

Women and Wage Labour in a Period of Transition: Montreal, 1861-1881

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Distinctions of gender and age were reinforced in the period of early industrial capitalism in Montreal as more and more children were drawn into wage labour. Working-class males sought work for wages for most of their lives. For women such work was transitory, undertaken as girls, seldom as wives, but required if their husband died or deserted them. Domestic labour was the usual task of both girls and women within the family economy. Gender-based wage differentials made it practical for families to send sons rather than daughters into the workforce, hardening the identification of the home as women's place. The female's economic dependence on a male and his wages was highlighted in the plight of the widow.

Les débuts du capitalisme industriel à Montréal furent marqués, au fur et à mesure de l'entrée des enfants dans la main-d'œuvre salariée, par une accentuation des écarts de rémunération basés sur des critères de sexe et d'âge. S'il allait de soi pour les travailleurs mâles de rechercher, sur une base permanente, un salaire pendant la plus grande partie de leur vie, la situation était, dans l'ensemble, différente pour les femmes : leur travail était transitoire, entrepris à l'âge nubile, rarement en tant qu'épouses sauf, par nécessité, suite à la mort ou à l'abandon de leur mari. En fait, les travaux domestiques restaient, avant et après le mariage, l'occupation féminine habituelle à l'intérieur de l'économie familiale. Les différences salariales en fonction du sexe incitaient logiquement les familles à envoyer leurs fils — et non leurs filles — sur le marché du travail, renforçant ainsi l'image de la femme cantonnée tout naturellement au foyer. Cet état de dépendance économique des femmes par rapport aux hommes ressortait dans toute son étendue dans les situations de veuvage.

Early industrial capitalism has traditionally been viewed as drawing men and women and boys and girls indiscriminantly into wage labour.¹ Studies focusing on mill towns where female labour opportunities predominated have perpetuated this tendency by stressing the widespread involvement of both girls and married women in wage labour. Historians and sociologists refusing to treat gender as a category of analysis have exaggerated the tendency.² In fact, in cities and towns with more

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1. See especially Karl MARX, *Capital, A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Progress Books, 1956), 1:372.

2. Neil SMELSER, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution. An Application of Theory to the Lancashire Cotton Industry, 1770-1840* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1959); Michael ANDERSON, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Tamara K. HAREVEN, *Family Time and Industrial Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). ANDERSON, *Family Structure*, p. 75, discusses children working without differentiating girls and boys and gives figures for sons working, but not daughters.

diverse industries, it is arguable that the consolidation of industrial capitalist production may have reinforced rather than eliminated distinctions of age and gender.³ Both over their own life cycles and in their function within the capitalist system, men and women played divergent roles. Working-class males, lacking any other means of support, had to seek work for wages for most of their lives. Working-class girls and women, in contrast, unable to earn sufficient wages to survive independently, alternated between wage labour and domestic labour while spending most of their lives dependent on the wages of a father or husband. The extent of their direct involvement in wage work and the period of their lives at which this occurred varied with the nature and stage of industrial capitalist development.⁴ The irregular pattern of female involvement in wage labour in the early period of industrial capitalism in Montreal clearly highlights both the centrality of women's role in the sphere of reproduction in the home, and their importance as a reserve army of labour.

The relations of production and reproduction and the sexual division of labour are not fixed. They have clearly changed through time and varied with the particular nature of production in any one place.⁵ This paper examines one aspect of the relationship of production and reproduction by analyzing women's involvement in wage labour in Montreal in the period of transition to industrial capitalist production. Women are examined initially as girls within a working-class family economy, then as married women and finally as widows. At all three stages in their life cycle, women's role as domestic labourers conditioned their experience as wage labourers. Differential wage rates in turn reinforced gender distinctions both in the family and in the economy.

This article is based largely on analysis of the manuscript censuses of two working-class Montreal wards, Ste. Anne and St. Jacques, in 1861, 1871 and 1881. Random samples were taken of one-tenth of the households in these parts of town. The aggregate biographies of the 10,967 people thus sampled over the three decades provide the information on the patterns of job-holding, residence and marriage discussed here.⁶ As the number of wives and widows in the samples seemed too

3. Compare the male-female differential in percentages employed in the mill town of Lawrence, Massachusetts, with the more diverse towns of Lynn and Salem (discounting "housework" as an occupation). Carl F. KAESTLE and Maris A. VINOVSIS, "From Fireside to Factory; School Entry and School Leaving in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts", in *Transitions, The Family and Life Course in Historical Perspective*, ed. Tamara K. HAREVEN (New York: Academic Press, 1978), pp. 144-45; Claudia GOLDIN, "Family Strategies and the Family Economy in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Role of Secondary Workers", in *Philadelphia. Work, Space, Family and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Theodore HERSHBERG (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 282-85.

4. Louise A. TILLY and Joan W. SCOTT, *Women, Work and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978); Karen Oppenheim MASON, Maris A. V. VINOVSIS and Tamara K. HAREVEN, "Women's Work and the Life Course in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1880" in *Transitions*, ed. Tamara K. HAREVEN (New York: Academic Press, 1978), pp. 187-216; HAREVEN, *Family Time and Industrial Time*, p. 190; Gail Cuthbert BRANDT "Weaving it Together: Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, VII (Spring 1981): 113-26.

5. Annette KUHN and Ann Marie WOLPE, "Feminism and Materialism", in their *Feminism and Materialism, Women and Modes of Production* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1978), p. 7.

6. The sample comprises 1,672, 1,898 and 2,006 people in Ste. Anne in 1861, 1871 and 1881 respectively, and 1,212, 1,648 and 2,531 in St. Jacques. For the purposes of this paper the two wards have been combined for most discussions except where the differences are relevant.

small to examine their wage labour in any detail, all married women and widows reporting a job were analyzed. The discussion of their work is thus based on the total population, not a sample. Contemporary descriptions, government reports and other qualitative sources complement the quantitative core.

