

The economic slowdown and women's employment opportunities

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Introduction

The recent recession in virtually all the industrialised countries of Western Europe had substantial repercussions on the labour market. Not only was the growth of employment severely curtailed but in many cases unemployment rose to record postwar levels. Policy-makers were generally deterred from mounting large-scale efforts to stimulate growth and alleviate unemployment because they were faced with unacceptably high rates of inflation. The upturn in economic activity was therefore slow and uneven, the labour market remained weak and unemployment receded only slightly in most countries. Two years after the onset of the recession, unemployment rates in these countries were still well above anything experienced in previous postwar depressions.

This sharp deterioration in economic activity and the subsequent weak recovery coincided with a period when significant structural changes were occurring in the labour markets of many countries. Foremost among these changes was the rise in the number of women participating in working life. This trend, which became apparent in the majority of countries a decade ago, accelerated in the early 1970s owing in large measure to the expansion of employment opportunities and changes in the attitudes of society towards women and work which were encouraged by favourable legislation and supportive policy measures. As a result, there was growing recognition of the importance of women in the economy and the significance of their contribution to continued economic progress.

It is against this background that the present article sets out to analyse the effects of the recent recession and subsequent recovery on the position of women in the labour market and, specifically, to ascertain whether, in general, women's job opportunities were more vulnerable to the fluctuations in economic activity than those of men.

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For the purposes of this analysis, four European countries, Belgium, France, Sweden and the United Kingdom (in particular, Great Britain), have been selected to provide a general cross-section of the experience of Western European economies in which there is a high rate of female labour force participation. However, no attempt has been made to draw direct comparisons between them since data definitions and measurements, as well as national circumstances, diverge too greatly. The paper begins with a general outline of the patterns of women's participation in working life prior to the onset of the recession; the cyclical impact will then be explored on a country-by-country basis against this broad background.

Women and work: before the recession

Data in table 1 document the continuous and substantial rise in female labour force participation in the countries under review. The reasons for this trend have been well researched and although they may vary among the four countries, many of the major influences are similar. Declining birth rates, an increasing tendency to remain at work after marriage and the growing numbers of mothers who return to work after the birth of children have all contributed to the dramatic increase in the participation rate of married women, who account in large part for the growth in over-all female participation in these countries. The trend has been reinforced by a number of factors such as changing attitudes (especially among women themselves) towards working women and, in particular, the working wife; a need or wish to supplement the family income; women's aspirations for independence and a social status in their own right; the availability of more free time thanks to labour-saving devices in the home; and rising educational attainments.

These changes have occurred during a period when the growth of labour demand (especially in the rapidly expanding tertiary sector and non-manual occupations) was particularly favourable to the employment of women, and it is evident that demand factors have made employment an increasingly viable alternative to work in the home. All the changes mentioned have been supported, to varying degrees, by government policies and legislation aimed at eliminating sexual discrimination in the labour market.

Despite the substantial impact that women have made on the workforce, there is little evidence that the types of job they do are changing. To a large extent, women workers are still concentrated in a small number of sectors and a limited range of occupations; this concentration has even tended to increase over the past decade.¹ In general, women are most likely to be found working in relatively unskilled, low-paying jobs in the distributive and service sectors, both public and private. In production and manufacturing, despite efforts to broaden their employment opportunities, women remain mostly in traditional

¹ For comparative data see OECD: *Labour force statistics 1963-1974* (Paris, 1976), and more detailed national sources.

Table 1. Female labour force participation rates

Country	% of female working-age population in the labour force		
	1967	1970	1974
Belgium	39.0	40.2	43.6
France	46.1	47.2	49.6
Sweden	35.8	38.4	41.2
United Kingdom	49.5	50.5	54.6

Source: OECD: *Labour force statistics 1963-1974*, op. cit.

industries characterised by low productivity and low wages (food, textiles, clothing, electronics and electrical engineering). Frequently they are employed on boring, tedious and repetitive jobs on the assembly line. Data on the distribution of female employment by activity are given in table 2.

