

# "Weaving It Together" Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950

Gail Cuthbert Brandt

---

Volume 7, 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt7rr01>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this document

Brandt, G. C. (1981). "Weaving It Together": Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7, 113-126.

# RESEARCH REPORT/ RAPPORT DU RECHERCHE

## "Weaving It Together":

### *Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950*

Gail Cuthbert Brandt

Valleyfield, 1908: One morning, at age fifteen, Hermina joins her father, three brothers, and an older sister on their daily journey to work. Their destination is the sprawling industrial complex of the Montreal Cottons Company, located in the heart of the town. There the young Hermina is engaged as a twister, joining together cotton threads, from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. each day Monday to Friday, and for half a day on Saturdays. At the end of her first two weeks, she receives her pay envelope containing \$6.50 for 110 hours of work. At age 26, Hermina leaves the employ of the company to marry and to raise a family which will ultimately include eleven children. She will never return to the mills again.

Valleyfield, 1942: Jeanne's uncle, a loom fixer, persuades the foreman of the Weave Room at the Montreal Cottons to offer his niece a job. Jeanne is sixteen, and after a brief period as a shuttle threader, she is assigned her own set of looms. She works from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, and at the end of two weeks she receives \$32.00 for 100 hours of work. In 1947, at the age of 21, she marries. From that time, until her final withdrawal from the company's ranks in 1966, her employment pattern is irregular since she quits and resumes work around each of her four pregnancies.

A CAREFUL CONSIDERATION OF the working lives of these women, who represent two different generations of Quebec's *travailleuses*, raises some important questions. What do these individuals have in common? How similar were their work experiences? What methodology is most appropriate for capturing the essence of the working woman's industrial situation? It is the underlying premise of this paper that feminist labour history is necessary and desirable, and that its achievement will require writers to emphasize different techniques than if they were concentrating on male workers. As one feminist historian has pointed out:

Women are members of families, citizens of different regions, economic producers, just as men are, but their emphasis on these various roles is different. The economic role of men predominates in their lives, but women shift readily from one role to another at different periods in their lives. It is in this that their function is different from men, and it is this which must form the basis for any conceptual framework.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gerda Lerner, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," in Gail Cuthbert Brandt, " 'Weaving It Together': Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 113-125.

The most effective method for documenting the changes in the various roles women assume, and to relate their impact to women's paid employment, is through the study of the changing life situations of working women. This paper will attempt to show the potential of life-cycle analysis as a principal integrative technique in writing the history of working-class women. Not only does the study of age-related patterns help cast light on the lives of working women for whom there are few alternate historical sources, but also on the dynamics of the complex relationship between women, work, and the family.

What follows then is an attempt to use the life cycle as the framework in which to analyze women's role in the Quebec cotton industry. Since this work is but part of an on-going research project, the conclusions are more tentative than definitive.<sup>2</sup> Much of the material has been extracted from 35 lengthy interviews conducted with female cotton workers in Valleyfield, Quebec. The fascinating information they provide has been supplemented by federal census data, government reports, archival sources, and newspaper accounts.

## I

ONE OF THE LARGEST employers of female labour in Quebec in the first half of the twentieth century was the textile industry, and in particular, the cotton industry. The establishment of this industry in the province dates from the early part of the preceding century, but the most significant expansion occurred between 1880 and 1900. Encouraged by the National Policy tariff, manufacturers were attracted to Quebec for it possessed two inexpensive and abundant resources: hydro-electricity and labourers. By 1911, 63 per cent of all Canadian cotton workers were located in Quebec.<sup>3</sup> As Table I indicates, between 1891 and 1951, women constituted a large proportion of the cotton mill workers, although by the latter date it had been substantially reduced.

There are several possible explanations for the replacement of women by men in the industry. First, technological change must be considered. In her early study of women workers in American cotton mills, Edith Abbott cited technological advancements, in the form of new machinery requiring more physical strength to operate, as the principal reason for the diminishing proportion of female workers.<sup>4</sup> This effect appears to have occurred somewhat later in Canada, for as late as 1938, it was reported that "the workers employed on the

---

Bernice A. Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays* (Chicago 1976), 353.