The period between 1861 and 1881 in Montreal was one of uneven transition in major sectors of the economy from workshop manufacturing to early factory production. Montreal, already the commercial capital of Canada, became, in these three decades, its first large industrial city.⁷ In metal-working, shoemaking and clothing, the three major Montreal industries, increasing numbers of factories were constructed. They coexisted and competed with numerous small workshops. Together, these three major sectors consistently employed over half of Montreal's industrial workers. Women and children constituted over 80 percent of the reported workforce in the clothing industry in 1871 and 1881 and over 40 percent in shoemaking. Tobacco processing and cigarmaking, Montreal's fourth largest employing sector by 1881, relied on children and women for 60 percent of its workforce. Overall, girls and women made up 34.5 percent of all industrial workers within the city limits in 1871 and 37 percent in 1881.⁸

These and Montreal's other industries drew on a sizeable and growing proletariat for their workers. Irish immigrants and their children were drawn into unskilled labour, finding work on the Lachine Canal, at the Port, or on public works in the city. French Canadians, some the children and grandchildren of the city's independent artisans, others fleeing the depleted agricultural areas of the hinterland, found work largely in woodworking, carpentry and other highly seasonal trades or in occupations undergoing dramatic restructuring—especially shoemaking. English and Scottish immigrants, with experience in the factories of their homeland, clustered in the newer, more skilled jobs created by the industrial revolution. In these two wards of Montreal, occupation and ethnicity were closely linked, differentiating fractions within the working classes.⁹

Differentiation occurred at the city level, too. Increasingly, the homes of the working class and of the older commercial and emerging industrial bourgeoisie were segregated in different parts of the city. Both Ste. Anne and St. Jacques were

7. For more details on the growth of industry in Montreal during this period, see Gerald J.J. TULCHINSKY, *The River Barons. Montreal Businessmen and the Growth of Industry and Transportation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), esp. chap. 12; G.-C. ROBERT, "Montréal, 1821-1871, aspects de l'urbanisation" (thèse de 3^e cycle, Histoire, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 1977), esp. chap. 6. Additional information on these two parts of town is provided in Bettina BRADBURY, "The Family Economy in an Industrializing City: Montreal in the 1870s", in Canadian Historical Association (hereafter CHA), *Historical Papers 1979*, pp. 71-76.

8. These percentages are based on analysis of the published industrial schedules for 1871 and 1881. On women in nineteenth-century Montreal, see Suzanne CROSS, "The Neglected Majority: The Changing Role of Women in 19th Century Montreal", in *The Neglected Majority*, eds. S.M. TROFIMENKOFF and Alison PRENTICE (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), pp. 66-86.

9. In Ste. Anne in 1871, for instance, 49 percent of Irish family heads were in semi- and unskilled jobs compared to 21 percent of French Canadians and 19 percent of English and Scots. Only 14 percent of Irish held skilled jobs compared to 43 percent of French Canadians and English and Scots, while only 4 percent of Irish were in the trades most exposed to restructuring, like shoemaking, compared to 16 percent of French Canadians and only 2 percent of English and Scots. Compare these proportions with the cross-national data of Gordon DARROCH and Michael D. ORNSTEIN, "Ethnicity and Occupational Structure in Canada in 1871: The Vertical Mosaic in Historical Perspective", *Canadian Historical Review*, LXI (September 1980): 305-33.

predominantly working-class wards, though there were significant differences between them. Nearly 80 percent of Ste. Anne's families were headed by working-class males compared to 60-70 percent of St. Jacques'. Unskilled workers always comprised over one-third of Ste. Anne's family heads, but only 17 percent of those of St. Jacques. Husbands and fathers working in shoemaking and other such precarious trades were much more likely to live in St. Jacques, as were small shop owners, artisans and professionals. Over these decades St. Jacques became increasingly French-Canadian as in-migrants from rural Quebec poured into the eastern parts of the city seeking work and wages.¹⁰ Ste. Anne remained the only working-class ward with a mixture of nationalities. There the clustering of factories and workshops offered work for skilled and unskilled workers alike.

I — BOYS AND GIRLS IN THE FAMILY ECONOMY

Differentiation by gender accompanied distinctions of class and ethnicity in nineteenth-century Montreal. Boys and girls played fundamentally different roles in the family economy of the working class in this early period of industrial capitalism. While an increasing proportion of children of both sexes was drawn into wage labour between 1861 and 1881, the proportion of boys was always much higher. In Ste. Anne ward, for instance, 27 percent of boys aged 14-15 reported an occupation in 1861; 50 percent did so in 1881. At the age of 18-19, 60 percent of boys were employed in 1861; fully 94 percent had been drawn into the labour market by 1881. By the 1870s working-class boys over the age of 15 or 16 would be spending most of their time either working or seeking a job.

