53.8	15	48.4	—	—	4	36.4	22	46.8	36	55.4
Over 45, No child	2	15.4	3	9.7	1	25.0	1	9.1	9	19.1	13	20.0
	13	100.0	31	100.0	4	100.0	11	100.0	47	100.0	65	100.0

While most women left the labour force when they married, and were reluctant to pursue full-time wage labour thereafter, the termination of a relationship through

[63]Advertisements were placed in the city's newspapers regularly by women who stipulated that the washing would be done in their own homes. *Evening Telegram*, 24 June 1920, 29 February 1927; 9 March 1933.

[64]Excerpt of the *Report of the Findings of the Royal Commission of 1922* in *The Liberal Press*, 16 March 1929. It is not know to what extent outwork prevailed in St. John's during the rest of the 1920s and 1930s.

separation, divorce, or death caused some to return to work. Divorce was relatively rare at this time. Neither the 1921 nor the 1935 census even included divorced in the section relating to marital status. Only four women in the sample were listed as being separated in 1921; there were eleven in the sample for 1935. Although divorce and even separation were still uncommon, widowhood occurred much more often. Loss of a spouse happened far more frequently for women than men. The death of a husband moved many women to yet another stage in their lives. More than five per cent of wage-earning women were widows (see Table 2). A substantial proportion of these women were age 40 or older (see Table 6). Most widowed wage-earners headed up their own households (66 per cent in 1921 and 83 per cent in 1935). Along with the title came the responsibility for ensuring the economic survival of their families. Like married women, the stage of their family's life cycle had an impact on the employment of widows. Only a small proportion of widows were working at early stages of their families' life cycles. Most worked when at least half of their children were 15 or older (see Table 7). Widows were most likely to be employed as boardinghouse keepers, shopkeepers, and charwomen (see Table 8). As noted above, these occupations provided more-flexible hours of work, and gave women who were in charge of their own households the opportunity to carry out domestic duties.

TABLE 8
Occupation Groups of Married, Separated and Widowed Working Women, 1921 and 1935

Occupation Groups	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Proprietor	9	64.2	11	35.5	—	—	1	9.1	18	38.3	25	38.5
Professional	—	—	1	3.2	—	—	—	—	1	2.1	3	4.6
Office Work	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	2.1	1	1.5
Retail Work	1	7.7	1	3.2	—	—	3	27.3	5	10.6	5	7.7
Service	1	7.7	11	35.5	3	75.0	5	45.5	16	34.0	23	35.4
Semi-skilled	1	7.7	3	9.7	—	—	1	9.1	4	8.5	5	7.7
Unskilled	1	7.7	4	12.9	1	25.0	1	9.1	2	4.3	3	4.6
	13	100.0	31	100.0	4	100.0	11	100.0	47	100.0	65	100.0

"Times were hard" in Newfoundland in the 1920s and 1930s. Few women in St. John's worked for "pin money;" rather, many engaged in paid employment because their wages were vitally important to the economic survival of their families. The pattern of women's paid work did not change substantially during the inter-war years. Like women elsewhere, wage employment for those in St. John's bridged the gap between school and marriage. The female labour force in this city overwhelmingly was young and single. Working women tended to be under 25, unmarried, and to live at home with their parents. At this stage in their life cycles they were as yet unencumbered by the responsibilities of domestic labour

or childcare, and thus free to pursue employment outside the home. Class background proved to be a determining factor along with age and marital status in women's entry into the labour force. Working-class women were far more likely to work than middle-class women, primarily because of the necessity for them to contribute to the household economy. Middle-class women sought wage employment in ever-increasing numbers, but at no time equalled the numbers of working-class wage-earners. Class background also influenced the type of employment which women managed to secure. The small number of married and widowed women who engaged in wage labour rarely did so full-time. They worked part-time, at a stage when their children were in school. The occupations that married and widowed women selected allowed them to perform their paid labour, as well as domestic labour.