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Jennifer G. Schirmer  
*Harvard University*

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WORKING WOMEN'S MARGINALIZATION IN DENMARK:  
TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF  
SOCIAL AND LABOR MARKET POLICIES\*

Jennifer G. Schirmer

Center for European Studies

Harvard University

ABSTRACT

Although it cannot be said that women's marginality in the labor market in Denmark from the 1960s to the present was 'planned' in any formal sense, the premise behind social and labor market policy measures, such as daycare and maternity leave, that women primarily serve as part-time service workers to increase economic growth, indicates a form of assumed and prescribed secondariness for women. By engaging the market and the family on strictly traditional terms, the social policy and labor market measures enacted to encourage women's entrance into the labor force in the late 1960s serve to institutionalize women's marginality within the Danish welfare state and labor market. The irony is that women now consider themselves primarily as workers and are organizing to overcome this structured impediment.

Social policy measures of any country are based on beliefs and assumptions about social relations between genders, the family and household, and their connections to the labor market. Additionally, these measures are often presented as rather neutral post hoc achievements built on economic development. Notwithstanding, any unequal consequences of social policy measures cannot be understood unless both the underlying assumptions of gender--established over many decades and remaining implicit--and the ability to achieve economic progress with the aid of social policy--as both a progressive and disciplinary instrument--are examined and made explicit.

It is this close interconnectedness of social and labor market policy and the persistent assumptions of gender roles in the face of major economic, social and demographic changes which can be illustrated by looking at the central role social policy played in bringing cheaper, marginal, part-time female workers into the labor market of the Danish welfare state in the late 1960s. By the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, these women workers, consistently denied better wages and positions, had come to constitute a central part of the economic planning commissions's strategy to increase the GNP. I shall argue that although there is

\*I would like to thank Lars Nørby Johansen and Finn Valentin for their valuable comments.

no formal planning per se, by engaging the market and the family on strictly traditional terms, these social and labor market policies serve to institutionalize women's marginality within the labor market and provide the state with cheap, flexible labor. With social policy measures a means by which the state regulates and directs the nature and length of women's participation in the labor market, women are not only held in reserve during economic crises but they are also channeled into marginal sectors of the economy during all phases of the economy.<sup>1</sup>

#### The General State of the Economy in Denmark

Between 1958 and 1973-74, as in all Western economies, there was rapid and sustained economic growth, high employment levels and relative price stability in Denmark. With the formation of the Common Market and the free trade zone, Denmark was able to finance the balance of payment deficit and become part of the international market. Agriculture was overshadowed by specialized export-oriented businesses, small-crafts firms and service industries (Hansen, 1974:149, 171-5).

The major structural change in the Danish economy at this time, however, was the expansion of the state: in 1960, it controlled 25 percent of the national income; by 1972, it ruled with 50 percent. There was an explosive growth in the social, health and education sectors, with the social sector alone making up 41 percent of the state budget in 1973-74 (Arentoft et al., 1977:44-5). By 1972, the state was the largest employer with 540,000 or 24 percent of the total labor force, against industry's 300,000 workers (Hansen, 1974:176).

With the unexpected economic setback of the 1973-74 oil embargo, felt in all Western industrial economies, direct expression of the crisis came with high unemployment, the undermining of real wages with inflation, increased taxes and value-added tax (VAT), and the intervention of the state in the 1975 and 1977 labor negotiations involving work stoppages (Borchorst et al., 1977:21).

Additionally, the economic difficulties and assumptions of gender roles were reflected in women's higher unemployment rates and in the increasing transfer of reproductive services such as daycare from public to private settings. Social policy thus became a more obvious means by which to stabilize the economy and direct the labor force.

As the crisis first developed in the building and construction sector and then spread to low-paid, work-intensive industries, such as textile, clothing and furniture in 1974-75 (Arentoft et al., 1977:61-62), men's unemployment rate remained higher than women's until 1977 when this was reversed. (See Tables A and B.)

#### Women in the Workforce

With the expansion of small firms and the public sector, employers, including the state, were faced with an immediate labor shortage in the mid-1960s, and were forced to view the utilization of women as the best solution to their problems.

<sup>1</sup>This work is based on 18 months of anthropological fieldwork in Copenhagen between 1976-78, funded by the Danish Marshall Fund. An exemplary sample of 100 working women in both the public and private sector was selected.