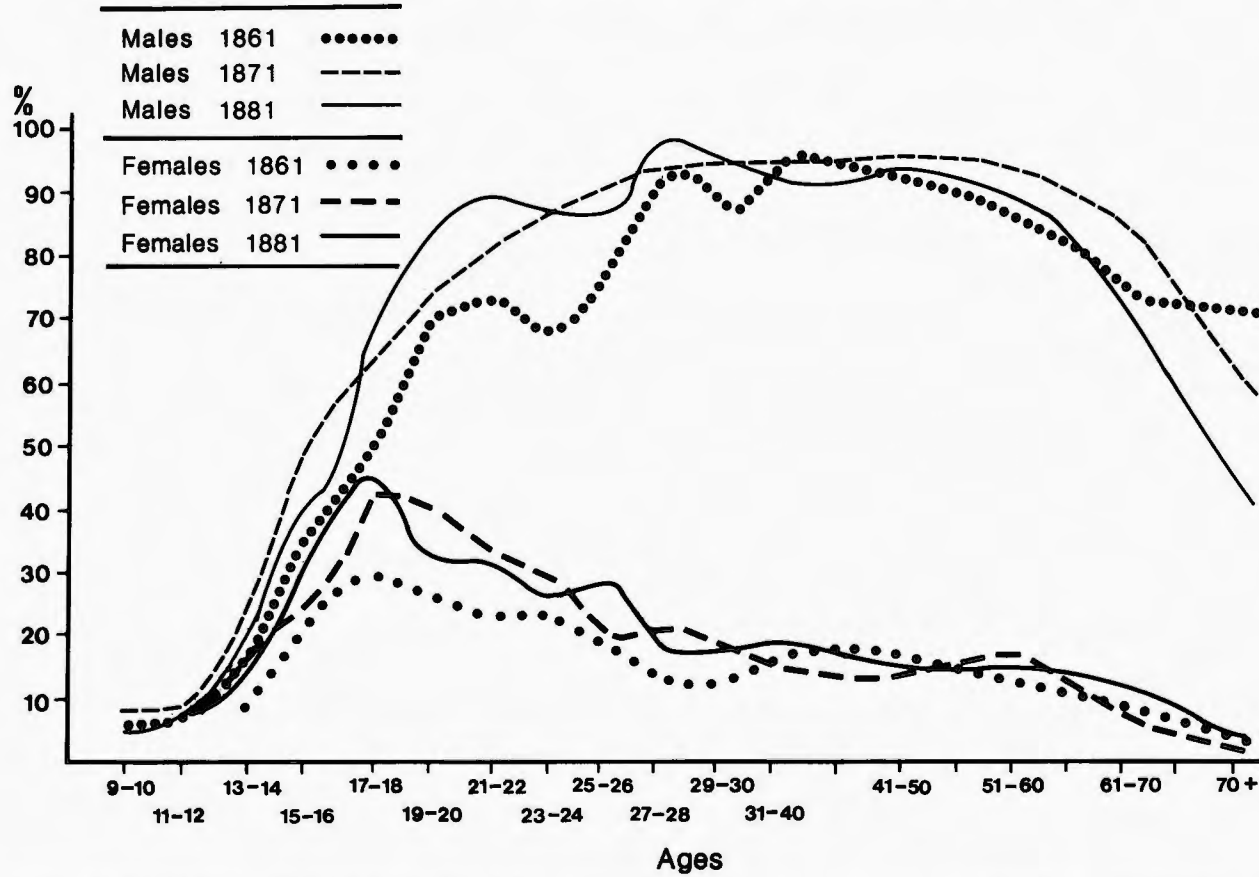
For these boys their early experiences with wage labour were a precursor of things to come. Some might learn a skill that they would practise, if they were lucky, for the rest of their lives. They would also begin to understand the problems of a labour market characterized by a surplus of workers over jobs, by seasonal fluctuations and low wages. Most, even in 1861, would be entering a work world that was fundamentally different from the one their fathers had experienced as children, even though often they would have the same occupation. As young boys, some worked as apprentices, but most were in a wide variety of crafts and skilled and unskilled jobs.

The experience of girls was different. They were much less likely than their brothers to be involved in wage labour. And when they were, it was for a shorter period. The jobs that they did were more limited both in variety and in the future they held. Graph 1 illustrates clearly the contours of a woman's work experience. It also, unfortunately, understates the percentage of girls working for wages as, of necessity, it ignores some of the girls sent as servants from working-class homes in St. Jacques and Ste. Anne to wealthy families elsewhere in the city.¹¹ Yet, even allowing for this, the difference between the experience of boys and girls is clear. These cross sectional data show that for girls wage labour was a temporary and

10. Percentages given in the text, unless otherwise specified, are derived from analysis of the 10 percent samples taken in the two wards in 1861, 1871 and 1881.

11. The instructions of 1871 and 1881 were somewhat ambiguous on where girls working as servants should be enumerated.

Graph 1 Percentage of Males and Females Listing an Occupation, by Age Group, Montreal, 1861-81



Source: Public Archives of Canada. Statistics Canada, RG 31, Manuscript Censuses, 1861, 1871, 1881, Ste. Anne and St. Jacques wards.

intermittent experience—something that they did at the most for four or five years, usually between the ages of 15 and 20. This remained true despite the fact that between 1861 and 1881 a growing proportion of girls was drawn into the wage labour force. In 1861 under 10 percent of girls aged 10-20 living at home reported an occupation; two decades later nearly 30 percent did so in St. Jacques ward and 18 percent in Ste. Anne. The gap between the proportion of girls and boys working for wages remained, as did the different pattern of their experience. The girls who did work for wages would do so until they married, and then all but a very small number would cease wage labour.

Whether girls would take a job was decided by a combination of factors: their place in the family, the nature of local employment opportunities and the steadiness and wage level of their father's job. Having one or more older brothers might mean that they were more likely to be kept at home to help with housework. The dominance of the putting-out industry in St. Jacques led to a consistently higher proportion of girls there reporting an occupation than in Ste. Anne, where the heavy labour offered fewer female jobs.

In 1871 and 1881 a quarter of the girls in St. Jacques' working-class families were at work by the time they reached 14 or 15. These young workers were predominantly the children of labourers, shoemakers and carters, as well as of men in the highly seasonal construction trades. Unlike girls in the mill towns of New England or Lancashire, England, few Montreal girls began work before the age of 14, though some did. Twelve-year-old Adeline Brousseau reported that she worked as a "labourer", as did her 16- and 19-year-old brother and sister and her father.¹² Few of these very young workers, unless they were the oldest girl, were the only additional wage earners. Given the wages of \$1.00 to \$3.00 a week that a young child like Adeline could make, the work of more than one was needed to fill the gaps that winter, time between jobs, and low wages made in a labourer's or shoemaker's earnings.

Girls in nineteenth-century Montreal were clustered in a few jobs, most notably service and dressmaking. Those who worked as servants usually left home to reside in the house of their new master and mistress. Working in the homes of the men of commerce, the professions and manufacturing, they toiled for long hours, got shelter, more protection than they may have wished for and minimal pay.¹³ In such homes, they saw from the outside a life completely different from their own where lack of food and clothing and freezing houses in winter had for many been part of everyday life.