In all the countries considered here women are far less likely than men to hold positions of responsibility. Although some progress has recently been observed, women workers have still not penetrated the higher-earning, higher-skilled jobs to any great extent and remain crowded together on the bottom rungs of the occupational ladder.

The rising number of women entering the workforce has been accompanied by rising female unemployment. Women in these countries have generally had higher unemployment rates than their male counterparts, except in the United Kingdom where, as we shall see, the official figures are believed to underestimate the number of jobless women by as much as 50 per cent. Moreover, jobless women are more likely to have difficulty in securing suitable work than jobless men, as can be deduced from the fact that they tend to remain unemployed longer.

The reasons underlying these patterns of employment and unemployment are complex and clearly vary from country to country. Nevertheless, certain striking similarities can be identified. From an early age young girls are brought up according to the traditional conception of a woman's role in society, which is to say primarily as homemakers and mothers. At school they are conditioned by an education which prepares them for this role while boys are encouraged to undertake more practical preparation for working life. Although conscious efforts are being made in a variety of ways to break down these stereotypes, one still finds that in the universities women are more likely to enter the liberal arts faculties, while in the technical schools they frequently pursue courses preparing them for the traditionally "feminine" occupations. Thus it is not surprising that women workers are concentrated in a narrow range of jobs. Post-school training may increase their employability, but with the exception of Sweden, where substantial efforts have been made to use

Table 2. Distribution of female civilian employment by activity, 1974
(%)

Activity	Belgium	Sweden	United Kingdom
All activities	100.0	100.0	100.0
Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing	2.2	3.9	1.5
Mining and quarrying	0.1	0.1	0.1
Manufacturing	24.5	17.6	25.6
Electricity, gas and water	0.2	0.2	0.7
Construction	0.8	1.2	1.0
Wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants	23.7	17.7	17.8
Transport, storage and communication	2.5	4.1	2.8
Financing, insurance, real estate and business services	6.4	6.0	6.3
Community, social and personal services	39.6	49.2	44.2

Source: OECD: *Labour force statistics 1963-1974*, op. cit.; comparable data are not available for France.

vocational training as a means of widening the range of job openings, women have not taken full advantage of the training opportunities available. In particular, women with family responsibilities often find it difficult to attend courses held in the evenings, for example.

This is not the only physical obstacle that may limit a woman's access to suitable employment. The availability of adequate day care facilities for children is often a major factor in taking a job. In all four countries the number of such facilities falls well short of present needs. Moreover, they are generally rarest in outlying areas where job opportunities are scarce to begin with. The inadequacy of child-care arrangements leads on to the question of suitable working hours for wives and mothers. Of the countries studied, only the United Kingdom has a substantial number of women doing part-time jobs and although there is a sizeable demand for them by women in the other countries, there is also a justifiable fear that unless part-time work can encompass a broad spectrum of activities part-timers will have access only to low-paying, unskilled jobs which may not carry standard insurance coverage or other employee benefits (as is the case with most part-time work at the moment). An alternative is flexible working hours, which are now beginning to be introduced more widely.

The preceding discussion shows that while women have made substantial inroads in the workforce their employment is highly concentrated and much has yet to be done to eliminate the dualistic nature of the labour market. It is also clear that much of the prevailing pattern can be explained by the interplay of education, training and skill acquisition together with the availability (or non-availability, as the case may be) of arrangements enabling a woman to combine her work in the home with gainful employment outside it. Thus,

before the onset of the recession women in the workforce were generally in a weaker position than men. It is the purpose of the next section to see whether this situation was exacerbated by the recession and the subsequent weak recovery.