Table A

Registered Unemployed as Percentage of Total Workforce by Gender 1973-1980

	Men	Women
1973	1.1	0.5
1974	2.5	0.5
1975	5.8	3.9
1976	5.5	5.0
1977	6.1	6.9
1978	6.6	8.3
1979	5.1	7.4
1980	6.4	7.8

(Tiårsoversigt, Danmarks Statistik 1981:82)

Table B

Women's Workforce Participation and Unemployment Rates 1960 and 1973-1979

	Women as Percent of Total Workforce	Women as Percent of Total Unemployed
1960	30.8	----
1973	40.6	24.4
1974	40.9	28.7
1975	41.1	32.0
1976	41.5	38.0
1977	42.2	44.9
1978	43.0	48.2
1979	43.7	52.3

(Borchorst 1981:57)

Between 1950 and 1980, the labor force of Denmark increased to 2.6 million out of the total 5 million Danish population, with the female labor force doubling in size from 34 percent to 43.7 percent (Foged, 1975:21; Danish Equal Status Council, 1980:19). The single largest gain among female workers was among married women whose participation in worklife rose from 18 percent in 1960 to 61.5 percent in 1977, with over 54 percent working part-time (Nielsen, 1979:95). By 1979, 65.7 percent of married women and 54 percent of unmarried women worked in the labor force, while men's work frequency stabilized between 79.3 and 81.4 percent (Borchorst, 1981:7). (See Tables C and D.)

Foged argues that the dominating tendency in female labor between 1960 and 1971 was the shift of women from private reproduction to that of public reproduction. One half of the women who entered the labor force were publicly employed, with 200,000 more women employed in 1971 than in 1960. This means that three women were absorbed by the state for every one man (1975:21 and 29).

Table C

Economic Activity Rates by Gender and Marital Status 1950-1979				
	Men	Women	Married Women	Unmarried Women
1950	87	----	14	64
1960	84	----	18	56
1970	77	51.2	34	44
1972	81	53.5	45	52
1974	81	55.2	56.7	52.5
1975	80	55.4	57.6	51.8
1976	81	56.7	59.2	52.5
1977	81	58.5	61.5	53.4
1978	81.4	60.8	65	54
1979	79.3	60.9	65.7	53.5

(Kjeikegaard, 1976:132 and 133; Tårsoversigt, Danmarks Statistik 1981:77; Borchorst, 1981:65 and 67)

Table D

Year	Women Working Part-Time		
	Total Number of	Part-Time Workers	Part-Time Workers as
	Women Working	as Percent of	Percent of all Married
	Part-Time	All Women	Women
1967	249,100	28.9	41.2
1970	306,700	30.8	44.7
1972	346,700	36.3	46.2
1974	402,697	41.1	53.0
1976	452,870	43.1	54.3

(Nielsen 1979:95)

Nielsen has estimated the increase in percentage differences between 'male' and 'female' occupations between 1950 and 1975 by dividing reproduction (social and educational sectors, business and officework, service and cleaning jobs) from production (agriculture, manual labor and transport), with women's participation in production decreasing from 50 percent in 1950 to 35 percent in 1975 and increasing in reproduction and service from 43 percent to 65 percent respectively (1979:143). (See Table E.)

Despite this increase of government bureaucracy and service jobs and the seeming upgrading of 'female' professions into desk jobs (along with the social democratic promises of equality for women through economic independence), the kinds of jobs women have been offered and their placement in the labor market follow the same, dual gender-determined labor market pattern of traditional low-wage, low-status 'female' work at the bottom of the hierarchy in both the public

Table E

	Labor Force Participation by Gender and Economic Category			
	Women		Men	
	Production	Service and Reproduction	Production	Service and Reproduction
1950	58%	43%	85%	15%
1960	39%	62%	75%	25%
1975	35%	65%	66%	34%

(Nielsen 1979:143)

and private spheres (Danish Equal Status Council, 1980:13). Women workers are concentrated in relatively few occupational fields, with 83 percent in job categories which employ between 80-90 percent women (Kjerkegaard, 1976:414; Knudsen et al., 1977:9).