If Montreal's leading female employment, domestic service, took young women away from their own families and into the homes of others, the next most important occupation—the sewing trades—kept many of them at home. In both Ste. Anne and St. Jacques, half the girls under the age of 20 who lived at home with their parents and reported an occupation were seamstresses or modistes. Clothiers, haberdashers and shoemakers all attested in the 1870s to the widespread existence of

12. Public Archives of Canada, Statistics Canada, RG 31, Manuscript Census, 1881, St. Jacques ward, subdistrict 17, household no. 376 (hereafter MS Census, 1881, 17: 376).

13. Claudette LACELLE, "Les domestiques dans les villes canadiennes au XIX^e siècle: effectifs et conditions de vie", *Histoire sociale—Social History*, XV (Mai-May 1982): 181-207.

homework in their trades. Mr. Young, a Montreal haberdasher, for instance, reported that his firm had five establishments in Montreal employing "about fifteen hundred people working indoors and out-doors . . . About one half of some of our goods are taken home and made by out-door work-women to be finished. They are all private persons and not small manufacturers."¹⁴

The clustering of two to five family members, all seamstresses, so commonly found in St. Jacques ward suggests very strongly that here was a centre of homework. Take, for instance, the family of Marie and Michel Guigère. In 1881 they had nine children at home aged 2 to 23. He worked as a shoemaker; four girls aged 13 to 23 reported that they were seamstresses, one son worked as labourer, and the 13-year-old son was an apprentice. Marie kept house for the workers, caring for the younger children, shopping, cooking, cleaning and looking after her husband's 77-year-old father who lived with them. She probably also helped sporadically with the sewing.¹⁵

Piece-work at minimal rates and for long hours initiated these girls to wage labour. Working at home they were free from the constraints of factory hours and factory discipline; but to make more than a pittance they were obliged to work continually.¹⁶ Why did so many girls apparently sew at home rather than work in factories or shops where wages, while still low, were higher? Employers in 1874 all agreed that most of their workers were French Canadians and were "females who can get nothing else to do."¹⁷ Probably there was little option. This was one trade in which women possessed an advantage, usually having at least some sewing experience. And, while there was a scarcity of certain kinds of skilled labour in Montreal, there was an overabundance of unskilled female labour. As old trades were deskilled and production reorganized, unskilled labourers, women and children, all competed for the existing jobs. They took what they could get.

Yet to argue that they had no options would be incorrect. There was some sewing work available in factories. There was apparently always a shortage of domestics and there were the jobs for women and girls in tobacco factories, in printing establishments, shops and other workshops and factories. Some young girls were no doubt attracted by the independence from family ties that accompanied work away from home. Those girls sewing at home, in contrast, were likely among the first generation of workers experiencing wage labour, for it was to the city's eastern wards, especially St. Jacques and Ste. Marie, that French Canadians from depleted rural areas migrated. Probably, like their equivalents in the early years of the industrial revolution in Great Britain, as long as there was a choice between home and factory they chose the home. For, as Pollard has pointed out:

The reasons for the repulsion of factory industry were many and varied and they were not all economic. There was more to overcome than change of employment or the new rhythm of work. There was a whole new culture to be absorbed and an old one to be traduced and spurned, there were new surroundings . . . and new uncertainties of livelihood,

14. Canada, House of Commons, Select Committee on the Manufacturing Interests of the Dominion, *Report*, Journals, 1874, Appendix 3, pp. 61-63 (hereafter *Report*, 1874).

15. MS Census, St. Jacques, 1881, 12:101.

16. Canada, Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital, *Quebec Evidence* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1889), p. 437 (hereafter *Quebec Evidence*).

17. *Report*, 1874, p. 8.

new friends and neighbours, new marriage patterns and behaviour patterns of children and adults within the family and without.¹⁸

Homework in clothing and shoemaking, by its very nature a product of the advanced division of labour and of factory production, offered these women a chance to resist the split between home and workplace and the adjustments this entailed. Older girls, for example, were responsible for domestic labour around the house, whether they brought in wages or not. Homework meant that for them and for married working women the two occupations could be combined. Moreover, sisters could work together and parents did not have to worry about their daughters being in dangerous, possibly immoral work environments. At home the women had at least the illusion of setting their own pace; they could modify the contours of "continuous employment . . . one of the most hated aspects of factory work".¹⁹

Compare, for example, the work situation of seamstresses at home with that of children working in factories as seamstresses, collar-makers, shoemakers or tobacco workers. In most factories work began anywhere between 6.30 and 7.30 a.m., summer and winter. Lunch was taken at noon at the factory in the same room they worked in. Punctuality was ensured in some factories by actually locking the doors once work began, in others by the imposition of heavy fines.²⁰

Even in more respectable work as office-girls, salesgirls or shop workers, conditions were grim. By the 1880s, in the dry goods business, for instance, some girls worked only from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.; but many served in shops that stayed open till 9 and even 10 or 11 p.m. on Saturdays. In retail stores, serving girls were forced to stand all day. Others worked in tiny, stuffy sewing rooms attached to the retail outlets.²¹

The wage work of girls within the family should not be overstressed. While many daughters of working-class parents probably earned wages at home at some point prior to marriage, at any one time most did not. In 1861 under 10 percent of daughters aged 10-20 and living at home in these two parts of town reported an occupation. In the two following censuses there were one-third at work. Families, except those in greatest need, preferred to send sons out to work for wages and keep their daughters at home. While boys became accustomed to wage labour, girls moved between wage labour and housework in response to the family's economic needs. At home they served an apprenticeship in the reproduction of labour power—in babysitting, sewing, mending, cooking and shopping.