<sup>2</sup> The project, "Women in the Quebec Cotton Industry, 1891-1951" is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. During summer 1980, 56 more interviews were conducted with women in Magog, and the information they contain corresponds with the Valleyfield data.

<sup>3</sup> *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. 3, Table V, 216-217.

<sup>4</sup> Edith Abbott, *Women in Industry* (New York 1909), 97-108.

principal manufacturing machines are not required to furnish any considerable muscular effort, which explains in part, the employment of large numbers of young persons and women in factories."<sup>5</sup> Thus the full impact of the introduction of heavier machinery probably was felt after World War II, as a result of the large-scale modernization of Quebec mills. On the other hand, the Report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Textile Industry did acknowledge that technology was altering employment prospects for women. It pointed out that "the increasing emphasis on finishing processes, such as dyeing and printing, may be factors in increasing the proportion of male workers."<sup>6</sup>

Table I

Distribution of the Quebec Cotton Industry Work-Force 1891-1951,  
according to age and sex

Year	Under 16		Over 16				Total			
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female		
1891	454	335	1262	1741	1716	2076	(45%)	(55%)		
1901	1123 boys and girls		3078	2414						
	10-14		15-24		25-64		65+		Total	
	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.	M.	F.
1911	140	189	1120	2212	1435	578	28	7	2723	2986
									(48%)	(52%)
1931	63	43	3191	3450	4179	1324	156	8	7589	4825
									(61%)	(39%)
1941	10	4	4155	3515	7692	2409	214	4	12071	5932
									(67%)	(33%)
1951	17	32	4381	3762	8067	2257	161	4	12626	6055
									(68%)	(32%)

Figures for 1921 are not available since analysis of the workforce was provided by occupation rather than by industry.

Sources: *Census of Canada*, 1891, vol. 3, Table I, 120; 1901, vol. 3, Table II, 34-35; 1911, vol. 3, Table V, 216-217; 1931, vol. 7, Table 56, 696-697; 1941, vol. 7, Table 18, 572, 578; 1951, vol. 4, Table 19, 19-79, 19-89.

The principal reason for the decreasing proportion of female operatives, however, was economic. Many employers during the 1930s "gave preference to male employees and particularly those with dependants."<sup>7</sup> In their interviews, older women also frequently made reference to the difficulty married

<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Textile Industry* (Ottawa 1938), 151.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

women encountered in obtaining or maintaining employment in the mills during the Depression.

The increased production demands which resulted from Canadian participation in World War II most certainly effected a reversal in the trend toward a reduction in the female workforce in the cotton mills. Unfortunately, the 1941 census figures do not record this change since it occurred subsequently. Beginning in 1942, the federal government campaigned vigorously to recruit women into the labour force. One of the areas where women were needed was textiles, for many male workers had been attracted to the higher paying jobs in direct war industry. The success of the campaign to enlist women in industry is attested to by the repeated denunciations of this trend by clerical and nationalist groups throughout Quebec.<sup>8</sup> The employment of married women in particular was condemned for it was tantamount to destroying the family, the cornerstone in the fortress of French-Canadian survival. It is therefore interesting to note in Table II that, although the proportion of female workers had declined even further by 1951, the percentage of married women had significantly increased.

Table II

Age and Marital Status of Women Working in the  
Quebec Cotton Industry, 1931-1951

		Age								
		Under 15	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
1931		43 (.5%)	1812 (37.6%)	1638 (34.0%)	952 (19.7%)	258 (5.1%)	93 (1.9%)	31 (.6%)	8 (.2%)	4825 (100.0%)
1941		4 (.0%)	1777 (30.0%)	1738 (29.3%)	1597 (26.9%)	588 (10.0%)	168 (2.8%)	56 (.9%)	4 (.1%)	5932 (100.0%)
1951		32 (.5%)	2009 (33.3%)	1753 (29.0%)	1224 (20.2%)	637 (10.5%)	288 (4.7%)	108 (1.7%)	4 (.0%)	6055 (100.0%)
		Marital Status*								
		Single	Married	Widowed	Separated/ Divorced	Total				
1941		5158 (87%)	589 (10%)	111 (2%)	74 (1%)	5932 (100%)				
1951		4870 (81%)	1050 (17%)	127 (2%)	9 (—)	6056 (100%)				

Sources: *Census of Canada*, 1931, vol. 7, Table 56, 696-697; 1941, vol. 7, Table 18, 578-579; 1951, vol. 4, Table 19, 19-89, 19-90.

