

WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRIAL LABOUR FORCE: *Evidence for British Columbia, 1921-53*¹

ERIC W. SAGER

THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN in the measured and paid labour force of the twentieth century remains a compelling subject for historians in Canada and elsewhere. A series of related problems have commanded attention: among others, the rise of women's labour force participation; recurring crises over gender and the work roles of women and men; the persistent overrepresentation of women in specific occupations and the durability of "glass ceilings"; the intersection of class, gender, and race in the state regulation of women workers; and the long history of struggles over wages and pay equity. Central to all of these subjects is the question of the timing of the rise in women's labour force participation as the issue of timing is critical to any explanation for changes in women's employment and work roles.² The issue of timing is itself bedeviled by problems with the state-generated statistics upon which all historians rely to varying degrees: the under-counting of women in both non-remunerated and paid or "gainfully occupied" labour

¹ I am indebted to Brodie Waddell for his meticulous work in entering the data into an Excel file during the 2004-05 academic year as well as to the University of Victoria for its work study program. I extend sincere thanks to Patricia Roy for her keen insights and helpful comments on a draft of this article. I am indebted to this journal's two anonymous readers for their very helpful comments.

² In Canada standard works include Patricia Connelly, *Last Hired, First Fired: Women and the Canadian Work Force* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1978); Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and Their Segregated Work* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994); Paul Phillips and Erin Phillips, *Women and Work: Inequality in the Canadian Labour Market* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1993); Ruth A. Frager and Carmela Patrias, *Dis-counted Labour: Women Workers in Canada, 1870-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). On women and work in British Columbia, a few collections remain indispensable: Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess, *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in British Columbia* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980); Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro, *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984); Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag, *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1992).

is only one of these problems. There is plenty here to challenge another generation of historians interested in the history of women, gender, family, and labour markets.

A general explanation for the rise of women's labour force participation requires integrating a number of factors: long-term changes in the structure of the labour force; demographic changes; the effects of the Depression and the Second World War; changes in standards of living and in consumer culture; changes in household production technology; and, interwoven in all of these factors, the contingent and changing cultural assumptions about gender. The literature and the methods are multidisciplinary: the analytical challenge has attracted historians, sociologists, and economists, and the literature from each of these disciplines is substantial.³ In North America the work of Claudia Goldin is central to the agenda, and her recent periodization of women's employment in the United States offers Canadian scholars an opportunity for fruitful comparative analysis. Goldin suggests that three evolutionary phases (from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s, from about 1930 to 1950, and from about 1950 to the 1970s) were followed by a "quiet revolution" that continues today. Her distinction between evolutionary and revolutionary change is firmly rooted in fundamental changes in the duration (or "horizon") of women's employment, in changes to women's self-perception (or "identity"), and in changes to the family-based decision-making process behind women's employment.⁴ Goldin's work invites us to revisit the trends in women's employment

³ From sociology, see Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Gregg Lee Carter, *Working Women in America: Split Dreams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For Canadian sociology see, among others, Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*; Cecilia Benoit, *Women, Work and Social Rights: Canada in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Scarborough: Prentice Hall, 2000). The economics literature is vast, but for recent Canadian contributions with a historical perspective, see Byron Lew and Marvin McInnis, "The Changing Structure of Women's Work and Its Rewards, Canada, 1911-1961," Queen's University Economics Department Working Paper, 2003 (presented to the Canadian Network on Economic History, 2002); J.C. Herbert Emery and Joan Wallace, "Marriage Market Imbalances and the Changing Economic Roles of Women: Evidence from Canada" (n.d., <http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~hemery/emerysd.doc>, viewed January 2006); Morris Altman, "On the Natural Intelligence of Women in a World of Constrained Choice: How the Feminization of Clerical Work Contributed to Gender Pay Equity in Early Twentieth-Century Canada," *Journal of Economic Issues*, 37, 4 (2003): 1045-74; Nicole M. Fortin and Michael Huberman, "Occupational Gender Segregation and Women's Wages in Canada: An Historical Perspective," *Canadian Public Policy*, 28 (2002): 311-39; Marsha Courchane and Angelia Redish, "Women in the Labor Force, 1911-1986: A Historical Perspective," in *False Promises: The Failure of Conservative Economics*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Gideon Rosenbluth (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1992), 146-62.

⁴ Claudia Goldin, "The Quiet Revolution That Transformed Women's Employment, Education, and Family," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 11953 (Cambridge, MA, January 2006). See also Claudia Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

in the first half of the century, both for their intrinsic importance and because her first three phases set the preconditions for what followed later in the twentieth century.⁵

This article offers a modest empirical brushstroke to one corner of this big historical canvas. Although we are a long way from testing Goldin's conclusions within the Canadian context, I am persuaded that useful advances can be made through microhistorical, or regional, studies, including those that focus on Canadian provinces or regions, so long as such studies are attentive to the multidisciplinary and macro-level contexts. As a longtime user of censuses and other official records, I continue to believe that official sources can and must be used so long as we understand their provenance and their limitations. In focusing on participation in the waged labour force, I in no way intend to deny the importance of the unmeasured work of women, both within and beyond the household. State agencies may have made a fetish of paid labour, but historians need not do so. I choose to focus on wage labour because the search for paid work was fundamental to the life course of women in the twentieth century and because there were relationships among household labour, family economies, informal economies, and the paid labour force: estimating the participation of women in paid labour is one essential step towards understanding their movement between paid and other work.

Historians of British Columbia possess a readily available but little used source on the employment of men and women in the province's industries: the annual reports of the provincial Department of Labour, established in 1917. The department was created to administer laws relating to labour, to oversee various boards and commissions, to collect statistics, and to monitor the employment of "Oriental" labour, "with a view to improving the relations between employers and employees in the province."⁶ The agenda was the stabilization of industrial relations and the mitigation of conflict, with minimal direct intervention, at a time

⁵ The influences of parents on children is only the most obvious example of influences extending from one temporal phase to the next. Of interest to Canadian historians may be the argument of Fernandez, Fogli, and Olivetti that the sons of women who held jobs during the Second World War were more willing than were previous male cohorts to accept the fact that their wives would be in the paid labour force. Raquel Fernandez, Alessandra Fogli, and Claudia Olivetti, "Mothers and Sons: Preference Development and Female Labor Force Dynamics," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 119, 4 (2004): 1249-99. On the relation between household technology and women's employment, see Jeremy Greenwood, A. Seshadri, and M. Yorukoglu, "Engines of Liberation," *Review of Economic Studies* 72, 1 (2005): 109-33.

⁶ "An Act Respecting the Department of Labour," *Statutes for British Columbia 1917*, chap.32. See also "Description of Dept. of Labour fonds," BC Archives, at <http://search.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca>, viewed December 2005.

when trade union membership was increasing and when new provincial initiatives, such as Workmen's Compensation, were being introduced.

In creating the Department of Labour, the government was striking a bargain with employers. In return for its services, the department expected specific contributions. The provision of information was one expectation that clearly increased the operating costs of employers. The department wanted to know how many industrial workers there were, what they were paid, and how many there were of each nationality or race. Beginning with the annual report of 1918, the department reported "Statistics of Trade and Industries," although in this first year the data covered only the first seven months of 1918. By 1921 the tables report summary results for twenty-five industrial sectors for the calendar year. For each industry the tables state the number of firms reporting, total salary and wage payments to three categories of employee (managers, clerical/sales, and wage earners), the average number of male and female workers by month, the number of male and female employees (wage-earners only) at each of thirty wage levels, the number of male and female employees of each "nationality," or "country of origin"; and (to 1925 only) the number of wage earners working at specified numbers of hours per week.