In fact, it made good economic sense to have boys rather than girls earn wages. While children of each sex often earned a similar wage, once they reached 15 or 16, girls received lower wages than men. The reporting of wages to the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital gives some idea of wage differentials by age and gender. In 1888, children earned as little as \$1.00 a week in cigarmaking, 25 to 30 cents a day in the cotton mills. Girl apprentices in dressmaking, mantle-making and millinery might earn nothing for several years till they had learned the trade, then they received around \$4.00 a week, well under

18. Sydney POLLARD, *The Genesis of Modern Management. A Study of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain* (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), p. 162.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

20. *Quebec Evidence*, pp. 679; 77, 102, 227, 25.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-20.

the \$6.00 of an unskilled labourer. In workplaces where young women and men both had jobs, differentials based on gender are clear. "Girls" making uppers in Olivier Benoit's shoe manufactory, for instance, received \$3.00 to \$4.00 a week. Men, in contrast, made \$7.00 to \$8.00. Girl bookbinders made \$1.50 to \$6.00 a week, journeymen bookbinders an average of \$11.00. Similar differentials occurred in most trades.²² Low wages for women and children were justified because it was assumed they were secondary wage earners. Girls and women were less likely to enter the workforce because they could earn less. Ideology and reality thus combined to increase the importance of the home as woman's place. The sexual division of labour was thus perpetuated. Women and girls were not excluded from production, but neither did they take part in wage labour on the same terms as men or even boys. The premise that they were dependent on a father or husband kept their wages below the level at which they could support themselves alone.²³ Those who tried to live alone found it virtually impossible. Some single girls boarded with families, a few shared with other young women, and some finding no other way to make ends meet turned to prostitution.

Over this period an increasing proportion of girls were dependent on their parents before marriage. In 1861 over 15 percent of the girls in these wards aged 10-20 had some independence in that they lived with an unrelated family, either as a boarder or servant. By 1881 only 5 percent did so. The proportion living with relatives also decreased from 5 to 1 percent. This pre-industrial stage of semi-autonomy²⁴ characterized fewer and fewer children's lives as industry developed and as families became more reliant on the wages and domestic labour at home of sons and daughters.

II — WAGE LABOUR AMONG MARRIED WOMEN

Marriage for a man meant assumption of the major and often sole responsibility for supporting the family. "A man with a family who is lazy and drunken, and who will not support his family should be flogged", one reformer argued in the 1880s.²⁵ Yet many who were neither drunken nor lazy could not support a family on wages that were low and in jobs that were not steady. In such cases, among the families of the unskilled; the deskilled and small traders, wives sometimes helped to earn wages, though very seldom. A woman who married a worker became the reproducer of his labour power. She would transform her husband's wage into what was needed for daily life—food, clothing and shelter. She would bear and raise the next generation of workers. Her work was basic to family survival. The nineteenth-century wage was in fact premised on the existence of domestic labour in the home.²⁶ That labour often took place under the most trying of circumstances, in

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 271; 15, 365, 297, 331.

23. Veronica BEECHY, "Women and Production: A Critical Analysis of some Sociological Theories of Women's Work", in *Feminism and Materialism*, eds. KUHN and WOLPE (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 186.

24. Michael KATZ, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 266.

25. *Quebec Evidence*, p. 19.

26. Jean GARDINER, Susan HIMMELWEIT and Maureen MACKINTOSH, "Women's Domestic Labour", *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*, IV (June 1975): 3-4.

houses lacking running water or sewage, without adequate insulation against the winter and, for some, in very crowded conditions. Irregular pay made shopping and rent payment difficult. Not until the end of the nineteenth century were wages being paid in most jobs on a regular weekly or bi-weekly basis. By the 1880s pay had regularized on the city's wharves—a major source of employment.²⁷ In the 1870s, however, it was reported that it was “nothing unusual to see the men on the wharf with their wives having their baskets on their arm waiting until 1 or 2 o'clock on Sunday morning for their money.” A joiner explained to the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital in 1888 the difficulty of getting his wages from his master. “When the wife expects \$7.00 or \$8.00 to live upon, and the husband arrives and has not got it, it is not convenient.”²⁸

Irregular work and low wages made several family workers necessary and the wife's work in the home even more vital. Only the most careful of housekeepers could tide a family through periods of unemployment or illness, and often not even then. “Do you believe”, the same Montreal joiner was asked in 1889, “that actual wages are sufficient to enable a man to live honorably, properly and to bring up his family?” “No sir”, was his reply—a reply echoed by many other workers, giving evidence.²⁹

Women's work in the home could and often did make the difference between adequate survival and hunger and discomfort. Some women stretched wages by careful shopping and food preparation. They took in boarders to increase the family's cash. A few in 1861 and 1871 made butter, kept bees, or wove linen or wool material. More kept animals. In 1861 cows, pigs and other stock were not concentrated in the hands of milk producers or small farmers on the city outskirts. Rather they were scattered around the city in the backyards of the poor. A milk cow meant milk at minimal cost to a labourer and his family. This valuable supplement to a wage income was largely eliminated after the 1870s when sanitary reformers convinced municipal politicians to outlaw some animals within the city.³⁰

In only a few families did married women take on relatively steady jobs and report an occupation to the census taker. Still more probably worked occasionally, taking in washing, ironing, sewing and mending or babysitting for neighbours, relatives or friends. Even if census enumerators massively undercounted the number of wives who worked for wages³¹, the most striking feature of married women's

27. *Quebec Evidence*, p. 632.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 652.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 652, 21-22.

30. See my “Pigs, Cows and Boarders: Non-Wage Forms of Survival Among Montreal Families, 1861-1881”, *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1984, forthcoming.