\*Marital Status was not indicated in 1931.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *Relations* (mai 1942), (décembre 1942), and (mai 1943).

All of these reasons for the replacement of women by men — technological change, fluctuating labour demands, societal attitudes toward working women — were closely related to another basic factor: the demographic behaviour of female cotton workers. An examination of the life cycle of the female wage earner is essential to comprehend her participation in the labour force and her industrial experience.

## II

FOR MANY YOUNG WOMEN who lived in the textile centre of Valleyfield, located 45 kilometres southwest of Montreal, adolescence heralded their entry into the Montreal Cotton Company mills. The Company began operations in Valleyfield in 1875, and by 1900, with over 1500 employees, it dominated the local economy. For women with little formal education, there were few alternate sources of employment. One woman interviewed put it succinctly: "Il y avait que cela quand on n'avait pas d'instruction, on allait à la manufacture de coton."<sup>9</sup>

From their early teens, at least until marriage, these women would be "au coton."<sup>10</sup> In spite of the existence of provincial factory and school legislation, prior to 1930 it was not unusual for parents to send their daughters into the industry at 13 and 14 years of age. After 1930, it was much more rare to find 14 year old girls at the mills, but this change was undoubtedly more the result of the difficulty in finding employment during the Depression than of the stricter observance of provincial legislation. Although there was a slight increase in the starting ages of those women interviewed who entered the industry after 1930, they were still very young. Seventy per cent were between the ages of 15 and 19 years, and most had ended their education at primary school.

Among the women interviewed, no matter when they began working, the reason for seeking employment at the mill remained constant. Nearly all cited the need to contribute to the family's economy as the primary factor in their becoming employees of the Montreal Cotton Company. Few exercised any personal influence over the decision: it was made for them by their parents. As one woman explained:

Ce n'est pas moi qui a décidé cela, dans notre temps c'était notre mère qui décide pour nous autres. Une journée ma mère a dit "Demain tu commences à travailler." Quelqu'un m'avait trouvé un ouvrage, alors je suis allée travailler. On avait pas le choix, c'était comme cela pour nous autres.<sup>11</sup>

As in this woman's case, most of the young women who became mill operatives had close relatives or friends already working in the mills. Pre-

<sup>9</sup> Worker employed at Montreal Cottons, 1943 to 1948.

<sup>10</sup> It is indeed appropriate that the term "au coton" has also come to mean exhausted or worn out.

<sup>11</sup> Worker employed from 1918 to 1929.

quently, it was these individuals who subsequently aided in their adaptation to industrial life. In some cases, familiarity with the mill and with the work the woman would eventually perform, was acquired before she was officially hired. Children were often assigned the task of carrying lunch to other members of the family working at the mill, and during the lunch hour, they were initiated into the skills of spinning and weaving under the watchful eye of an experienced family member. Consequently, they were able to secure employment more readily and to avoid a prolonged period as a lowly paid apprentice or learner.

While family ties facilitated the entry of young women into the cotton industry, they also impeded the development of personal independence. The young woman frequently was placed in a department where another family member could keep her under protective surveillance. Not only did parents decide when and where their daughters could work, they could also influence their subsequent attitudes toward work. One woman recalled, "Je ne me suis jamais plainte, s'il y avait eu des problèmes je serais demeurée ici, c'est simple hein! Mon père aurait dit 'Reste donc ici ma petite.'" <sup>12</sup>

Nearly all of the women interviewed stated that they lived at home prior to marriage, and in most cases, they handed over their entire earnings to their parents. As one woman vividly recounted, "On arrivait le midi de notre paie et on plaçait notre salaire dans l'assiette de maman. Notre cachet c'était que l'enveloppe ne soit pas ouverte. Maman ouvrait notre enveloppe et nous donnait parfois le change de notre paie."<sup>13</sup> Almost without exception, this almost total handing over of their salaries to the family economy was considered normal by the women interviewed, at least in their first years of working. By her mid-twenties, if the young worker was still single, in most families she was no longer expected to surrender all her wages, but only a portion to cover her room and board.