The information was collected by means of a questionnaire sent to every industrial employer in the province, and the department noted that its staff invested considerable time and energy in ensuring that its list of employers was complete and up-to-date. Despite these efforts, the early reports note that many firms often returned their completed questionnaires too late, and only after repeated reminders. The 1919 report admits that "a number of firms" in the province had not complied and that the absence of their returns "leaves the report incomplete."⁷ By 1925 the Department of Labour was becoming more assertive:

It should be understood that employers failing to comply with our request for returns, within the period specified, are placing themselves in a serious position. These returns are legally obligatory, and in order that there be no misunderstanding, section 8 of the Department of Labour Act is here quoted: "Every person who for the space of one month after receipt of notice to furnish information required under any of the provisions of this Act, neglects or refuses to furnish the same shall be liable, on summary conviction, to a penalty not exceeding one hundred dollars."⁸

⁷ British Columbia, Annual Report of the Department of Labour, 1919, *Sessional Papers*, 1920, vol. 1, K5.

⁸ This quotation, and the one in the next section, are from British Columbia, Annual Report of the Department of Labour, 1925, *Sessional Papers*, 1926-27, vol. 1, G12.

Such efforts encouraged the department to believe that annual increases in the number of firms and the number of industrial employees now reflected not simply a higher response rate but “chiefly the progressive increase in the number of industrial establishments in the Province.”

The data in these tables are potentially very useful. Above all, since the data are reported annually, they transcend the limits of the information reported in the decennial censuses. The census snapshots of 1931, 1941, and 1951 do not allow us to say much about employment levels during the Depression of the 1930s, or during the Second World War, or even during the immediate postwar years. Since the Department of Labour questionnaires carried the weight of a legal obligation and were targeted at specific firms in manufacturing, mining, construction, and transport, their coverage is likely to be reasonably comprehensive within this broadly defined “industrial” sector. The respondents were the employers themselves or members of their clerical or accounting staff; there seems little reason to assume an incentive to systematic misreporting or under-reporting. The specific problems that led to the undercounting of women in censuses (the denial of an occupation to a farmer’s wife, for instance, or the under-reporting of casual or part-time work by women) are less likely to arise when clerks or accountants are asked to go through wage books or ledgers and count the number of women employees in each month.

We must still be very cautious in using these reports. A graph of the total number of men and women employees in all industries in each year may be constructed; we must accept, however, that short-term fluctuations (especially in the 1920s, when compliance was less certain) may reflect changes in response rates as well as real changes in total employment. It is also clear that any such graph cannot measure total industrial employment in the province. Not included in the tables were butchering, cartage, coal yards, wood yards, janitors, heating plants, warehouses, and transcontinental railways.⁹ Thus we probably cannot use the data to estimate the industrial labour force participation rates of women in British Columbia (i.e., the proportion of all adult women who were employed in industry). We can, however, say something about long-term changes in the numbers employed within a definable economic sector called “industry” and about the proportion of this industrial labour force consisting of women. A great advantage of the tables as constructed by the Department of Labour is their consistency:

⁹ The 1923 Annual Report (*Sessional Papers*, 1924, 611) estimates that, if all industrial operations were included, the total industrial payroll would be closer to \$145 millions than to the reported \$106,796,958.

they report, for thirty-three consecutive years from 1921 to 1953, the same information for firms in the same industrial sectors, with remarkably few changes in the categories structuring the tables. In this way administrative convenience and the department's desire to make comparisons over time serve the interest of historians.

A comparison of the decennial census information with the information in the Department of Labour tables suggests that the census systematically underestimated women's employment in industry. If we sum those reported by the census to be employed in manufacturing, logging, mining, construction, and transportation (the same sectors included in the provincial labour reports), we might infer that 4.2 percent of BC employees in these sectors in 1921 were women; the proportion rises to only 4.9 percent by 1941 and to 6.9 percent by 1951.¹⁰ The Department of Labour tables suggest much higher proportions: 7 percent in 1921, 9.2 percent in 1931 and 1941, and 10 percent in 1951. If we accept that the provincial data are the more reliable, the census was missing several thousand women workers in each year.¹¹ These results are consistent with Margaret Hobbs's reservations about the value of census data for the study of the employment and unemployment of women.¹²

What, then, do the provincial data tell us about women's employment? They allow a specific contribution to our understanding of what happened to women in the Depression of the 1930s, the subject of work by Margaret Hobbs, Katrina Srigley, W. Peter Archibald and others in Canada as well as several scholars in the United States.¹³

¹⁰ *Census of Canada, 1951*, vol. 4, table 2. The table gives the total number of men and women in the labour force by province and by sector as reported in each census from 1901 to 1951.

¹¹ An objection might be that the census is counting all employees, including salaried employees, whereas the Department of Labour reports count only wage-earners; and that if the provincial reports included salaried employees, then the proportion of women indicated by those reports would be lower. There are two responses. First, the overwhelming majority of those employed in these sectors were wage-earners; thus the addition of salaried employees would not significantly alter the gender ratios. Second, the annual surveys of manufacturing firms conducted by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS) through the 1920s and 1930s indicate that the proportion of women among salaried employees was slightly higher than it was among wage-earners. In 1929, for instance, the DBS survey reports 4,726 male salaried employees and 1,058 female salaried employees, and 39,217 male wage-earners and 6,378 female wage-earners in manufacturing in British Columbia. This suggests that about 18 percent of salaried employees were women and that 14 percent of wage-earners were women. These data tend to confirm that the census was seriously underestimating the proportion of all employees who were women. The DBS annual surveys of manufacturing are summarized in the *Labour Gazette* for most years in the 1920s and 1930s. See, for instance, *Labour Gazette* (May 1930), 595.

¹² Margaret Hobbs, "Gendering Work and Welfare: Women's Relationship to Wage-Work and Social Policy in Canada During the Great Depression" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1995).

¹³ Hobbs, "Gendering Work and Welfare," chap. 5; Katrina Srigley, "In Case You Hadn't Noticed!": Race, Ethnicity, and Women's Wage-Earning in a Depression-Era City," *Labour/Le*

As these authors note, economic theory relating to labour markets suggests three hypotheses about the effects of a depression on women's employment. First, when pressed to cut costs, employers are persuaded by the relative cheapness of women's labour to lay off more men than women and even to substitute cheaper female labour for male labour ("substitution" theory).¹⁴ Second, reserve army theory would suggest that women are a flexible reserve, to be drawn upon when the economy is booming and laid off in recession; gender assumptions and pressures to give priority to male breadwinners reinforce the tendency for women to be "last hired and first fired."¹⁵ Third, labour market segmentation theory holds that women are more clustered than are men in a narrow range of occupations and that the level of women's employment will be determined by demand for products in female-dominated sectors. The differential impacts of recession by sector may even result in a lesser risk of layoff for women than for men.¹⁶

The results for British Columbia are consistent with the findings of Archibald for Hamilton and Hobbs for Ontario (Graph 1).¹⁷ The proportion of the industrial labour force consisting of women increased in the early years of the Depression, from 7.5 percent in 1929 to 10 percent in 1932 and 9.9 percent in 1933 (I make no claim to the definitive precision of these estimates: it is the trend that I assert to be credible). This does not mean that more women were being hired than men; rather, it suggests that proportionately fewer women were being laid off. As in Ontario, "women do appear to have been hit less by unemployment than men were, but not nearly to the extent that

Travail 55 (Spring 2005): 69-105; W. Peter Archibald, "Do Status Differences among Workers Make a Difference during Economic Crises? The Case of Depression Hamilton," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 35, 2 (1998): 125-63. For the United States, see Lois Scarf, *To Work and To Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

¹⁴ Jill Rubery and R. Tarling, "Women in the Recession," in *Socialist Economic Review* 1982, ed. D. Currie and M. Sawyer (London: Merlin Press, 1982), 47-75.