Women and the business cycle

In attempting to assess what happened to employment opportunities during the latest business cycle, it is important to note that the labour market behaviour of women may differ significantly from that of men and may not be revealed by aggregate labour market statistics such as employment or unemployment figures. In this connection, there are two hypotheses about the behaviour of women workers at such times: the "discouraged-worker effect" and the "added-worker effect".¹ The discouraged worker is one who, unable to find a job, stops looking for work, and thereby ceases to be counted among the economically active in the official statistics. Empirical evidence has shown the discouraged-worker effect to be particularly strong among married women over the course of the business cycle.² They tend to leave the workforce when they cannot find jobs or to postpone the decision to look for work until the employment situation brightens. The official unemployment rate therefore tends to underestimate the number of women who are actually unemployed to the extent that the discouraged-worker effect is operating.

In contrast, the added-worker hypothesis postulates that as employment prospects deteriorate and unemployment rises, married women tend to enter the labour force in greater numbers than previously in order to supplement the family income when the principal breadwinner is out of work or on short time. More recently, the added-worker effect is thought to have been reinforced by high rates of inflation which have reduced real levels of family income and stimulated women to enter the workforce. If these "added workers" are then laid off, observed unemployment rises, but the gravity of the problem is overstated since they are assumed to withdraw from the labour market once economic conditions improve.

The recent cycle has been unique in that high unemployment and high rates of inflation were experienced simultaneously. Thus, while some women may have behaved as discouraged workers, it is also likely that declining real income provided many others with an incentive to seek paid employment. In fact, the evidence that emerges from analysis of the four countries is that, in aggregate, the discouraged-worker effect was less in evidence in the recent cycle than previously. There are indications that the rate of entry of women into the labour market may have slowed to some extent, but not as much as in earlier cycles. This question will be discussed in more specific terms when we come to look at what happened in each country.

¹ For a full description of the theory and empirical evidence of these effects see Guy Standing: *Labour force participation and development* (Geneva, ILO, 1978), Ch. 5.

² See for example William G. Bowen and T. Aldrich Finegan: *The economics of labor force participation* (Princeton (New Jersey), University Press, 1969), especially Ch. 6.

First, however, it should be noted that the analysis will cover the situation of women workers in each of the two main phases of the business cycle: the recession, or downswing in economic activity,¹ and the recovery phase.² The former period generally corresponds to 1974-75, although the exact timing varies from country to country. Similarly, the recovery broadly covers the period 1975-76, from the time economic growth resumed in each country to about a year later, depending on data availability. This two-stage analysis allows for the possibility that women in the labour market may behave differently in a situation of declining output and in one of slow recovery from the deep recession.

Belgium

On the basis of available data,³ it appears that a major effect of the recent business cycle was to widen the already substantial differences between the position of women and men in the labour market. Both groups experienced a similar sharp rise in unemployment during the recession, with the unemployment rate of women climbing from 6.0 to 9.9 per cent and that of men from 2.4 to 4.4 per cent. The recovery in economic activity, which began in mid-1975, had little noticeable effect on the labour market until the turn of the year when the number of jobless men began to decline. Women did not share the benefits of recovery, however, since their unemployment rate continued to rise steadily, reaching 14.0 per cent in mid-1976, compared with 5.1 per cent for men (mid-year data are shown in table 3).

Disaggregating these over-all trends, it appears that the downswing greatly curtailed employment possibilities for the young: in some cases because they had least employment seniority and in others because, as new entrants to the workforce, their lack of experience made them difficult to place. In absolute terms the increase in unemployment was more pronounced for young women than for young men. Reflecting the pervasive character of the recession among most industries and sectors, men and women of prime working age (25 to 49) were also hard hit during this phase since the number of men without jobs in this age group rose nearly 130 per cent and that of unemployed women about 75 per cent. The absolute increase in joblessness among women was, however, greater than for men.

Recovery of the labour market in response to the improvement in over-all economic conditions was rather weak. The unemployment situation of women, in marked contrast to that of men, continued to deteriorate among all age groups and in most sectors of the economy. Their educational qualifications tended to be higher than those of unemployed men, but were clearly not of the

¹ Commonly defined as the period between the peak of economic activity as measured by real gross national product and the trough or low point in real GNP.

² The period from the trough of activity onwards.