In view of their economic importance to the family one would expect parents to encourage their daughters to defer marriage so that the family could benefit from their earnings for as long as possible. Late marriages appear to have been common for female cotton workers in Valleyfield prior to 1940. The median marriage age for women who began working before that date was 25 years; for women who began working between 1940 and 1950, it was 21 years. It is not surprising that the age of first marriage among cotton workers would decline in the 1940s. A return to prosperity enabled young men to achieve economic security, a prerequisite for establishing their own household at an earlier age; as a result, their brides were younger also. The greater ease which household heads experienced in securing and maintaining employment may also have lessened the family's reliance on the earnings of single daughters.

For women working at the mill before 1930, not only was employment

<sup>12</sup> Worker employed from 1922 to 1941.

<sup>13</sup> Worker employed from 1936 to 1941.

there likely to influence their age at marriage but also their choice of a marriage partner. Sixty per cent of the women interviewed who were working at that time reported that, at the time of their marriage, their husbands were also employed at the Montreal Cotton Company. By contrast, only 44 per cent of the husbands of women who began work in the 1930s and 1940s were so employed. This change may have been due to two factors: an increase in employment opportunities for young men in the community, and more frequent contact between young women and young men outside the place of work. The operation of the first factor is easily documented, for World War II witnessed a significant diversification in the town's industrial base.<sup>14</sup>

Once married, few of the female cotton workers continued to work outside the home. The low proportion of married women generally in the Valleyfield mill prior to World War II was repeatedly mentioned in the interviews. As Table II indicates, the proportion of married women in the female work-force in the Quebec cotton industry was small as late as 1951. This situation presents a marked contrast with that observed by Tamara Hareven in her study of French-Canadian workers in Manchester, New Hampshire. She found that two-thirds of the women who married continued to work in the mills, and a large proportion worked between pregnancies.<sup>15</sup> One possible explanation for this difference in behaviour between the Valleyfield workers and those in Manchester is a dissimilarity in the availability of labour. According to Hareven, the Amoskeag Cotton Company found it difficult especially before 1920 to obtain a full complement of workers. Therefore the company was forced to tolerate greater flexibility in the individual worker's employment pattern. Married women, if they were skilled spinners or weavers, found it relatively easy to leave and re-enter the work-force as dictated by their child-bearing experience. Only one woman among those interviewed in Valleyfield felt this same flexibility existed for the married woman at the Montreal Cotton Company, and she was referring to the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In the 1930s the lessened demand for women workers coincided with an intensification of the campaign against married women working outside the home. The principal arguments of this school of thought were assimilated to a great extent by working-class males. Nearly all of the women interviewed who quit working after their marriages cited societal attitudes toward working wives and mothers, and their husbands' opposition to their employment outside the home as the main reasons for their decision. Most men clearly believed that it was their responsibility to provide for the family; for the wife to go out to work was an indicator of their failure to fulfill this basic responsibility. A typical

<sup>14</sup> Among the larger industries which were established in the Valleyfield area during the war were Defence Industries Limited, Nichols Chemical Company, Colonial Dyeing and Finishing, and Quebec Distillers.