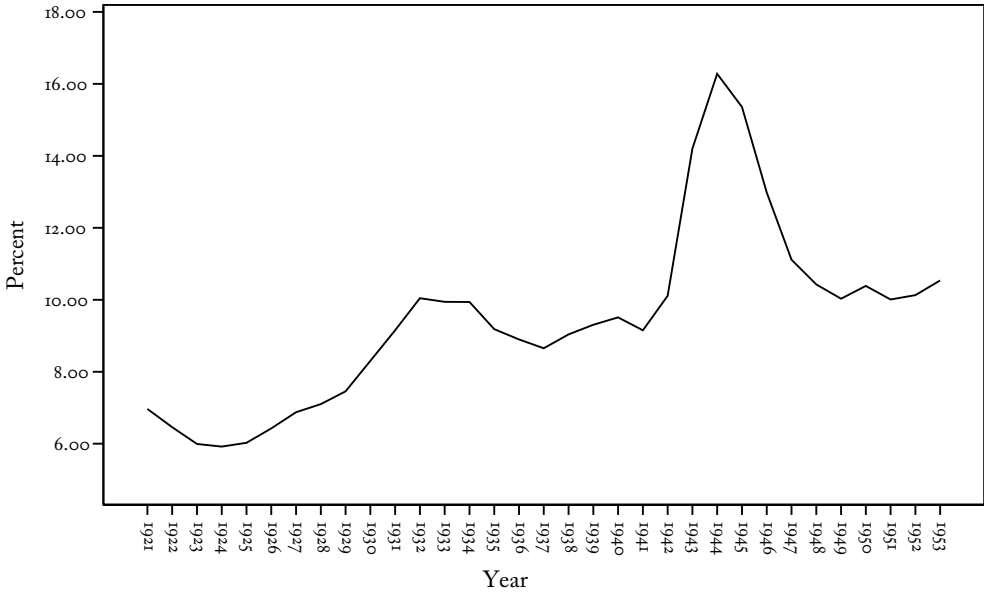
¹⁵ Connelly, *Last Hired, First Fired*; Irene Bruegel, "Women as a Reserve Army of Labour," *Feminist Review* 3 (1979): 12-23.

¹⁶ Among the many works that emphasize this approach are Ruth Milkman, "Women's Work and Economic Crisis: Some Lessons of the Great Depression," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 8, 1 (1976): 73-97; Alan Green and Mary Mackinnon, "Unemployment and Relief in Canada," in *Interwar Unemployment in International Perspective*, ed. Barry J. Eichengreen and T. J. Hatton (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 353-96. Jill Rubery points out that these apparently competing hypotheses may be compatible in specific historical contexts. For instance, women may be a flexible and expendable reserve, and they may be segregated in unstable jobs or unstable firms. Jill Rubery, ed., *Women and Recession* (London: Routledge, 1988), 4-5. See also Hobbs, "Gendering Work and Welfare," 262-5.

¹⁷ Data in Graphs 1 through 5 are from the Department of Labour Annual Reports, British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*.

GRAPH 1

Women as a Percent of All Wage Earners, All Industries



Unless otherwise stated, data in the graphs that follow are from British Columbia, Annual Reports of the Department of Labour, *Sessional Papers*.

contemporaries assumed.”¹⁸ The conclusion applies only to the first five years of the Depression. As employment levels slowly recovered in the late 1930s (and not until 1940 did total industrial employment return to the 1929 level), the proportion of wage earners who were men rose as men returned to the labour force more frequently than did women.

These results confirm parts of each of the three hypotheses and suggest that none is complete by itself. As markets collapsed and employers sought to cut costs in the economic downturn, they laid off more men than women. At the onset of the Depression, any ideological preference for male breadwinners gave way to the cost-cutting priority. As a slow recovery began after the trough of 1933-34, however, male workers were rehired and women workers were not. Women remained in reserve, “last hired” if not “first fired,” while employers’ preference for male labour reasserted itself.

It is very unlikely that employers were substituting women for men in any significant numbers in the 1930s. The overall trend was not the

¹⁸ Hobbs, “Gendering Work and Welfare,” 43, 260. See also Archibald, “Do Status Differences among Workers Make a Difference?” 127.

sum of similar patterns in all industries. In some sectors the proportion of wage earners who were women actually fell between 1929 and 1934: breweries, explosives/chemicals, leather and fur, and laundries. In these sectors there was a tendency to retain men, and especially Canadian men: the number and proportion of Canadian employees remained stable or rose as the number and proportion of women and Asian workers fell. For reasons relating to their calculations of costs and essential labour inputs, employers in these industries found ways to substitute Canadian men for women, Asian, and sometimes other non-Canadian workers.

The overall increase in the proportion of women workers between 1929 and 1933/34 was in fact determined by only a few industries. As labour segmentation theory predicts, women were concentrated in a much smaller range of industries and occupations than were men.¹⁹ In 1929 four sectors – food products, garment making, laundries, and street railways/utilities – accounted for 80 percent of all women wage-earners in BC industries, and this proportion rose to 83 percent by 1933. Three of these industries – food products, garment making, and street railways/utilities – determined the pattern in Graph 1, and the most important of these was food products. In food products women employees were to some extent sheltered from layoff because they were in an industry of inelastic demand: total employment fell much less in it than in most other industries.²⁰ The same may apply to street railways (the BC Electric Railway had a female clerical staff) and to some utilities, such as telephones, although it did not apply to garment making.²¹ Relatively stable demand in food products and street railways/utilities appears to have sheltered firms in these sectors from total collapse: the decline in the number of firms in these areas between 1929 and 1933 was relatively small.²²

¹⁹ Gillian Creese notes the concentration of women workers in Vancouver in 1931. See Gillian Creese, “The Politics of Dependence: Women, Work and Unemployment in the Vancouver Labour Movement before World War II,” in *British Columbia Reconsidered*, Creese and Strong-Boag, 366–7.

²⁰ Total employment (men and women) in food fell by slightly under 12 percent between 1929 and 1933. By comparison, the Department of Labour tables suggest that total employment in all industries fell by 41 percent between the same years. At the national level, Margaret Hobbs infers cautiously from census data that segregation afforded women some degree of protection (mainly in service, clerical, and sales occupations). Hobbs, “Gendering Work and Welfare,” 274–5.

²¹ The number of firms in street railways/utilities actually increased from 99 to 101 between 1929 and 1933. In telephones, Elaine Bernard reports that “The operators survived the depression without layoffs.” Elaine Bernard, *The Long Distance Feeling: A History of the Telecommunications Workers’ Union* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1982), 87. Garment making collapsed: total reported employment fell by about 50 percent, and total salary and wage payments fell by 70 percent between 1929 and 1933.

²² In 1929 the total number of firms reporting information to the Department of Labour was 5,065; by 1933 the total was 3,530, a decline of 30 percent. In food products the decline was 12

Women's relative protection from layoff is explained mainly by their concentration in specific sectors. There is no evidence of any change in employment patterns that might have challenged prevailing assumptions about gender roles or gender stereotyping of occupations. Employers do not appear to have substituted women for men. If women were replacing men, then we would expect to see inverse correlations: the number of women would increase or remain stable as the number of men declined. This did not happen in the Depression, whether we look at all industries together or at specific industries. For the decade as a whole, there is a very strong positive correlation between annual changes in the number of men and women employees. Looking only at food industries between 1929 and 1935, again we find a strong positive correlation.²³ When men were laid off, so were women; the difference is that proportionately fewer women were laid off.²⁴

Men and women were streamed by industry and by occupation within industries. The patterns of segmentation remained intact, and both men and women suffered in the Depression. The slightly greater protection from layoff for women in no way implies that women did not suffer from unemployment. The Department of Labour tables suggest that of all jobs held by men in 1929, 42.8 percent had disappeared by 1933; women, already a small fraction of the labour force, saw 22 percent of their jobs disappear. Women, furthermore, were always more vulnerable to seasonal layoff than were men, and this vulnerability increased during the Depression. By 1933 over a third of jobs held by women in summer had disappeared by winter.²⁵

percent (from 507 to 447 firms). In street railways/utilities there was a small increase in the number of firms.