³ See Office national de l'emploi: *Recensement annuel des chômeurs complets indemnisés inscrits à fin juin* (Brussels, 1974, 1975, 1976), and *Bulletin mensuel* (Brussels), various issues.

Table 3. Unemployment in Belgium, 1974-76
(%)

Indicator	Women	Men
Change in registered unemployment ¹		
1974-75	78.0	82.8
1975-76	46.8	17.8
Unemployment rate ¹		
1974	6.0	2.4
1975	9.9	4.4
1976	14.0	5.1

¹ As of June.

Source: Office national de l'emploi: *Recensement annuel des chômeurs complets indemnisés inscrits à fin juin 1976* (Brussels, 1976).

type in demand on the labour market. Even in the same sectors of activity and the same industries, men had far less difficulty in finding jobs. As a result of this, women remained unemployed substantially longer than men: prior to the onset of the recession men tended to experience more long-term unemployment than women, but by mid-1976 the situation had been reversed. More than 40 per cent of unemployed women had then been without jobs for a year or more, as against only 20 per cent of all unemployed men. Even more serious, 14 per cent of women without work had been registered as such for two or more years, while this was the case for only 4 per cent of unemployed men.

These data on the duration of unemployment also suggest that a new trend in the labour force behaviour of women may be emerging in the present economic environment in Belgium. Contrary to past cyclical experience, it may be that many women have been refusing to be discouraged and are continuing to seek jobs despite poor prospects, whereas previously they were more likely to return to their homes, opting out of the workforce until conditions improved.

France

It appears that in France women in the workforce were at first shielded from the recession to a greater degree than men; subsequently, however, they experienced more difficulty than men in retaining their jobs in many activities and in finding work once unemployed or on entering the labour market (see table 4).

During the recession, survey data ¹ indicate that the number of men without jobs rose quite rapidly between the spring of 1974 and 1975, increasing

¹ See Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques: *Enquête sur l'emploi* (Paris, INSEE), series D, 1974, 1975, 1976.

Table 4. Labour market indicators for France, 1974-76
(%)

Indicator	Women	Men
Change in employment		
1974-75	0.5	2.0
1975-76	0.3	-0.7
Change in unemployment		
1974-75	49.0	90.2
1975-76	33.6	13.8
Unemployment rate		
1974	3.7	2.6
1975	4.8	3.6
1976	5.5	4.2

Note: Data as of March 1974, April 1975 and March 1976.

Source: INSEE: *Enquête sur l'emploi*, op. cit., 1974, 1975, 1976.

by 90 per cent compared with about 50 per cent for women. Layoffs, particularly in manual occupations, were chiefly responsible for the jump in unemployment among men, while it was mainly the rise in the number of women seeking work who had previously been in the home or at school that accounted for the increase in female unemployment. Nevertheless, women were not better off in any meaningful sense than men during this period since, despite the big rise in male unemployment, women still formed the majority of those without jobs—a disproportionate share relative to the size of the female workforce. Further, they apparently had more problems in finding jobs than men, as evidenced by the longer duration of their unemployment.

The upturn in economic activity had little over-all impact on the labour market, and unemployment among both men and women continued to rise. However, in this phase women were harder hit than men since the female unemployment figures rose by a third, while the comparable increase for men was about 14 per cent. Much of the rise in female unemployment continued to be attributable to younger workers, but women of prime working age (25 to 49) also had to spend longer looking for jobs: nearly 40 per cent of unemployed women in this age group had been looking for work for a year or more as against 28 per cent of men. Young women also had more difficulty in this respect than their male counterparts: 80 per cent were on the unemployment register for more than six months, twice the proportion of young men. As far as layoffs during this period were concerned, women workers appear to have been affected to a greater extent than men in most branches of industry. In tertiary activities, on the other hand, women's employment continued to grow more than men's in nearly all branches.