<sup>15</sup> Tamara Hareven, "Family Time and Industrial Time; Family and Work in a Planned Corporation Town, 1900-1924," in T. Hareven, ed., *Family and Kin in Urban Communities, 1700-1930* (New York 1977), 192.



statement of this attitude was provided by one interviewee: "Mon mari m'avait dit 'Tu ne retravailleras plus,' il n'était pas d'accord. En ce temps-là ce n'était pas de mode autant que la femme travaille. Si j'aurais voulu travailler je crois que ça aurait été bien difficile."<sup>16</sup> As Philippe Garigue pointed out in his study of the French-Canadian family, there was a definite link between the father's role as economic provider and his authority within the family. Being the primary or sole wage earner endowed him with special status and power in his relationship with his wife and children.<sup>17</sup>

Although it is not possible at this time to draw definite conclusions concerning variations in family size among different cohorts of female cotton workers, there do appear to have been some interesting and important changes in their reproductive patterns which will require further analysis. For example, none of the women who married before 1940 practised any form of birth control; however, one-third of those who married after this date did. All utilized the Ogino-Knauss (rhythm) method of contraception. Thus one might conclude that the 1940s and 1950s were significant decades for they marked the transition from the two-stage life cycle, characterized by a period of gainful employment prior to marriage and withdrawal from the work-force after marriage, to a three-stage cycle. The latter consisted of the first two phases, but the duration of the second phase was markedly reduced since the woman was now having fewer children and having them earlier. As a result, a third phase which often included a return to work once the children reached a certain age, was discernible by the late 1940s.

This change in life cycle for the Valleyfield workers during the 1940s appears to reflect changes occurring for all female cotton workers in Quebec, and for Quebec women in general. An examination of Table II reveals that there was a significant decline between 1941 and 1951 in the percentage of workers aged 25-34 years, and a 40 per cent increase in the proportion of women over the age of 45 years. The first change could be attributed to earlier age at marriage and the second to a return of married women to work. In his study of the participation of married women in the Quebec labour force, Nicolas Zay noted similar trends for all Quebec women, and in particular a striking increase in the participation of women aged 45 to 64 years in the work-force.<sup>18</sup>

### III

A STUDY OF THE LIFE CYCLE of women cotton workers can add significantly to our understanding of their industrial experience. The presence of large numbers of female workers, the vast majority of whom were young and single, was

<sup>16</sup> Worker employed from 1908 to 1918.

<sup>17</sup> Philippe Garigue, *La Vie familiale des canadiens français* (Montreal 1970), 43.

<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Zay, "Analyse statistique du travail de la femme mariée dans la province de Québec," in Michèle Jean, ed., *Québécoises du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Montreal 1974), 124-140.

bound to have important consequences. For one thing, it meant that there would be relatively rapid turnover among employees. The result was that the companies regarded all women, regardless of their individual circumstances, as temporary workers, and provided no occupational mobility for them. "Promotions" consisted of moving from the rank of cleaner or doffer to that of spinner, or from shuttle threader to weaver. For French-Canadian male workers, mobility was limited but it did exist; for example, weaving was sometimes only a preliminary stage for a man, necessary for him to know if he was to become a loom fixer or a foreman. Most of the women interviewed spent all their working years, in some cases half a century, performing the same tasks day after day.

If the high rate of turnover among female employees created certain difficulties for employers, it also posed problems for unions. It has often been claimed that the youth of women workers made it difficult to organize them since they did not view themselves as permanent members of the work-force, and therefore sought to improve their lot through marriage rather than through union activity.<sup>19</sup> Given this argument, it is important to examine the participation of female cotton workers in various union movements, their attitudes toward the unions, and to assess what influence changes in the life cycle may have had for women's militancy.

Women figured prominently in the first successful union movement in the cotton industry, the Federation of Textile Workers of Canada. This organization was particularly active between 1906 and 1908, and according to its President, Wilfrid Paquette, women accounted for two-thirds of the members and were among the most active.<sup>20</sup> Women held the position of vice-president in several of the locals, and in Valleyfield they had their own local, No. 7, *Les Dames et Demoiselles de Valleyfield*.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the early part of the century, women were also actively involved in industrial disputes in the Quebec cotton industry. An examination of the files of the Royal Commission of 1908 and of the federal Ministry of Labour reveals that several work stoppages directly involved women.<sup>22</sup> In 1900, to give but one example, female spoolers in Valleyfield walked off the job when the foreman began to employ apprentices to perform their work. As a

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of these views, see Veronica Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day: Canadian Working Women in the 1920s," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), 152-158; Catherine McLeod, "Women in Production: the Toronto Dressmakers' Strike of 1931" in J. Acton et al, eds., *Women at Work, Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto 1974), 324-325.