²³ The correlation coefficient is +.89 for annual changes in total male and female wage earners from 1929 to 1939. For food industries the coefficient for annual changes from 1929 to 1935 is +.69. It is interesting to note that in the late 1930s, almost as many women as men were hired, and, when rehiring occurred in the food sector, proportionately more women than men were hired.

²⁴ It is still possible that some women were being shifted into positions vacated by men. But I think it more likely that the gender-based occupation hierarchies in food processing remained intact and that the pace of work for men remaining on the job increased. Unfortunately the Department of Labour tables cease reporting weekly hours of labour after 1925. The data on number of wage earners by month suggests that seasonality diminished for men between 1929 and 1933. In 1929 there were 22 percent fewer men employed in all industries in December than there were in July. This seasonal difference had diminished to 7 percent by 1933. It is likely that employers were retaining a smaller number of experienced or trusted men who would be employed all year.

²⁵ I measure the seasonal change by taking the difference between the average of those employed in three summer months (June, July, August) and the average employed in three winter months (December, January, February). In 1929, winter employment levels for women were 27.9 percent less than were summer employment levels; by 1933, winter employment levels were 34.8 percent below summer levels. The comparable differences for men were 21.4 percent (1929) and 19.7

Unemployment and seasonal layoffs must also be set in the context of the large and remarkably stable gap between men's and women's earnings. Graph 2 is constructed from the tables in the Department of Labour reports that list the number of men and women wage-earners at each of thirty wage levels.²⁶ In 1921 women's weekly wages were 60 percent of men's. By 1933 women's wages were still at 62 percent of men's, and in the recovery to 1940 the gap widened (in that year women's earnings were 54 percent of men's). The gap between men and women narrowed slightly during the Second World War (women's weekly wages were 63 percent of men's by 1944) but widened immediately afterwards. In a few wartime industries in which the employment of women increased rapidly during the war – explosives/chemicals, shipbuilding, metal trades, and wood – women's earnings came closer to those of men. But any benefit was temporary, as women were laid off in these industries after the war and wage gaps between the sexes widened.²⁷ The wage gap in Graph 2 relates only to average weekly wages: given the tendency to greater seasonal layoffs for women, the gap between men and women would be even greater if we could look at annual earnings.

The modest shifts in the ratio of women to men over the Depression decade may be the least interesting of the results to be gleaned from the Labour Department reports. Short-term changes during the Depression and the Second World War occurred within the context of a structure of inequality basic to capitalist labour markets. This structure took a particular form in British Columbia, where resource-extraction and resource-processing industries depended upon a specific mix of immigrant and Native labour. A highly racialized and gender-based distribution of occupations emerged in the nineteenth century: where a large pool of surplus labour had not accumulated, much of the demand for labour was met by the hiring of workers – Asian, Aboriginal, female – whose

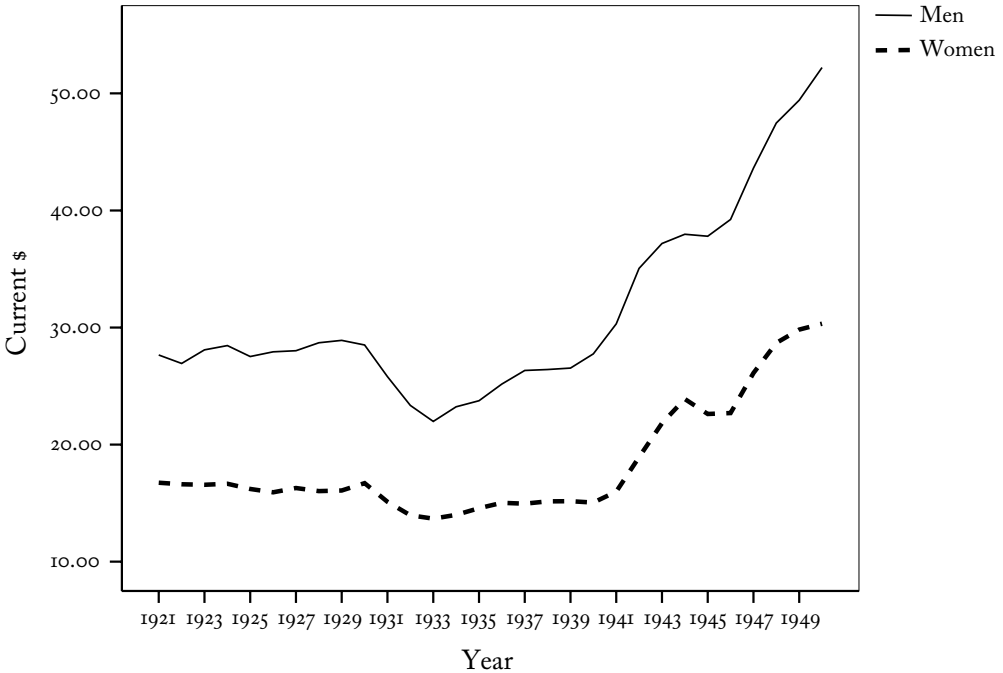
percent (1933). Even factory work not directly related to seasonal resources could be subject to seasonal layoffs. The garment factories experienced seasonal layoffs following the rush to produce for winter and summer markets. See Marlene Hill, "At the Garment Factory," in *Working Lives: Vancouver 1886-1986*, ed. Working Lives Collective (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1985), 61.

²⁶ In estimating the annual averages, I take the mid-point of each weekly level (thus, those between \$14.00 and \$14.99 are assumed to be earning \$14.50) and multiply by the number of wage earners at each level, regardless of age. The total wage bill is the sum of the product of weekly wage and number of earners at each level. I take the data here only to 1950 since the reports reduce the number of categories for wage level from thirty-four to fourteen in 1951, and I am reluctant to estimate an average weekly wage for 1951 to 1953 on the basis of the smaller number of categories.

²⁷ By 1944 in explosives/chemicals, women were at 85 percent of the average wage of men. The comparable percentages were 78 percent in shipbuilding, 72 percent in metal trades, and 74 percent in wood industries.

GRAPH 2

Estimated Average Weekly Wages, Men and Women, All Industries



labour was signified as “cheap.”²⁸ By the second decade of the twentieth century, if not before, immigration had helped to create a labour surplus that manifested itself in large numbers of unemployed, especially in the cities.

The result was a remarkably durable structure of inequality *within* the wage-labour force. Graph 2, presented here as a necessary summary of broad trends, conceals a much more important reality: few if any workers, male or female, actually earned such “average” amounts. Much more important are the ranges and variations, both within and across industries. To take one example: in food products in 1921, weekly wages for adult women ranged from six dollars to between forty and forty-five dollars. The range for men was wider: from six dollars to over fifty dollars, and many more men than women were at the higher wage levels. The

²⁸ An important recent study of the racialization of occupations in the nineteenth century is Jamie Morton’s “Industry, Ideology and Social Formation in British Columbia, 1849-1885” (PhD diss., University of Victoria, 2005). See also Alicja Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996).

material living standards of both women and men depended on where they were located in the wage and occupation hierarchy. Many parts of the food sector were seasonal (most obviously, the canning of fish, fruit, and vegetables). But even if a worker were fortunate enough to be employed for ten months, annual earnings for those at the bottom of the scale must have fallen between \$258 and \$430. Life must have been very different for those women, and the much larger number of men, earning thirty dollars a week or more: their annual earnings were likely to have been over \$1,300, and a few were likely to be earning over \$2,000 a year.