31. On the problem of underenumeration, see Sally ANDERSON, “Women's Work in Nineteenth Century London: A Study of the Years 1820-1850”, in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, eds. Juliett MITCHELL and Ann OAKLEY (London: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 63-66; MASON, VINOVSIS and HAREVEN, “Women's Work and the Life Course”, p. 191. Clearly, some men chose not to report the wife's wage work, perhaps out of a feeling of shame. Frances EARLY cites the case of Felix Albert, French Canadian emigrant to Lowell, Massachusetts. “I have not reached a level here which requires you to work”, he angrily responded when his wife showed him a dollar she had earned taking in laundry. “The French-Canadian Family Economy and Standard of Living in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1870”, *Journal of Family History*, VII (Summer 1982): 183. Yet the instructions to Canadian Census takers were quite clear on this point, at least from 1871 on: “In the case of a woman, unless they have a definite occupation beside their share in the work of the family or household, the column is to be

work experience is the infrequency of wage labour. In these two areas of Montreal between 1861 and 1881, the highest percentage of wives reporting an occupation to the census taker was 5.3 percent in St. Jacques in 1861. In England a decade earlier, in contrast, one-quarter of married women resident with their husbands were reported as working for wages. In France in 1860, 40 percent of married women worked.³² The figures available on the numbers of married Montreal women reporting an occupation to the census taker reflect the ambiguity of wage labour for wives. Over the three decades only between 1 and 5 percent of women reported wage work.³³ Specific numbers vary both in place and time from the peak in St. Jacques in 1861 of 5.3 percent to a low of under 1 percent in Ste. Anne in 1881.

Variations result from a combination of ideological and cultural, economic and family-based factors. Cultural definitions of men and women's roles clearly contributed to keeping some working-class wives at home except in the most desperate of situations. The belief that the home and the associated work there was women's proper sphere was not simply a borrowed middle-class ideology. It also reflected a sensible and rational allocation of labour power within families attempting to survive in the capitalist system at that time. Provided that the husband alone or with one or more children could earn sufficient money for survival, a wife best served the family economy by managing the household. The division of labour within the family and the patriarchal structure is nicely captured in an interview with a French-Canadian emigrant to Manchester, New Hampshire. Remembering her family in the early twentieth century, she reported that her parents fought when her mother suggested going out to work.

He'd say "no, you're not going to work. You're going to stay home." And that's why she did other things. She'd make clothes for him, take in boarders, rent rooms. She used to rent one or two rooms for \$12.00 a week to people who worked in the mills. Sometimes she'd also work; little stretches at night, from six to nine, because we lived right in front of the mills. When there were big orders, the mills were always looking for people. But my father didn't want to keep the children. That was woman's work; his work was outside.³⁴

Broader economic and structural factors also contributed to the lack of wage labour among married women. Crucial was the overall scarcity of work available in this period in Montreal and Quebec as a whole—a situation dramatically different from the mill towns of New England or even the factory towns of England and France. Married women were not the only, nor indeed the major, reserve of labour available to Montreal capitalists. Rapid population growth and two hundred years of exploitation and depletion of the soils of Quebec combined to produce large

filled with '———' as also in the case of children. If they have a special occupation such as seamstress, clerk, factory hand etc., then it should be entered accordingly". See the "Manual Containing 'The Census Act', and Instructions to officers employed in the taking of the First Census of Canada, 1871", *Sessional Papers*, 1871, no. 64, p. 134.

32. TILLY and SCOTT, *Women, Work and Family*, p. 124. It is important to note, however, that the logic behind enumeration varied from country to country, leading to divergent practices. Further work needs to be done on the different bases of job reporting in different countries, especially regarding the effects on enumeration of the occupations of women and children.

33. Figures used in this section are based on the occupations reported by all wives in these wards with co-resident husbands, not on a sample.

34. Tamara K. HAREVEN and Randolph LANGENBACH, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory City* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 255.

numbers of potential workers—a pool of labour much greater than the available jobs.³⁵

The few married women who did wage labour in nineteenth-century Montreal were likely to attempt to enter and leave the workforce in response to conditions within the family as much as in the workplace. Hence the ambiguous nature of the figures for their involvement. Influential factors included the nature and stability of the major wage earner's income, whether there were other potential second wage earners, and interruptions in the head's earnings as a result of illness, drunkenness or unemployment.

Wives who did work for wages came from families headed by men in unskilled and highly seasonal occupations. Around one-quarter of the women were wives of labourers. In 1871 in St. Jacques, while 10 percent of the ward's population were in unskilled jobs, 36 percent of the wage-working wives were married to unskilled workers. While 7 percent of wage workers were shoemakers, 18 percent of working women were the wives of shoemakers. While 10 percent of the population worked in construction, 21 percent of the wives were married to construction workers. Between 5 and 10 percent of these wives earned money helping husbands who were small proprietors: running grocery stores, a baker's shop or a small stall at the local market. Numerous other women married to grocers, shopkeepers and small traders must surely have helped, too, without considering it necessary to inform the census taker.

The pattern of married women's involvement in the labour force reflects the fact that the wife was the least likely family member to work for wages. Over half the married women who reported occupations came from families where there was no other possible additional wage earner, i.e., before she had had children or while they were under 11. This was the critical period of the family life cycle, when there were often many children to feed and clothe, but only one wage earner.³⁶ More had children than did not, and for these women childcare must have been a constant problem. Lacking older girls or boys in the family, those who could not work with their children nearby had to turn to neighbours, kin, boarders or institutions for babysitters.

Not surprisingly, many wage-earning mothers turned to additional household members for assistance. In St. Jacques in 1861 half the households in which the wife worked and the children were too young to work had additional people in them. Some were extended families with parents, brothers or sisters present. A few had female relatives, others an extra family, and still more had female boarders. In the Cerat household, for instance, the 48-year-old father worked as a stone cutter as did his two sons. Both sons were married. Their wives and children all lived with the grandfather. Both mothers worked as seamstresses. Working together they could supervise the three children under 5.³⁷ When Marguerite Courtois, apparently

35. Paul-André LINTEAU, René DUROCHER and Jean-Claude ROBERT, *Histoire du Québec contemporain* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1979), p. 142.