<sup>20</sup> Royal Commission respecting industrial disputes in the Cotton Factories of the Province of Quebec (1908), vol. 1, "Minute Book," 9 (Public Archives of Canada).

<sup>21</sup> *Le Fileur*, I, 8 (juin 1907).

<sup>22</sup> According to information contained in the 1908 Royal Commission documents and in the files of the Ministry of Labour, women appear to have played an important role in at least 9 work stoppages, and possibly in an additional 9, out of a total of 42 between 1900 and 1920.

result of their action, the mill was forced to close for two weeks, and the spoolers only returned to work when the manager resolved the dispute in their favour. This strike was known locally as "la grève des jeunes filles."<sup>23</sup>

Female cotton workers were much less conspicuous in subsequent union efforts, at least in Valleyfield. Later unions were the National Catholic Textile Federation and the United Textile Workers of America.<sup>24</sup> The women also appear to have been less militant in terms of their work stoppages after 1920.<sup>25</sup> In the case of the Catholic unions, the anti-feminist attitudes of the principal leaders may have been a factor in reducing female militancy. Throughout the Depression, the Canadian and Catholic Confederation of Labour, with which the National Catholic Textile Federation was affiliated, called repeatedly upon the provincial government to restrict the use of female labour and recommended the dismissal of married women.<sup>26</sup> The preamble to a 1939 resolution provides an excellent summary of the CCCL's views on the dangers of female employment:

Ce régime facilite une trop grande émancipation de la jeune fille de telle sorte qu'un bon nombre se dégagent de la tutelle de leurs parents pour aller vivre en toute liberté d'action et souvent de conduite, ce qui entraîne une foule de conséquences graves relativement à la morale. Le Travail Féminin contribue à retarder les mariages, ce qui occuperait ces jeunes filles dans leur foyer respectif, milieu naturel de l'exercice de leurs activités. Ces jeunes filles et femmes remplacent les jeunes gens et les hommes et entretiennent l'ère des bas salaires obligeant les patrons consciencieux à engager une main d'oeuvre féminine pour concurrencer avec les compétiteurs. Et le cercle vicieux recommence. Le travail féminin désorganise le marché de l'emploi et cet état de chose appelle encore plus de main d'oeuvre féminine.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of the United Textile Workers of America under whose banner Kent Rowley and Madeleine Parent began to organize in 1942, there was no anti-feminist bias evident at an official level. Not only did Parent serve as the Secretary-Treasurer of the national council from 1946 to 1951, but also during these years female representation at the annual conventions increased.<sup>28</sup> At the local level, the union sought to gain equal treatment of male and female

<sup>23</sup> *La Presse*, le 2 février, 1900.

<sup>24</sup> The National Catholic Textile Federation was established in 1926 and was active in Valleyfield after 1934. The United Textile Workers of America were active there after 1942.

<sup>25</sup> Of 23 work stoppages studied which occurred between 1920 and 1950, only 4 directly involved female workers.

<sup>26</sup> CCCL, *Proceedings*, 1935, p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> CCCL, *Proceedings*, 1939, p. 147. For a fuller discussion of the CCCL's attitudes toward women workers, see M.-J. Gagnon, "Les Femmes dans le mouvement syndical québécois" in Marie Lavigne and Yolande Pinard, eds., *Les Femmes dans la société québécoise: aspects historiques* (Montreal 1977), 145-168.