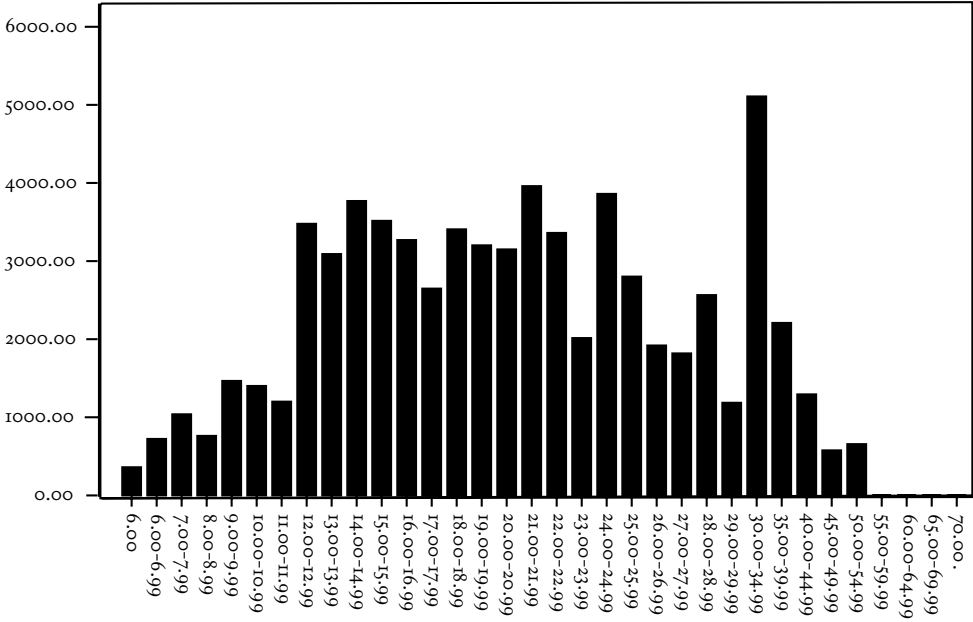
The different wage structures among industries widened the overall earnings disparities. A male worker in metal mining, smelting, oil refining, or shipbuilding was likely to be earning two or three times as much as a cigar-maker in the 1920s. Graph 3 shows the number of workers at each wage level for all industries in 1933, and the distribution was only slightly wider than it had been in the 1920s. Graph 4 shows that the war left very wide wage differentials but pushed many more into the higher range, from thirty dollars to fifty-five dollars a week (these are current-dollar values, which do not take into account the effect of wartime inflation). The distribution flattens after the war and returns to its more “normal” shape.

My previous work with the 1901 census suggests that, quite apart from any gap between employers and employees in British Columbia, the inequalities *within* the working class were already extreme.²⁹ The data before us on industries in the province suggest that those inequalities persisted through the first half of the twentieth century. These inequalities existed even in industries that employed few women and few Asians. Nevertheless, earnings disparities were not independent of gender or race in the “white man’s province.” In the early 1920s almost 15 percent of the industrial labour force consisted of Asians (Chinese, Japanese, and “Hindu”). One goal of the Department of Labour was to monitor, and to encourage, the replacement of Asian workers with white workers, and in its reports the department recorded what it saw as success. The total number of Asian-origin workers fell, especially during the Depression and during the Second World War, and the proportion of the industrial labour force identified as Asian fell steadily across the

²⁹ A standard measure of income inequalities is the gini coefficient, which always falls between 0 and 1. The gini coefficient for all Canadian families in 1995 was .37. The gini coefficient for BC wage earners in 1901 was a remarkably high .38. Obviously the coefficient would be much higher if all incomes could be included. See Eric W. Sager, “Inequality, Earnings, and the Canadian Working Class in 1901,” in *Household Counts: Canadian Households and Families in 1901*, ed. Eric W. Sager and Peter Baskerville (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