Additional information on the effects of the cycle is provided by data on "marginal workers", i.e. those who are not officially unemployed but would take a job if they had a suitable offer. Though not strictly comparable with "discouraged workers", in a cyclical context they probably do reflect a certain degree of discouragement. During the recovery phase the total number of marginal unemployed declined slightly, but among women so classified there was a rise of more than 5 per cent, primarily in the 25-39 and 50-59 age groups. The majority of these women were looking for permanent employment; in many cases they preferred part-time work, but indicated that they would nevertheless accept full-time jobs. The official statistics may therefore not fully reflect the deterioration in the unemployment situation of women during this period. However, as was noted in analysing the situation in Belgium, it appears that, on balance, women workers in France have shown less tendency towards discouragement than in the past. Research has found that women's attachment to the workforce is increasingly strong even in a situation of high unemployment.¹

Sweden

Despite a pronounced slowing down in economic activity, the available data indicate that the recession had only a limited effect on the Swedish labour market. The rate of expansion of employment was curtailed significantly in both 1975 and 1976, yet unemployment showed no tendency to rise over the same period. This was due in large part to an active and timely labour market policy. It has been estimated that, without the manpower policy measures implemented during the cycle, unemployment would have been four times what it was.² The virtually unchanged level of female unemployment during this period shows that women clearly benefited from them, whereas in the previous recession (1970-71) women in all age groups experienced a higher rate of unemployment increase than men and their participation in the workforce declined. Investigation of the more recent cycle produces little evidence of the discouraged-worker effect among women, for although the increase in participation rates slowed down, this was mainly due to women retiring earlier and the young remaining at school longer. Data collected in the regular labour force surveys lend support to this view since the number of "hidden" or "latent" jobseekers showed no upward trend during the cycle.

Women workers were also shielded from the cycle to some extent by the concentration of female employment in tertiary activities, which were not affected by the slowdown to the same extent as industry. In many cases, working hours were cut and there may have been some substitution of part-time for full-time workers, but the continued growth of employment in the

¹ Jean-Pierre Revoil: "L'emploi en 1975, l'impact de la récession", in *Economie et statistique* (Paris, INSEE), June 1976, pp. 3-16.

² Nordic Labour Market Committee: *Labour market policy in the Nordic countries during the 1975-76 recession*, Report presented at the Committee's meeting held in Oslo in September 1976.

service sectors more than offset employment losses in industry, where the situation for women workers was different. The slowdown had a pronounced effect in those industries in which women were concentrated, and in the manufacturing sector as a whole more women lost their jobs than men. Moreover, data on the duration of unemployment also suggest that women had relatively more difficulty in finding work than men. Of the total registered unemployed in 1976 more than half were women and 35 per cent of these had been out of work for more than three months, whereas only about 20 per cent of registered men had been jobseeking for a comparable period. Data for Sweden appear in table 5.

Although important policies were implemented in the other three countries to alleviate their labour market problems, the scope and concentration of the Swedish efforts were unique and it may therefore be interesting to look at them in more detail.

During the recent slowdown, labour market policies had two purposes: firstly to safeguard employment at the workplace by preventing layoffs and dismissals, and secondly to provide education, training and work for those new to the labour market or unable to find a job.¹ The latter category includes school-leavers and women looking for gainful employment after an extended period spent working in the home. The aim of these policies with regard to women workers was to reinforce the wide-ranging structural measures designed to improve their employment opportunities, as well as to provide short-term relief for those who were unemployed.

For those already in employment, there were several policies directed towards maintaining jobs: job security legislation which was introduced in 1974; investment incentives through the use of counter-cyclical investment funds; grants for inventory stockpiling; and support for training schemes to avoid redundancies when it was no longer possible to maintain employment. The Employment Protection Act² requires the employer to have acceptable reasons for dismissal which, if challenged by an employee, can be tested in court. It further lays down that at least one month's notice of termination must be given, rising to six months depending on the employee's age rather than length of service. This latter point is particularly advantageous for women, who frequently do not have the same continuous length of service as men. Moreover, a warning of any impending changes involving notice of termination must be sent to the employment authorities within specified time limits to enable them to monitor developments in the labour market as they occur. Short-term layoffs were discouraged by requiring firms to pay a substantial portion of the employee's wages for the first four weeks following the layoff. This legislation was coupled with various economic incentives to make it financially feasible for firms to maintain employment during the downturn.