36. For further detail on this stage of the family life cycle see BRADBURY, "Family Economy and Work".

37. MS Census, St. Jacques, 1861, fol. 7429. The numbering system in the 1861 Census was different from that used in subsequent ones. Folio numbers quoted for 1861 refer to the number printed on the upper right corner of each family's return.

an unmarried mother, had a daughter, she went to live with her brother, a baker in St. Jacques. In 1861 he had three children himself. Marguerite and her sister-in-law Flavy Courtois both took in work as seamstresses and probably shared caring for the children as well as the cooking, washing, shopping and general housework.³⁸ Thus additional household members served not only to spread the costs of rent and to provide additional household income, but also to share the tasks of daily reproduction.

Other parents, unwilling or unable to find relatives, boarders or neighbours to help look after their young children could turn to the daycare centres or even orphanages run by the Church.³⁹ Schools too were clearly important in providing daily care for older children. The availability of schools and church-run daycares and orphanages gave mothers some options about how their children could be cared for if they did go out to work or get sick. However, demand was always greater than the space available. In 1865 the Sisters of Providence reported turning some 400 children away from their Salle d'Asile in St. Jacques because of lack of space.⁴⁰

Most of the married women reporting an occupation chose jobs that simplified the reconciliation of wage work and domestic labour. Most, especially in St. Jacques ward, worked in the clothing industry as seamstresses and sewing women. And most worked at home with other family or household members. Mme Dufresne is not atypical. She took in work as a seamstress as did her four daughters aged 20-34.⁴¹ Twenty years later the same pattern was found in numerous families. Rachel Racette, the wife of a labourer, also worked as a seamstress along with four of her daughters, aged 17-28. A fifth daughter aged 13 attended school, while the 25-year-old son worked as a cigarmaker.⁴² Most other wives reported that they worked as labourers, small shopkeepers, washerwomen or servants.

French-Canadian women predominated disproportionately amongst wage-earning wives in 1861. By 1881, they were only slightly more likely to report a job than were Irish women.⁴³ Cultural preference and tradition was not a major factor in married women's work in Montreal. The wage labour of wives arose out of their

38. MS Census, St. Jacques, 1861, fol. 7743.

39. On Montreal's daycares see CROSS, "The Neglected Majority", pp. 76f; Micheline DUMONT-JOHNSON, "Des garderies au XIX^e Siècle: les Salles d'Asile des Sœurs Grises à Montréal", *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique Française*, XXXIV (juin 1980): 27-57. On the use of orphanages as short and long term survival strategies, see my "The Fragmented Family: Family Strategies in the Face of Death, Illness and Poverty, Montreal, 1860-1885", in *Childhood and Family in Canadian History*, ed. Joy PARR (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), pp. 104-28.

40. Archives of the Sister of Providence (hereafter ASP), Montreal, "Notes pour les chroniques de l'Asile St. Vincent", handwritten manuscript, 1865.

41. MS Census, St. Jacques, 1861, fol. 8068.

42. MS Census, St. Jacques, 1881, 17:340.

43. The exact distributions of French-Canadian women in the two censuses were as follows:

	Ste. Anne		St. Jacques	
	1861	1881	1861	1881
% of female population	18	28	68	87
% of working wives	33	24	87	95

By comparison, Irish females in Ste. Anne ward went from 30 percent to 48 percent of the female population between 1861 and 1881, and from 40 to 42 percent of the working wives.

material situation, itself a direct result of their class position. They worked not “to buy finery”,⁴⁴ but to supplement the irregular and low wages of their husbands. Married women acted as secondary wage earners in the family economy largely when no children were available to do so. Once there were, domestic labour became their major task.

III — WIDOWS AND WAGE LABOUR

Marriage in nineteenth-century Montreal offered working-class women the best, if a somewhat shaky, chance of economic security. Given the low wages for women and the limited types of jobs available, a woman’s best hope for security lay in a husband who could find relatively well paid and steady work, who did not drink away his wages and who treated her tolerably. Remaining with elderly parents, a life in domestic service, or entering a convent were possible alternatives.⁴⁵

For those who did not marry, or whose husbands died or deserted them, the realities of women’s dependency on a male wage earner became clear. Widowhood was not something confined to a few women. In 1881, 30 percent of all women in Montreal over the age of 40 were widows. This compares to only 10 percent of men of the same age. The large difference reflects the fact that remarriage for widowers was both easier and more likely than for widows. The surplus of females over males in Montreal must have made it especially difficult for widows with several young children to compete for a spouse.⁴⁶

The loss of a husband thrust on a woman’s shoulders the burden of new responsibilities. Previously she had managed the incoming wage, stretched it over tight periods, and even perhaps supplemented it at times by working for wages herself. Now she found herself responsible for incoming cash on which to live. Her previous work background left a woman with several young children ill-prepared to be the sole supporter of the family. If she had had experience with wage labour, it had been brief and had seldom led to the development of a marketable skill. When she had worked before she had probably been a second or third wage earner in the family. Now she would need to be the major earner, or provide in other ways. As long as girls were raised and viewed as home-makers, as the reproducers of labour power, and wages were predicated on this assumption, widows and single women would face this problem.

Women drew on diverse areas of skill, on their families, on friends and on charity, when as widows they reshaped the contours of the family economy. Younger widows often moved back in with their parents or in-laws, transferring their dependence from the dead husbands to their fathers. Marie-Louise Larivière, aged 26, and her three children, for instance, moved in with her parents-in-law some time after her

44. *Report*, 1874, p. 36.

45. Marta DANYLEWYCZ, “Taking the Veil in Montreal, 1850-1920: An Alternative to Migration, Motherhood and Spinsterhood” (Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the CHA, 1978).