One could argue that with the increase of public reproductive work and the retention of domestic tasks in these jobs (such as cooking, cleaning, waiting, routinization, welfare and childcare) (cf. Wilensky, 1968), women have been transformed into an ideal labor supply for segments of the economy that demand low labor costs, flexible schedules and part-time workers. These low-productive and highly competitive occupational areas which often cannot afford to pay high wages, need and, indeed, foster instability of worklife (cf. Sherman, 1972; Bluestone, 1972). (In fact, it is questionable which came first, the structural demand for 'unstable labor' or women's 'instability' (cf. Lockwood, 1958).) Indeed, I would argue that the high demand for part-time work (in 1970, 46 percent of married women wanted to work part-time) should be interpreted not so much as testimony to women's 'willingness' but to their difficulties in combining work, children and household responsibilities. With close to 90 percent in 1979 of all part-time workers women and 43.6 percent of all working women part-timers, and with spouses of working women (regardless of the number of children) spending at most one-half hour a day (versus women's two to three and a half hours a day) on domestic responsibilities, part-time work must be seen not only in terms of women's double burden but also women's marginality in the labor market. By planning for increased part-time work among women (against the cries of the Unskilled Women Workers' Union), women's marginalization in the labor market and the traditional division of labor in the home is cemented and indeed, institutionalized (Borchorst, 1981:34-45). For the foundation for such an economic-social policy is women's 'willingness' to perform the double burden.

These traditional assumptions of 'female' work and the double burden are reflected in the social and labor market policies enacted to encourage women to enter the workforce. The Danish Economic Planning Commission Report No. 1 of 1968, left little doubt that married women provided a potential and more important, a flexible, labor force:

The labor market's largest marginal group consists of married women. The group is also one of the most flexible, such that even small changes in

the relevant background variables give comparatively powerful results in married women's willingness to seek and maintain employment in the labor market (Kongstad et al., 1976:5).

These "small changes in the relevant background variables" were equal pay measures, vocational training programs, paid maternity leave extensions, and an increase of daycare centers--all to bring more women into the labor market. Moreover, the Labor Ministry had requested in 1964 that all institutions ease married women's entrance into the labor market by offering part-time work. Other "incentives" offered were changes in the pension law in 1969 which attempted to allow men to receive their widow's pension. The change in the tax law in 1972 which allowed husband and wife to be separately taxed was of much importance as an earning incentive, although to this day, men are allowed all other deductions, besides personal, such as for property and capital gains (Kongstad et al., 1976:5). The divorce law was also changed in the late 1960s with limitations placed on alimony payments in relation to the length of marriage (i.e. ten years or longer). This was an expression that marriage was no longer insured, life-long dependence for women, and encouraged them to enter the labor force. As one female sociologist at the Social Research Institute wrote:

In 1965, the Women's Commission was established. It was clear from the then Prime Minister J.O. Krag's opening speech what the most important goal of the efforts for equality was: Women should be working in great numbers in the labor market so that the GNP could thereby be increased. There was a lack of labor power and the country's only labor force reserve was married housewives. One went so far in one's attempt to motivate this group to go out to work that women's desire to work part-time to a great extent became accepted (Berlingske Tidende, November 24, 1975).

These institutional measures were thus instituted to encourage women to enter the labor market and provide precisely the kind of labor needed for economic advance: marginal, part-time, non-unionist service work that married, middle-class, semi-skilled women could perform--such as the 50 percent of women who entered the public sector. Indeed, between 1970 and 1987, according to the forecasts of the Economic Planning Commission, this new workforce would work part-time with an increased annual rate of productivity per worker in the private sector (from 3 percent in 1950s to 4 percent in 1960s to 4.75 percent in 1970s) "as the result of improvements in education and training" (PPI and II *passim*; Boserup, 1975:16-19). It is clear that the expansion of the Danish economy between the mid-1960s and 1975 was to depend critically upon the 'willingness' of married women to combine part-time or fulltime jobs with domestic responsibilities. These measures have meanwhile provided the state with a means by which to direct women's tie to the labor market, especially when they have small children.

## Daycare<sup>2</sup>

Daycare is a good example of a social policy measure extended in the 1960s to encourage women's entrance into the labor market. Daycare is rightfully seen

<sup>2</sup>For an elaboration of these reforms, I refer you to my book *The Limits of Reform: Women, Capital and Welfare*, Cambridge: Schenkman, 1982.

as a necessary service to enable couples and single parents to combine both family and work life equally. However, when an economic-social policy rests on the assumption of a needed workforce which is 'willing' to take on the double burden (although couched in terms of 'equality'), then these daycare centers become a means for directing women's tie to the labor market. It releases women into the labor market on a conditional basis by primarily serving not the interests of children or women (although it does lessen the burden), but of capital.

The availability of daycare, for example, has to a high degree influenced the extent of women's employment when they have small children. Despite the tremendous increase in the number of women entering the labor force in the 1960s and 1970s (61 percent of women between 15 and 64 with children under 7 years of age), the expansion of daycare has not met anywhere near the need for daycare provision. Even in Denmark, which has one of the most developed daycare systems in Scandanavia, there were altogether 70,000 children in 1977 without needed daycare (Politiken, July 28, 1977). A woman often must reserve a space long before she is pregnant or quit working altogether when she has children--in spite of the 'provision' of daycare services. This lack of space has been magnified with cutbacks in social services, the transfer from public to private daycare, and the increasing dependence upon part-time workers<sup>3</sup> in Denmark since 1976.