<sup>28</sup> In 1946, only 17 per cent of the Quebec delegates to the national convention were women and only one woman served on a committee. By 1948, 30 per cent of the delegates and 30 per cent of the committee members were women. See Rowley-Parent Collection, vol. 5, file 3 (Public Archives of Canada).

workers; for example, in Valleyfield, it proposed the abolition of a difference in benefits paid to male and female workers.<sup>29</sup> In spite of the more favourable attitudes enunciated by the UTWA toward women wage earners, it appears that women were under-represented in the Valleyfield local. According to a list dated November 1944, 26 per cent (19 out of 74) of the signed members were women. Another list from August 1945 indicated that only 8 per cent (7 out of 88) were women.<sup>30</sup>

Among those interviewees employed between 1930 and 1950, most (20 of 24) were indifferent or even hostile to the textile unions, whether they were Catholic or international. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed analysis of all the forces contributing to these attitudes. One of the most striking aspects of the discussion with all the women interviewed was the absence of a sense of having been exploited; an examination of the interplay of subjective and objective factors which resulted in this belief merits its own special treatment. Nevertheless, there is another recurrent theme in the women's comments about unions which relates directly to structural changes occurring in the industry, and these changes must be considered, along with transformations in the life cycle of the workers, in any analysis of the female workers' militancy.

Almost without exception, the interviewees believed that conditions worsened as the years progressed. Each decade witnessed increased demands on the worker's productive capacity as production quotas increased, and the number of employees frequently decreased. Most of the women stated that they felt less oppressed by the factory system in the 1920s and 1930s than they subsequently did. In spite of the often deplorable conditions existing then, there was some time to fraternize with other workers, and consequently there existed a certain camaraderie among the employees. As one woman explained:

On travaillait mais je veux dire il y avait de joie entre nous autres, on ne travaillait pas revolté. Il y avait une fraternité qui régnait parce qu'on ne changeait pas d'employés à tous les jours. On vivait en famille.<sup>31</sup>

With the increased emphasis on speed, particularly in the post-war period, the workers were reduced to mere automata. Another woman recalled:

Quand tu avais ta paie tu étais bien contente, tu vas travailler, tu ne te plaignais pas parce que les premiers temps on travaillait moins fort que quand après ils ont mis le bonus [après la guerre]. Après qu'il y a le bonus là, on travaillait plus fort. Il y avait plus de vitesse, plus de machines.<sup>32</sup>

The UTWA recognized the importance of this problem, as indicated by the following comments of their research officer:

<sup>29</sup> In case of sickness or accident, male workers received \$12 compensation per week; female workers, \$8.

<sup>30</sup> Rowley-Parent Collection, vol. 5, file 27 (PAC).

<sup>31</sup> Worker employed from 1936 to 1941.

<sup>32</sup> Worker employed from 1942 to 1955.

## 124 LABOUR/LE TRAVAILLEUR

This question of "speed-up" is particularly acute at this period in the larger textile mills where the companies are attempting to maintain the higher level attained during the war, while at the same time, cutting down the hours of work and subsequently reducing the worker's weekly take-home pay.<sup>32</sup>

The unions, however, appeared helpless to prevent this practice, and this failure on their part explains the low level of interest in the union movement among some of the Valleyfield women. They accounted for their lack of involvement in union activities thus:

Parce que ça [le syndicat] m'intéressait pas plus que cela. Ce n'était pas assez fort.<sup>34</sup>

J'étais contre le bonus. J'avais pas de confiance dans le syndicat.<sup>35</sup>

Le syndicat n'était pas assez fort.<sup>36</sup>

De ma part les femmes n'avaient pas une grande autorité envers les unions.<sup>37</sup>

Although the unions were able to improve wages and some working conditions, they were unable to attain significant progress in an area deemed extremely important by female operatives: the worker's ability to maintain a reasonable rate of production.

Furthermore, there is no indication that the unions were sensitive to another change occurring in the employment of women in the cotton industry: the increased sexual division of labour and the relegation of women to unskilled positions. According to testimony given before the Royal Commission of 1908, large numbers of women were employed in the carding, spinning, and weaving departments. It was estimated by one witness that between one-half and two-thirds of all weavers at the Hochelaga factory were women.<sup>38</sup> Another document presented to the same Commission indicated the importance of female operatives at Dominion Textile's Merchants plant in Montreal: 63.7 per cent of the workers in the card rooms, 66.6 per cent of the frame spinners, 85 per cent of the spoolers, 54 per cent of the slashers, and 50 per cent of the weavers were women.<sup>39</sup>

By 1940 a dramatic shift in employment opportunities for women inside the cotton manufactures had occurred. In 1931, only 39 per cent of the carders, 64

<sup>32</sup> Rowley-Parent Collection, vol. 5, file 21, Jane Gray to Mr. Miller, n.d. (PAC).