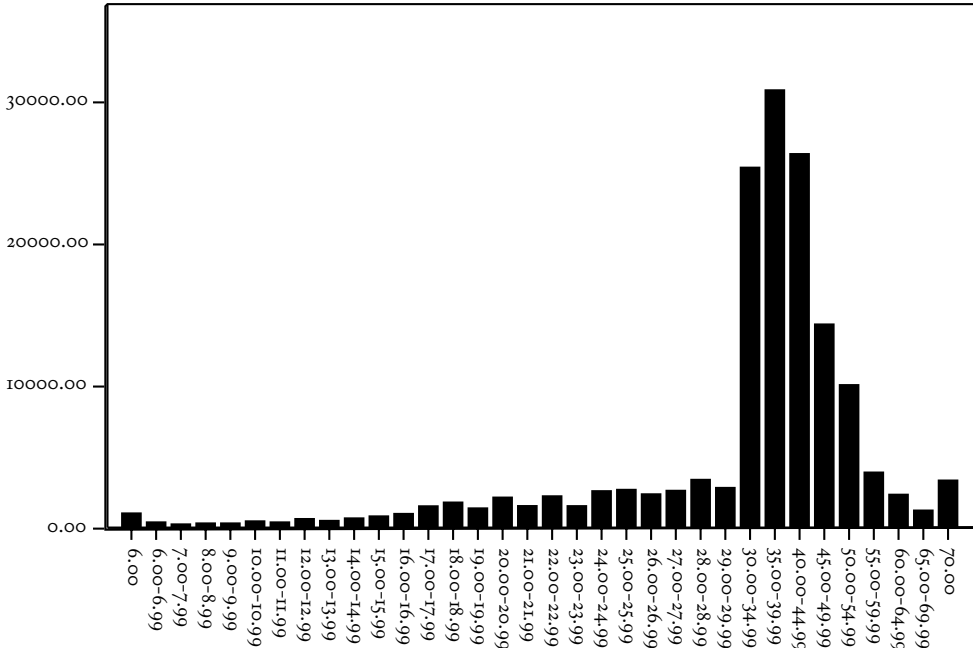
GRAPH 3

Number of Workers (Men and Women) by Weekly Wage Level, All Industries, 1933

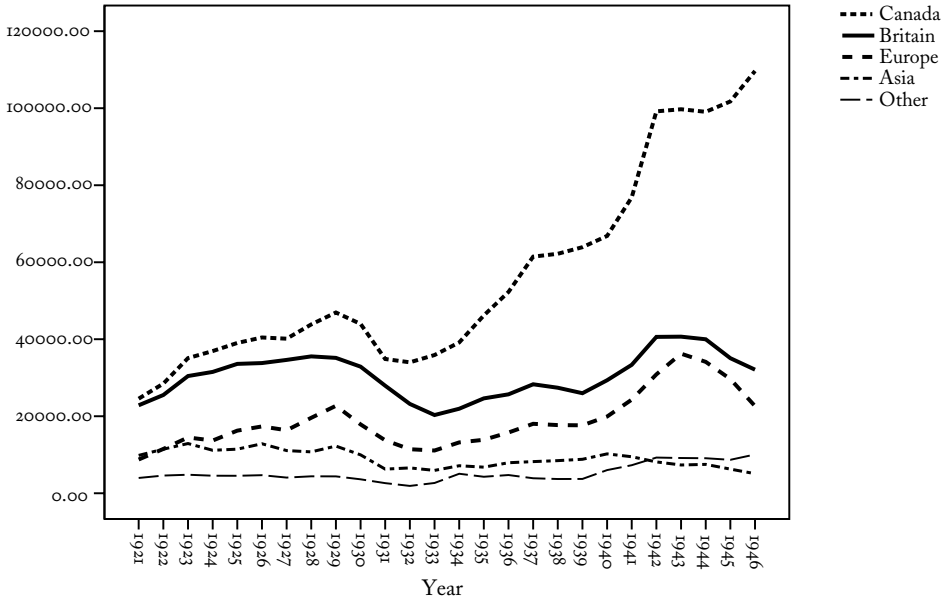


GRAPH 4

Number of Workers (Men and Women) by Weekly Wage Level, All Industries, 1946



GRAPH 5
Number of Employees by Country of Origin, All Industries, 1921-46



first half of the century (Graph 5).³⁰ While Asian-origin workers were employed in many industries, they were concentrated in a few industries: in the early 1920s, 90 percent of the Japanese were in three industries (food, lumber, and pulp and paper); 89 percent of Indian-origin (Hindu) workers were in one industry (lumber); and 83 percent of the Chinese were in three industries (lumber, coal mining, and food). While there were some shifts over time, these concentrations remained remarkably durable through the 1930s and 1940s.

It cannot be shown that Asian workers depressed the wage levels throughout those sectors in which they were employed. They were not employed merely in industries where the wage levels were conspicuously low. Nor did the industries in which they were employed have a wider dispersion of workers across wage levels (the curve is not flatter, nor the left “tail” any longer, than it is in Graph 3). Unfortunately, the Department of Labour reports do not give us wage levels by “country

³⁰ On the decline of Asians in lumbering, and minimum wage legislation as an anti-Asian measure, see Patricia E. Roy, *The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man's Province, 1914-41* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 92-9. On the concentration of Asian workers, see also Gillian Creese, “Class, Ethnicity, and Conflict: The Case of Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1880-1923,” in *Workers, Capital and the State in British Columbia*, ed. Rennie Warburton and David Coburn (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988), 55-85.

of origin.” We know from other sources, however, that Asian-origin workers tended to be clustered at the lower levels of the wage distribution. They held jobs that normally commanded a low wage; and whatever the job, they were paid less than white workers. In 1921, according to Gillian Creese, Asian workers earned between twenty-two and forty-five cents an hour in a Vancouver sawmill; white workers’ earnings ranged from thirty-five to ninety cents.³¹ Separate wage scales for whites and “Orientals” were common in British Columbia until after the Second World War.

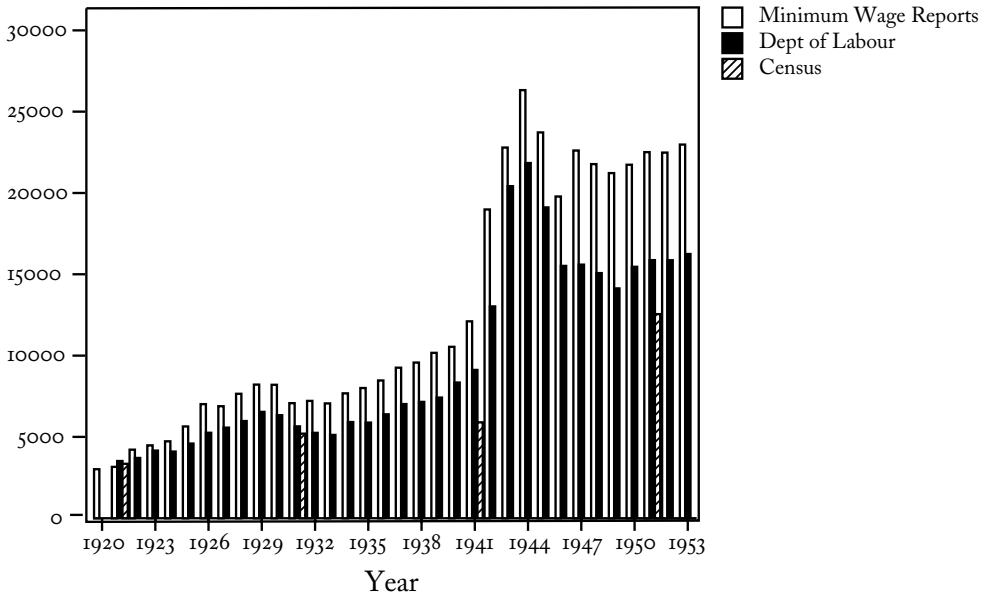
As the number and proportion of Asian-origin workers declined, the number and proportion of women workers rose. The direct substitution of women for Asians was most evident during the Second World War and in specific industries: builders’ materials, explosives/chemicals, lumber, pulp and paper, and, above all, the food sector. The replacement of Asians with women also occurred in coastal shipping, where it began in the 1930s. One effect of the exclusion of Asians (including the removal of Japanese during the war) was to smooth the entry of women into the labour force. The structure of inequality remained intact as employers found new sources of low-cost labour and as the race/gender composition of the labour force shifted.

Having annual data over three decades helps us to put the short-term changes brought on by the Depression and war into a larger context. The data force us to reconsider any generalizations about women’s labour force participation that are based on the census. Graph 6 offers estimates of the aggregate number of women employees in industry from three sources: the Department of Labour reports, the annual reports of the Minimum Wage Board, and the census. Not all data from the Minimum Wage Board reports are used: for instance, I omit the reported employment of women in office work, hotels, and “mercantile,” and include only those sectors that are also included as “industry” in the Department of Labour reports. Similarly, I include from the census the totals for women in manufacturing, construction, and transportation. The absolute numbers cannot be taken as definitive, and we must remember that the three sources are not measuring exactly the same thing. The data from the Minimum Wage Board may reflect changes in reporting, especially in the early years when the board was still trying to enforce compliance.³² The trends are presented in order to make a

³¹ Gillian Creese, “Working-Class Politics, Racism and Sexism: The Making of a Politically Divided Working Class in Vancouver, 1900-1939” (PhD diss., Carleton University, 1986), 85-6.

³² Beginning in 1925 the Minimum Wage Board asked for the number of women employees in the week “of greatest employment” in the year. In previous years they asked for the number of

GRAPH 6
Number of Women Employees in Industry from Three Sources



Sources: Department of Labour Annual Reports; Minimum Wage Board Annual Reports; census total for women in manufacturing, construction, and transportation.

simple point: women’s employment grew over three decades, both in total numbers (Graph 6) and as a proportion of the industrial labour force (Graph 1). War and the Depression induced no more than short-term fluctuations in this long-term trend. The direct employment effects of the Second World War were short-term: a growth of jobs in industries in which women had traditionally been employed (food products, laundries) and a small reduction in labour-market segregation as jobs

women employees in designated weeks of the year. The change resulted in an increase in the number of women reported. Report of the Minimum Wage Board, 1925, in British Columbia, Department of Labour Annual Report, 1925, *Sessional Papers, 1926-27*, vol. 1, 651. The board was careful to point out that it could not report the total number of women employees in the province since domestic servants, fruit-pickers, and farm labourers were excluded from the provisions of the Minimum Wage Act. Nevertheless, their tables on manufacturing, laundries, telephone and telegraph, fishing, and fruit and vegetable industries appear to be consistent across the years. The act creating the minimum wage for women gave the board sweeping powers of inspection and information-gathering. The board had the power to inspect all payrolls and records of employers “and to require from any employers full and true statements of the wages paid to his employees.” The board also had all powers conferred by the Public Inquiries Act for obtaining information. See “An Act to fix a Minimum Wage for Women,” *Statutes for British Columbia 1918*, chap. 56.

for women opened up in some non-traditional sectors (shipbuilding, metal trades, wood products, and “miscellaneous” industries).³³

Since the data do not purport to include all women workers, we cannot estimate the participation rates of women (the proportion of adult women who were in the paid labour force). We can infer, however, that participation rates were increasing at a steady rate across the three decades. The population of women aged fourteen and over increased from about 161,000 in 1921 to almost 426,000 in 1951. The difference between growth in the population of adult women and growth in industrial employment, as measured by the Department of Labour, is slightly over 2 percent per year (see Table 1).³⁴ Once again, there is no pretence to definitive precision here: the point is that, over time, the employment of women in the broad category “industry” was growing much more quickly than was the total population of women. Both the 1930s and 1940s were key decades in the growth of industrial employment for women.