Additionally, the price of daycare has influenced women's employment patterns. With free daycare only provided to single parents in the low-income brackets, the rate of payment is generally decided at the state level according to the economic ability of parents who earn below a certain minimum. For example, a free place in daycare is provided to those who earn under \$5,000, or "almost nobody alive", as one female daycare worker told me. However, the costs, provision and building of daycare facilities are decided at the individual municipal level (with state subsidies). This means, as my research in Denmark shows, that costs of daycare may not differ significantly among municipalities although wages and salaries do.<sup>4</sup> Cutbacks in personnel and closings of daycare centers in particular neighborhoods now during the recession also reflect class differences and influence the work frequency of women workers of different classes.

Finally, although daycare is usually presented as a positive necessity for women to combine family and work, it can also be a Catch-22 and a tool for labor discipline against women in times of economic recession. If a woman becomes unemployed (which is likely now with rates among insured male workers 10 percent and 17 percent among women in 1979, Borchorst 1981:61)<sup>5</sup>, she is expected to keep

<sup>3</sup>In 1982, three out of ten daycare workers, 95 percent of them women, work part-time (Information March 5, 1982).

<sup>4</sup>For example, in one working-class municipality where the average taxable annual income is \$10,000 and monthly rent is \$350, daycare costs \$58 a month, while in an upper middle-class municipality where the annual income ranges up to \$50,000 and housing costs between \$150,000 and \$200,000, daycare costs \$63 a month.

<sup>5</sup>Unemployment figures only include fulltime and part-time insured members of union funds (one can belong to a union fund without joining the union) as well as non-insured persons who register with employment offices for unemployment compensation. The unregistered unemployed--such as women who work part-time, who work seasonally, or who are non-organized--are thus not counted as unemployed. For example, non-organized married women who lose their jobs are counted as housewives in labor statistics (OECD 1976:8; Knudsen 1970:73).

her children in daycare so she can be "available for the labor market". If she takes her children out of daycare because she can't afford it, and then can't get them back in when she is offered a job because of lack of daycare spaces, and must turn down the job offer, she then loses her unemployment benefits and cannot be offered work for five weeks. If after this period she still cannot accept work due to lack of childcare (for lack of funds), she loses her benefits for good and is considered "unemployable" and no longer part of unemployment statistics. This legal Catch-22 also applies if she refuses night or shiftwork because of childcare responsibilities. However, even if she doesn't take her children from daycare (so as not to lose her benefits), it has now become state policy to save money by refusing childcare to the children of the unemployed after a 14-day warning. In principle, this rule applies to both genders, but it is nearly always the women who are held responsible for children and it is they who are disciplined. In one case in which a male brewery worker was denied job offers for five weeks because of lack of childcare, his 'quarantine' was revoked and unemployment compensation reinstated after his ombudsman estimated that lack of childcare was grounds for refusing job offers (Information October 31, and November 8, 1977).

Some politicians (both Left and Conservative) believe the Labor Ministry's interpretation of "to be available for the labor market" has become stricter than the law intended and has become "a political smear campaign" against women. "As it stands now," one female Parliament member said, "the unemployed must jump for the jobs which in reality means it is discriminating against women. If they can't get their children cared for, they must say no to the job offer and be quarantined. The head of the employment agency within the Labor Ministry claims that his interpretation of the law is "simply administrative" (Information November 3 and 8, 1977). Also, despite his acknowledgement of needed daycare for the unemployed, the mayor of Copenhagen has stated that "it is the parents' own fault" if they take children out of daycare (or have been forced to!) when the mother becomes unemployed and later need a place again when she is offered work (Politiken October 26, 1977).

The ideology behind the unemployment stipulation that women must keep children in daycare which they can no longer afford without a job in order to look for a job, imposes a form of economic and social discipline that, in the end, makes women accept underpaid, and often part-time work in order to cope with the double burden.

Limited daycare hours are also used as labor discipline. With most daycare centers open during normal working hours (from about 6 or 7 am until 5:30 pm at the latest) and not located near places of work (such as hospitals, factories or offices where most women are employed), women are forced to rush to daycare before work hours and often to shop during lunch breaks. As one militant assemblyline electronics worker told me, "The union tells us women with children to tell the employer we will come an hour later because daycare doesn't open till 6:30 am. How in the hell can I come an hour later with unemployment as high as it is?"