¹ For further discussion see "Swedish labour market policy", in *Fact Sheets on Sweden* (The Swedish Institute), Mar. 1976.

² ILO: *Legislative Series*, 1974—Swe. 1.

Table 5. Labour market indicators for Sweden, 1974-76
(%)

Indicator	Both sexes	Women	Men
Change in labour force			
1974-75 (1st quarters)	2.2	4.1	0.7
1975-76 (1st quarters)	1.3	2.6	0.3
1975-76 (4th quarters)	0.2	1.6	-0.8
Change in employment			
1974-75 (1st quarters)	3.0	5.0	1.5
1975-76 (1st quarters)	1.2	2.5	0.2
1975-76 (4th quarters)	0.3	1.7	-0.7
Unemployment rate			
1974	2.0	2.4	1.7
1975	1.6	2.0	1.3
1976	1.6	2.0	1.3

Source: OECD: *Labour force statistics*, Quarterly supplement to the yearbook, Feb. 1977.

Other measures were taken to help job applicants, both new and returning entrants to the labour market, to find employment. The employment service was given additional personnel to deal with the problems of young persons and women, and with respect to the latter to try to facilitate their placement in jobs traditionally done by men. Vocational training has been a key tool among the various policy measures. A new system of trainee allowances was introduced early in 1976 under which eligibility for allowances is no longer affected by the earnings of the spouse. This aimed to facilitate a woman's entry into vocational training, and in fact in late 1976 all places in training centres were filled, about half of them by women.

Job creation efforts focused on relief work projects for the unemployed who could not find work in the open market. In view of the changing composition of unemployment, with a preponderance of women and younger workers, greater emphasis has been placed on projects involving service, nursing and welfare work, particularly within the municipalities and county councils. More than one-third of the projects are in service occupations and more than half of the participants are young people or women. Other types of relief work designed especially for the young have recently been opened to older women as well.¹ Relief projects in the more traditional field of building work have been launched with a view to improving employment opportunities in the future and to meeting urgent social requirements. For example, local authorities have been given state grants for the expansion of day care facilities.

¹ "Safeguarding employment", Ministry of Labour press release, Feb. 1977.

Moreover, public sector hiring has increased rapidly, and combined training and relief work has been expanded to cover a full range of municipal jobs, including nursing and child care. Altogether, 125,000 people or 3 per cent of the labour force—about half of them women—were given employment through labour market policy measures of this kind.¹

Thus, thanks to a combination of legislation and economic incentives the employment situation in Sweden has to a large extent been stabilised. The Nordic Labour Market Committee concluded late in 1976 that "the rises in unemployment have been eliminated [among young persons and adult men and women] . . . due to individualised measures being applied at the exact point where needs have arisen".²

On balance, the Swedish experience during the cycle shows that well-designed policies can reduce the vulnerability of women to fluctuations in economic activity, but that nevertheless these can only supplement and cannot be a substitute for a long-term policy designed to give women a more secure labour market footing.

United Kingdom ³

The extent to which the business cycle affected women vis-à-vis men in Great Britain is less easily discernible than in the other countries considered here because the labour market indicators are, on the whole, inadequate for cyclical analysis. The chief problem resides in the method of collecting unemployment information. The official figures released each month are counts of the numbers of unemployed persons registered at employment or careers offices throughout the country. The drawback to this system is that while most men who are without work are likely to register because this is a precondition for receiving unemployment benefits, women are not similarly motivated. Married women are permitted to opt out of making social security payments and it is estimated that about 75 per cent of them take advantage of this opportunity. In so doing, however, these women forgo their rights to unemployment benefits and hence have no financial incentive to register at employment exchanges when they are seeking work. As many as 50 per cent of women jobseekers are thought to be missing from the official unemployment counts,⁴ so that the unemployment figures provide only a partial representation of the cycle's effect on women.