<sup>34</sup> Worker employed from 1940 to 1947.

<sup>35</sup> Worker employed from 1948 to 1961.

<sup>36</sup> Worker employed from 1945 to 1947.

<sup>37</sup> Worker employed from 1936 to 1941.

<sup>38</sup> Royal Commission respecting industrial disputes in the Cotton Factories of the Province of Quebec, vol. 1, "Secretary's Minute Book," 8 (PAC).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, "Dominion Textile Co. . . . Merchants Branch, Average Daily Wage of all Employees . . . May 4, 1908."

per cent of the spinners, and 46 per cent of the weavers in Quebec were women.<sup>40</sup> In 1941, only 49 per cent of the spinners and 32 per cent of the weavers were women.<sup>41</sup> Increasingly, members of the female workforce were performing tasks which required few job skills, as cloth inspectors, folders, pressers, and packers. The result was that women no longer held key jobs which permitted them to occupy a strategic position in the industry and therefore in militant activities, whether these consisted of active involvement in unions or participation in strikes and lockouts.

The reduction in the level of female participation in these activities in Valleyfield would also seem related to changes in the life cycle noted earlier. By the 1940s women were entering the mills later and leaving them earlier to marry than had their mothers and grandmothers. While it was not unusual for women who began working in the pre-1930 period to work for fifteen years before they married, by the 1940s it was much more common for them to work five years before marriage. It would seem logical to assume that the psychology of impermanence would have been substantially reinforced among the latter group and would have impeded the development of a strong interest in the union movement.

#### IV

THIS INITIAL ATTEMPT to analyze the life cycle of female cotton workers in Quebec between 1910 and 1950 reveals that there was both consistency and change in the prevalent patterns. First it should be noted that although single young women played an important economic role, they experienced little increase in personal independence as a result of their employment outside the home. They remained closely tied to the family for they continued to live at home and to work alongside relatives or family friends. Many of these women gave all their wages to their parents. This lack of personal autonomy characterized women who began working in the 1940s as well as those who began working much earlier in the century.

Prior to World War II, employment in the cotton mills resulted in fairly late marriages among women. This tendency may well have been due to the single woman's significant financial role within the family. Given the fact that a large proportion of the female operatives married men who were also employed at the mills, the age at marriage may also have been influenced by the degree of difficulty the men experienced in setting up their own households. Once married, only a small percentage of the women continued to work.

The 1940s appear to have been a transitional decade which laid the groundwork for a new life cycle consisting of three rather than two phases. Previously there had been a pre-marital employment phase, followed by a

<sup>40</sup> *Census of Canada*, 1931, vol. 7, Table 58, 786.

<sup>41</sup> *Census of Canada*, 1941, vol. 7, Table 21, 694.

period given over to the bearing and rearing of children. After 1940, more of the workers were making an effort to limit the size of their families and were beginning to experience a third stage during which they returned to paid employment.

These changes in life cycle were inextricably linked to women's participation in the cotton industry. As a result of technological change which began on a significant scale in the 1920s, and the discriminatory practices against female workers in the 1930s, a more distinct sexual division of labour was created. Women were less likely to hold skilled positions than they had in the past. It would appear that they were marrying younger and withdrawing at least temporarily from the workforce. The net result was an erosion of the female cotton worker's militancy.

## **SPECIAL OFFER**

### **Back Issues of the Committee on Canadian Labour History Bulletin**

Still available, at a special price of \$1.50 each  
or \$5.00 for all 4, are:

- numbers 2 (Autumn 1976)
- 3 (Spring 1977)
- 5 (Spring 1978)
- 6 (Autumn 1978)

**Order from:**

Labour/Le Travailleur  
Department of History  
Dalhousie University  
Halifax NS  
B3H 3J5