A principal defect of the aggregated information in the published census helps to make sense of the difference between the growth rates inferred from the census and the rates inferred from the other two sources. The census was a snapshot of a specific moment in time, and it was the result of oral interviews between enumerators and household representatives (often, but not always, the male “head” of the household). The definition of “occupation” changed between censuses and so did instructions to enumerators. It was assumed, but it was not always explicitly stated, that enumerators would determine the principal occupation of all household members, even for those members who were unemployed at the time of the census. By 1931 it was explicit that enumerators should enter “the occupation in which last regularly employed” for persons who were “idle or unemployed at the date of the census.”³⁵ It is unlikely that the instruction was followed consistently. How consistently was the answer “she isn’t working at the moment” followed by the question “what was the last occupation in which she

³³ In 1939 about 70 percent of women in industrial occupations were employed in three sectors: food products, laundries, and street railways/utilities. By 1944 about 39 percent were in these three sectors. Indirect, attitudinal, and cross-generational effects of women’s wartime employment remain a matter for debate. See Claudia Goldin, “The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women’s Employment,” *American Economic Review* 81, 4 (1991): 741–56; Ruth Roach Pierson, “*They’re Still Women After All*”: *The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986); Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada’s Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 145–69.

³⁴ I omit estimates for the 1921–31 period because of the possibility that reporting compliance by industrial firms was weaker at the beginning of the decade than at the end and because of the change in reporting by the Minimum Wage Board in 1925.

³⁵ *Census of Canada, 1931*, vol. 1, 276.

TABLE 1
Estimated Annual Growth Rates in Women's Employment (Annual Percent)

YEAR	MINIMUM WAGE BOARD REPORTS	DEP'T OF LABOUR	CENSUS (3 CATEGORIES)	CENSUS (ALL WOMEN IN LABOUR FORCE)	POPULATION OF WOMEN AGED 14+
1921-1953 (1925-53)	5.9%	5.5%	4.5% (1921-1951)	4.6% (1921-1951)	3.3%
1931-1941	5.4%	5.4%	1.3%	2.3%	2.8%
1941-1951	2.1%	9.2%	7.8%	5.9%	3.5%

Note: the growth rate of 5.9% for Minimum Wage Board data is from 1925 to 1953 because of the change in reporting practice in 1925. Growth rates from census data are calculated from end-point ratios; growth rates from the other two sources are calculated from the linear regression of the logarithms of annual totals over time.

was regularly employed?" Even if the second question were asked, an informant could easily assume that a few months' work in a fish cannery was not regular employment. A male head of household might be reluctant to admit that his wife or daughters were compelled to take wage labour. The Department of Labour was asking a very different question, and it was asking it of employers: how many women have you employed at any time during the year and in each month of the year? The latter question is much more likely to yield a reliable estimate of the number of women in the labour force in a specific month or the average number in the labour force in a year.

Consider, for instance, the working life of Nan Bourgon, a peripatetic English immigrant, who held a succession of jobs in several places. She worked briefly as a dressmaker and a waitress in Vancouver; she moved to Prince Rupert and worked in the Grand Trunk Pacific café for three months; she moved to the Bulkley Valley and worked as a cleaning woman in a hotel; she moved to Seattle, then back to the Bulkley Valley, working as a "farmer's wife"; later in life she ran a boarding-house. Little if any of this work would have been caught by census enumerators. But at least when she held an occupation in services or industry she was more likely to have been counted by her employers and included in their reports to the Department of Labour or the Minimum Wage Board.³⁶

³⁶ Cole Harris, "Making an Immigrant Society," in *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 250-1; Nan Bourgon, *Rubber Boots for Dancing and Other Memories of Pioneer Life in the Bulkley Valley* (Smithers, BC: T. and J. Hetherington, 1979).

We should reflect not only on the questions asked by agents of the state in the past but also on the questions historians ask. It is one thing to ask what proportion of women were in the labour force at a specific moment in time (the participation *rate*); it is a very different thing to ask what proportion of women held a paid occupation at any time during the year (the participation *frequency*). The example of Nan Bourgon suggests that the participation frequency might be the more valuable measure of what women were actually doing. And it is still another thing to ask what proportion of women held a paid job once or more over another temporal frame – the lifecourse. The answer to the latter question would tell us a great deal about women’s experience of wage work and labour markets, about their movement between paid and unpaid work, and about the role of paid employment in the choices made over a lifetime.

Estimates of participation frequency and of lifecourse employment are beyond the scope of this article (and perhaps beyond precise measure, to be perceived anecdotally, through oral historical and biographical accounts). Nevertheless, what evidence we have suggests that participation frequency was high. And there is evidence to suggest a partial explanation for the rising labour force participation rate reflected in Table 1. A key change was likely to be in employment *duration*. At the beginning of the century, a large proportion of women entered the labour force in their late teens or early twenties but remained only briefly: most left the labour force at the point of marriage or early in the marriage.³⁷ The rising participation rates of women resulted from the fact that increasing numbers stayed in paid employment for longer periods; and in British Columbia this change was happening between the 1920s and 1940s, if not before.

Two key pieces of evidence confirm the point, and both come from the reports of the Minimum Wage Board. The board occasionally reported the “number of employees in continuous service” in a table showing the number of workers according to the number of years they had worked for their current employer. The results will, if anything, underestimate employment duration since many may have moved from one employer to another. The 1923 report suggests that 38.5 percent of

³⁷ In British Columbia in 1901, labour force participation for women peaked at age twenty-two, when one-third of all women were reported to have an occupation (and this is certain to be an underestimate). Only 12 percent of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine were reported to have an occupation. (Data taken from the national sample of the 1901 census created by the Canadian Families Project.)

women had been with their current employer for a year or less. Only 26 percent had worked for their current employer for three to four years or more.³⁸ Between 1923 and 1939 there was a significant change, and this change occurred particularly in manufacturing, including the food sector (fruit and vegetables). By 1939 only 29 percent of women had been with their current employer for a year or less, and almost half had been with their employer for three to four years or more.³⁹

Between 1925 and 1946 the Minimum Wage Board also collected information on the marital status of women employees. The 1925 report states that 19 percent of wage-earning women were married. By 1939 that proportion had increased to 22 percent, but the real change came during the war.⁴⁰ By 1943 37 percent were married. Many married women left the labour force immediately after the war, but the proportion of married women was up to 39 percent by 1951, and in manufacturing it was even higher.⁴¹ The census provides further evidence of the increasing tendency of women to remain in the labour force through their twenties and thirties – a trend that is fully evident well before the middle of the twentieth century.⁴²

In 1951, Pat and Hugh Armstrong tell us, “the female participation rate was at the point of rising steadily and quickly.”⁴³ Their emphasis on the four decades after mid-century makes sense if census data are taken as the primary benchmark of secular trends. Look again at the

³⁸ British Columbia, Department of Labour Annual Report for 1923, *Sessional Papers*, 1924, vol. 1, 660.

³⁹ British Columbia, Department of Labour Annual Report for 1939, *Sessional Papers*, 1940, vol. 1, 646.