Nevertheless, the general picture that emerges from analysis of these limited data on unemployment, in conjunction with the information on employment, is that British women may have been more severely affected by the cycle than men (see table 6). During the downswing in economic activity,

¹ Nordic Labour Market Committee, op. cit.

² Ibid., p. 16.

³ The figures and legislation referred to in this section apply only to Great Britain.

⁴ See *Department of Employment Gazette* (London, HM Stationery Office), Dec. 1976, pp. 1331-1336.

Table 6. Labour market indicators for Great Britain, 1974-76
(%)

Indicator	Recession ¹	Recovery ²
Change in employment		
Women (full-time)		
All sectors	0.2	-1.6
Production	-6.1	-2.1
Manufacturing	-6.6	-2.1
Services	3.6	-1.3
Women (part-time)		
All sectors	-1.4	1.9
Production	-15.7	-3.9
Manufacturing	-17.4	-4.3
Services	1.7	2.9
Men		
All sectors	-1.4	-1.5
Production	-3.6	-2.2
Manufacturing	-4.5	-1.9
Services	1.5	-0.6
Change in registered unemployment ³		
Women	103.2	36.6
Men	58.7	17.8

¹ September 1974-September 1975. ² September 1975-June 1976. ³ Seasonally adjusted.
Source: *Department of Employment Gazette*, Sep. 1976.

the proportion of women registered as unemployed rose faster than that of men. Much of the increase was due to a rise in the number of jobseekers under 30 years of age. The fact that the majority of these were under 19 suggests that this was not the result of a new tendency for the unregistered to sign on, as some observers have suggested, but rather reflects the fact that young women, as was the case in Belgium, experienced particular difficulty in finding work.

During the downswing men and women appear to have been laid off in much the same proportions, although there was a marked difference in the underlying dynamics. In production industries a far higher percentage of women lost their jobs than men. These women were largely part-time workers whose jobs were probably the most expendable in the prevailing economic conditions. In the distributive and service industries the employment situation of women was much better than in the production sector. Here the number of jobs held by women continued to expand among both full-time and part-time workers, while employment among men also increased but not as much as among women.

During the recovery phase of the cycle, women continued to account for a disproportionate share of the increase in registered unemployment: the number

of women jobseekers increased by 36 per cent, more than twice the corresponding rise for men. As was the case in the previous year, the highest rates of unemployment were among women in the younger age groups and men between the ages of 20 and 39. Employment continued to decline in the production sector, but not as fast as in the recessionary phase, and job losses experienced by women, though still substantial in a number of industries compared with men's, were not as severe as in the previous year. In the distributive and service sectors, an interesting pattern emerged over this period. Over-all employment growth slowed quite dramatically as downward trends experienced elsewhere in the economy in the previous year began to affect these sectors as well. Women concentrated in these activities suffered a net loss of jobs, but all of this was among full-time workers since part-timers were able to increase their numbers in both services and distributive trades. To some extent, then, it appears that there may have been some substitution of part-time for full-time women workers, although on the face of it one cannot be certain whether this substitution represented the continuation of a secular trend or an additional hardship imposed on women in the workforce as a result of the business cycle; a number of factors operating during the period tend to support the latter view.

Compliance with the Equal Pay Act of 1970¹ became mandatory in December 1975 and thus in mid-cycle women became relatively more expensive to employ than in the past, a factor which may have decreased employers' willingness to hire them. Data on women's earnings relative to men's in fact indicate a sharp upward trend since 1970, but attempts to measure its effect on employment or unemployment have met with little success. It is interesting to note, however, that the observed decline in the employment of full-time working women coincided with the period during which the Equal Pay Act became fully operative. One observer has suggested that, in looking for ways to cut costs, employers may have replaced full-time women workers with part-timers because "under the law [the Equal Pay Act] it is much harder to compare the similarity of part-time jobs than full-time ones simply because there are so few men in part-time employment".² While it is not possible to argue the point without further data, the earlier analysis which showed women part-timers gaining relative to full-timers in employment is consistent with this argument. Moreover, there have been some cases reported where employers in an economic squeeze have threatened part-timers with dismissal if equal pay compliance were pushed.