46. Alain BIDEAU, “A Demographic and Social Analysis of Widowhood and Remarriage”, *Journal of Family History*, V (Spring 1980): 34-36, points to the lower remarriage rate for females and especially of widows with children in the Castellany of Thoissey, France, between 1670 and 1840. See also BRADBURY, “The Fragmented Family”; CROSS, “The Neglected Majority”, p. 69.

husband's death.⁴⁷ Some women joined with other widows facing similar problems. When "Widow McGrath" lost her husband, she was left with three children aged 4 to 9. She took in two other widows, one with an 11-year-old child. Two of them worked as washerwomen, one sold goods at market. Between them they kept five pigs, probably eating some, and raising cash by selling others.⁴⁸

The fragility of a widow's or of a deserted woman's survival in a situation where wages were the major source of sustenance is clear from a comparison of families headed by males and females. Throughout these two decades only 2-6 percent of male-headed families were without a worker, whereas 30-48 percent of female-headed ones were. In these households without any workers alternative sources of survival had to be found. Some women may have survived partially on small pensions or on payments from mutual benefit associations. Yet the numbers belonging to such schemes must have been limited. The \$1 to \$5.00 entry fee and the 25 to 38 cents weekly contribution were more than many a family could muster. Furthermore, the \$1.00 to \$2.00 given weekly as benefits was not sufficient to live on.⁴⁹

Both Catholic and Protestant charities in Montreal catered to large numbers of widows in dire need. Some provided food and support while visiting them at home; others gave sewing or other work in institutions. Several Montreal orphanages took children for varying lengths of time and were used by widows to tide themselves over difficult periods.⁵⁰

If a woman did not remarry, and clearly a very large proportion did not, her children were her major security. Not surprisingly then, there were a higher proportion of children at work in female-headed households than in those with a father present. Between 1861 and 1881 in Ste. Anne, the percentage of female-headed homes with children at work increased from 30 to 50 percent, compared with an increase from 15 to 25 percent among homes with a father.

Widows did work for wages themselves. Between 19 and 30 percent reported an occupation to the census taker in this period. They were involved in a depressingly limited number of occupations. Without capital or work experience, choices were clearly limited. They took on jobs that used the skills they had developed in the home. Sewing, cleaning, cooking, running small hotels or boarding houses or acting as nurses or midwives accounted for four-fifths of their occupations. Their jobs differed from those of working wives in the higher percentages involved in running boarding houses, hotels and saloons, and in the predominance of washerwomen.⁵¹ Whereas in 1861 a few appeared to inherit the trades of their deceased husbands, over the next decade this pre-industrial practice clearly died out. For widows, as

47. MS Census, Ste. Anne, 1861, fol. 1595.

48. MS Census, Ste. Anne, 1861, fol. 3160.

49. On such associations, see L. A. HUGUET-LATOURE, *Annuaire de Ville-Marie. Origine, Utilité et Progrès des Institutions Catholiques de Montréal* (Montreal: Senécal, 1863), pp. 105-14.

50. BRADBURY, "The Fragmented Family"; Montreal, Protestant Orphan Asylum, *Annual Reports, 1870-1895; A History of the Montreal Ladies Benevolent Society, 1890-1920* (Montreal, 1920); L'Institut de la Providence, *Histoire des Sœurs de la Providence* (Montréal: Providence 1940), vols. II and IV.

51. The information on widows' jobs is based on an analysis of all widows reporting an occupation in the two wards.

for wives and daughters, the clothing industry was important. Here, the women worked for industrial capital, but seldom directly. Virtually all the other jobs they held were in sectors that were of little interest to industrial or commercial capital. They worked for wealthier families, especially as washerwomen, but also as servants and cooks. Such jobs were linked to the abilities of families to afford to pay others to do the tasks. In 1871, the only time over these decades that the census was taken in a period of general prosperity, over one-third of the widows of Ste. Anne found work as washerwomen. A decade earlier, when the economic climate was more depressed, less than one-tenth found such work. Other women opened small, often precarious corner stores, traded in apples or in fish on the streets or at the market. Some were general hucksters, small dealers and traders. One, Marie Paquette, a 77-year-old illiterate French Canadian who lived with a young labourer's family, honestly reported her occupation as beggar.⁵² For widows, work outside the home was truly an extension of their domestic labour in the home. Few of the jobs offered secure, steady paying work. Few offered consistent hours. This was both their attraction and their disadvantage.

IV — CONCLUSION

Within the working-class family in mid to late nineteenth-century Montreal, the sexual division of labour made men the primary wage earner and older brothers the preferred second earner. Girls worked in some, but not all, such families, especially among the children of the unskilled. The wife's contribution to the family economy lay not in her wage labour, which was infrequent, but in her transformation of the wage of others into sustenance, and in her ability to find alternate sources of support. This she did by taking in boarders, turning at times to charity and to kin and neighbours.

Wage dependency locked the wife and children to the father in a relationship that was mutual, but also hierarchical and dependent. It was not an equal relationship. Its very equilibrium was embedded in the sexual division of labour within the family and in the economy. Women and girls could seldom make as much as their fathers or older brothers. They therefore were more likely to be the homemakers. Ideology, economics, and practicality mingled inextricably to perpetuate differences in the life courses of men and women. The latter's involvement with wage labour would be transitory, temporary, something ambiguous, undertaken at specific stages of their individual and family life cycles and in times of crisis. Their dependence on male earners was especially highlighted in the plight of widowhood.

Yet when there were steady wages for the major wage earner, when an older brother or daughter could also work, and when the wife could adequately feed and clothe the family, this was the best arrangement working-class men and women had to keep themselves clothed and fed and sheltered. Industrialization did not destroy the working-class family, but the spread of wage labour and the growing separation of home and work did reshape the family economy. Divisions of age and gender hardened. The association of wages with work downplayed the contribution of women's domestic labour at home. Within the working class the family remained

52. MS Census, St. Jacques, 1871, 10:287.

crucial for, as Jane Humphries has pointed out, it was the only institution through which workers could control, to some degree, their standard of living.⁵³ It was in that control over the standard of living that working-class women played the crucial role.

53. For a more theoretical analysis of the persistence of the working-class family, see Jane HUMPHRIES, "Class Struggle and the Persistence of the Working Class Family", *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, I (1977): 244-58, and "The Working Class Family, Women's Liberation and Class Struggle: The Case of Nineteenth Century British History", *The Review of Radical Political Economics*, IX (Fall 1977): 25-41.