⁴⁰ The 1939 percentage is very different from the census-based national estimate for 1941: “In 1941, only slightly more than 10 percent of all employed women were married,” according to Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson, and Naomi Black, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 351.

⁴¹ *Census of Canada, 1951*, vol. 4, table 11. While questioning the census estimates of the total number of women in the labour force, I am less concerned about the reliability of the information on marital status. Only if the undercounted or missing women employees were almost all of one marital status would the reported distributions be altered significantly. I do not know of a source that will tell us about the labour force participation of women with children during this period.

⁴² The reported percentages of women at each age level in British Columbia who were gainfully occupied are as follows:

	16-17	18-19	20-24	25-34	35-49 (1921) or 35-44 (1941, 1951)
1921	23.7%	41.2%	36.8%	15.9%	10.3%
1941	14.4%	36.5%	42.0%	23.4%	15.2%
1951	27.2%	57.5%	48.9%	25.8%	24.2%

Censuses of 1921 (vol. 4, table 4); 1941 (vol. 7, table 3); 1951 (vol. 4, table 3).

⁴³ Armstrong and Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto*, 24.

long-term trends inferred from census data in two key graphs in Prentice et al., *Canadian Women: A History*: the pre-1951 trend appears relatively flat and uninteresting, and the historian would be forgiven for placing explanatory emphasis on the period from 1951 to 1981.⁴⁴ I suggest that the rise in women's labour force participation in the postwar decades, important as it was, should not distract attention from the earlier steady rise in women's labour force participation rates. The 1930s and 1940s were key decades in the history of women's employment in British Columbia (and perhaps elsewhere in Canada). The movement of women into paid labour, and their retention of jobs over longer periods, began well before the changes that we associate with the third quarter of the century – the expansion of consumer culture, the women's movements of the time, the campaigns for pay equity, and the end of the baby boom. Pressures from within the family economy, and women's own needs and expectations, were persuading more women to seek and to retain paid employment during the decades of the Depression and the Second World War. At the same time more employers sought to limit labour turnover and to retain workers, even married women, regardless of ideological pressures to reserve work for married men. Work duration served much the same disciplinary function as did wage differentials, for women as for men: retention or rehiring was a reward for those who were deemed to be loyal, punctual, docile, and experienced.

We might expect that growth in the overall labour force participation of women would be more rapid in British Columbia than in Canada as a whole, for reasons having to do with the structure of the provincial economy. The labour force participation rate for women appears to be lower in British Columbia than in the rest of Canada at the beginning of the twentieth century; by 1951 the provincial and national rates are almost identical.⁴⁵ The "catch up" trend may relate partly to changes in the occupation structure of the provincial economy: at the beginning of the century, an unusually large proportion of the labour force was in male-dominated resource-based sectors (fishing, logging, mining); the shift from these sectors towards the service, clerical, and trade/finance sectors was proportionately greater in British Columbia than elsewhere. But this structural change cannot account directly for the positive growth rates indicated by Table 1 as these measure change *within* a broadly defined industrial sector rather than across sectors.

⁴⁴ Prentice et al., *Canadian Women*, appendix, figures A7 and A8, p. 473.

⁴⁵ The Canadian Families Project sample of the 1901 census indicates that, in British Columbia, 13.9 percent of women aged fifteen through sixty-four had an occupation. The national proportion was 17.6 percent.

Two key differences between British Columbia and most other provinces may shed light on the former's trends. First, British Columbia's was an economy in which a relatively small proportion of the labour force was involved in agriculture. The intergenerational movement of workers from agriculture to other sectors in the first half of the twentieth century did occur, but it involved relatively small numbers of people. We may speculate that, within this context, the barriers among workers themselves to accepting women as wage workers, rather than unpaid household-based workers, were weaker than they were elsewhere.⁴⁶ Second, this was a province where a relatively high proportion of women and men were immigrants. Where, in the transfer of ideas and assumptions from one place to another, so many lives were "radically decontextualized," as Cole Harris puts it, ideas and practices were contested and some, including even religious beliefs, could be discarded.⁴⁷ Immigrants came to a province where families and households were flexible, mobile, and often "non-traditional," and they came in the expectation of economic betterment. Annie McQueen, whose sojourning has been recounted by Jean Barman, may not have been the only woman to seek and find an "unusual liberty" in her activities and social intercourse after she moved to British Columbia.⁴⁸ Among migrant workers, and especially among migrant women themselves, the expectation of paid work may have been strong, and many came from Britain and from European countries where the labour force participation of women was higher than it was in North America.

This is not to deny the power of gender distinctions, of the male breadwinner norm, or of the resistance to married women having jobs, especially during the Depression of the 1930s.⁴⁹ There was considerable resistance to women as workers, just as there was in Ontario in the 1930s. That resistance was perhaps most evident in the teaching profession: until mid-century school boards expected women teachers to resign when they married. During the 1930s the feminization of teaching was reversed and the proportion of men rose as school boards gave priority

⁴⁶ On the other hand, as Cole Harris suggests, the "maleness" of most work in resource industries may have reinforced the gendered separation of workplace and residence and the identification of women with domesticity. Harris, *Resettlement of British Columbia*, 259.

⁴⁷ Harris, *Resettlement of British Columbia*, 262; Lynne Marks, "Leaving God Behind When They Crossed the Rocky Mountains": Exploring Unbelief in Turn-of-the-Century British Columbia," in Sager and Baskerville, *Household Counts*, forthcoming.

⁴⁸ Jean Barman, *Sojourning Sisters: The Lives and Letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); John Douglas Belshaw, "Rurality Check: Demographic Boundaries on the British Columbia Frontier," in *Beyond the City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia*, ed. R.W. Sandwell (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 210.

⁴⁹ Creese, "Politics of Dependence," 378, 381.

to male breadwinners.⁵⁰ The point is that between the 1930s and 1950s, many more women surmounted the “marriage bar” to employment, and gender ideology increasingly collided with the actions of women themselves.

In the “very ordinary life” of Phyllis Knight, the immigrant from Germany, there is much that was commonplace among women of her time. She and her contemporaries moved from one job to another, back and forth between household and paid labour, negotiating time and residence with a similarly mobile husband. Phyllis Knight worked in a chocolate factory and in domestic service; she was a janitor, a gold panner, a baker, and a homemaker; she worked in a Burns packing plant. “Jobs were pretty hard to get, at least for women,” she tells us.⁵¹ She knew many long spells without work, but she also found jobs, both before and after marriage and the birth of her children. The working life of Phyllis Knight is an instance of some of the trends in Claudia Goldin’s second phase (1930 to 1950): in these decades married women entered the labour market in greater numbers, albeit intermittently; women’s labour force participation typically varied inversely with their husband’s earnings; and within the working class, at least, the Depression and the Second World War helped to weaken the stigma surrounding women’s work outside the home. In these decades, as the evidence compiled by the Department of Labour helps us to see, women occupied no separate sphere but, rather, claimed their place in the paid labour force, by need and by right, long before the changes of the third quarter of the twentieth century.⁵²

⁵⁰ Of the 3,784 public school teachers in 1928-29, 72.0 percent were women. Of the 4,194 teachers in 1938-39, 61.8 percent were women. See British Columbia, Public Schools Report 1928-29, *Sessional Papers*, 1930, vol. 2, R8; British Columbia, Public Schools Report 1938-39, *Sessional Papers*, 1940, vol. 1, H9.

⁵¹ Phyllis Knight, *A Very Ordinary Life* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1974), 237.

⁵² Helena Gutteridge and the Women’s Employment League, founded in 1914, campaigned for employment for women on the grounds of both need and rights. See Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), 108-12.