More generally, observers have attributed at least part of the deterioration in women's labour market opportunities to pressures generated by the recession compounded by the coming into force of the following three pieces of legislation: the Equal Pay Act, 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act, 1975,³ and

¹ ILO: *Legislative Series*, 1970—U.K. 1.

² Sue Cameron: "Part-timers alter the market", in *Financial Times* (London), 15 Sep. 1976, p. 19.

³ ILO: *Legislative Series*, 1975—U.K. 1.

the Employment Protection Act, 1975.¹ These Acts may have operated as a disincentive to hire women—especially on a full-time basis—because of the number of restrictions and obligations they imposed, many of which are not clearly understood by those who take the decisions about employment. In a time of economic uncertainty, the new rules of the game may have left many employers unsure of how to classify jobs in compliance with the Equal Pay Act, as well as of the degree to which they can maintain their flexibility in hiring, firing and promotion, all of which may seem to be an additional headache to be avoided if at all possible. This is particularly the case with small employers who appear to prefer to substitute part-timers for full-time workers.

General summary and conclusions

As the preceding analysis has demonstrated, women workers in the countries examined appear to have felt the impact of the recent business cycle to a greater extent than men. Even in Sweden, where an active and timely manpower policy largely cushioned the adverse effects of the economic slowdown, the employment situation in some industries deteriorated relatively more for women than for men. The particular reasons for this differ of course in each of these countries, but on a general level a number of common influences can be observed, many of which are likely to operate in other countries as well. The structure of female employment opportunities was clearly one of the chief factors. More concentrated than men in a few industries and a narrow range of occupations, women were at first to some extent shielded from the recession which initially affected the production industries and manual occupations in which women were comparatively rare. However, as the slowdown became more widespread and severe, women grew much more vulnerable to job loss. Many of them worked in low-skill jobs which were among the first to be jeopardised when production slowed down. Once unemployed, it was harder for them to find work than for men because of the narrow range of jobs they were seeking. Education and training have clearly not prepared women for working life to the same extent as men, and in a period of economic slowdown the narrowness of their occupational base proved a major obstacle to securing suitable employment and impeded efforts to break away from the type of jobs traditionally regarded as "feminine".

These structural factors were reinforced by institutional arrangements which have placed many women workers at a disadvantage. For example, the seniority system under which those with the shortest service are the first to be laid off has, in many instances, worked against women who, because of family responsibilities, tend to leave and re-enter the workforce to a much greater extent than men. Inadequate facilities for child care and, in many cases, the lack of access to training for a broad range of jobs have also narrowed the range of opportunities open to women jobseekers in the recent slowdown.

¹ ILO: *Legislative Series*, 1975—U.K. 2.

The implications of these findings are that, as a first step, policy must be directed towards widening the employment opportunities of women. In each of these countries this will require a redoubling of efforts to eliminate the obstacles which many women encounter in their working life. More fundamentally, however, the longer-term situation of women will depend on the answer given to the basic question of their role in society in general, because this cannot realistically be divorced from the needs and rights of women in working life. A certain ambivalence towards woman's place in society prevails in many countries where old conceptions of roles coexist uneasily with changing values and realities. Traditionally a woman's first occupation is looking after the home and family and work outside the home is seen as secondary to this responsibility. Thus a woman in paid employment is considered to be a secondary worker and her job, both with respect to status and content, reflects this. Before any significant changes in the position of women can be contemplated, therefore, the structure of society and the organisation of work, both within and outside the home, will require fundamental probing. While child care, education and training may provide short-term answers to the very real and immediate problems of women, more far-reaching solutions must be sought if both men and women are to benefit to the fullest possible extent from more equitable opportunities to participate in the economy and in society as a whole. ■