Daycare as an economic-social policy gives the illusion of change: women are 'integrated' into the labor market and some children cared for. Yet women, given the assumption of their 'willingness' to perform double labor, are provided with a 'service' which not only conditionally through constraints of availability, price and location of daycare, 'releases' them to fulfill the demand for part-time

work, but also disciplines them by virtue of their double burden. Daycare in this context thus becomes both a progressive and disciplinary instrument for economic growth.

### Maternity Leave

Maternity leave is another social reform extended during the 1960s to encourage more women to take outside employment. Although all working women can demand a 14-week leave at 90 percent pay before taxes, white-collar and professional women, because of their stronger unions, also have the option of five months at half pay. The self-employed women and 'helping wives' in small shops receive four weeks at 90 percent before taxes; there are no benefits for students or apprentices. This means that women who have the most tiring jobs have only six weeks' rest before they must return to work. It is, according to one Danish social worker, as though these latter groups had "better health, easier births, or children who sleep more". What is clear is that with income-related benefits (above a certain minimum), the welfare state can be a very different experience for working-class women than for middle-class women.

However, with employers having to pay 10 percent of the cost plus train a substitute, some are opting either to fire or not hire many women. For example, one woman lawyer told me, "Although the Finance Ministry official asked me in my interview if I had children, I got the job because the other applicant was pregnant which put her out of the running immediately since it meant she'd use her leave right away." A woman architect also told me, "If a man is married, he is stable; if a woman is, she is just the opposite. I was passed over for a job because I'm 28--an age, I was told, when if a woman doesn't have children yet, she will have them soon enough."

Even the highly trained, professional women, such as architects, veterinarians, journalists and lawyers, are either the first fired or are only offered temporary part-time positions with low wages in order for employers to avoid paying maternity leave. Female journalists, for example, earning 80 percent of their male colleagues' wages, have an unemployment rate three times higher than male journalists (14 percent versus 5 percent) (Levende Billende, 1976/1977).

As one unemployed female architect told me, "unemployment is higher for women than men because it is women who get pregnant and employers ask at interviews 'are there children?' 'how are they cared for?' 'If your child is ill, who will stay home?' One has to be fulltime plus overtime, although we are now only offered part-time work. It is just plain bad working conditions we women have and we must organize."

Maternity leave can also be used as wage discipline by preventing women from asking for raises or promotions. One female journalist at a leading newspaper told me she was discouraged by her union representative from asking for a raise: "He told me, 'You've had maternity leave twice now. Don't get too pushy'." One woman head of a department in a large bank found she had been demoted in her position by one of her ten male subordinates during her five-month leave, and was placed in another department by herself.

Maternity leave can also be used as a form of fertility control. One law firm was asking women to sign a promise not to have children in order for them to

Table F

Reasons for Unemployment among Female Metalworkers of KAF Division 5		
Reasons for Firing	All-Male Metalworkers'	Women's Division,
	Union Copenhagen Percent Unemployed	Copenhagen Percent Unemployed
Illness	10	21
Lack of Work (laid-off)	68	50
Unionizing	7	3
Workplace shutdown	12	26
Rationalization	18	15
Children's Illness	--	2
Pregnancy	--	5

(KAF's Afdeling 5 Undersøgelse "Arbejdsløshedens Karakter og Virkning" 1977:12)

avoid paying maternity leave. None of the women would promise. "One doesn't even think of asking a male applicant if he will have children. It is most often a mutual decision, you know," a female lawyer told me angrily.

In a study by the Metal and Iron Division of the Women Workers' Union (KAF) on their unemployment patterns, 5 percent of its workers were shown to have been fired for pregnancy, even though employers and union leaders deny that this occurs (1977:12). (See Table F.)

One female journalist summed it up: "Many employers feel (and this is very shortsighted) that it is right that children must be born and someone must pay for the benefits. But the women who have these children they'd rather not hire; they say 'another employer should hire them, not me'. Many women thus feel it is so embarrassing (as in the past) and now are fearful to have to go and tell their employer that they are pregnant. It has become almost a criminal matter and the women are blamed for getting pregnant!"

It should be noted, however, that even if some employers were open to hiring women, the economic constraints for many small, low-capital firms (such as law and architecture), where replacement and re-training are costly, do not allow it. Thus, within the context of an economic-social policy which does not fully cover the costs of reproductive labor and thus only conditionally releases women with a double burden, maternity leave can in many ways force women into part-time work and in times of recession be used against them through unemployment.

### Conclusion

Daycare and maternity leave illustrate the close interconnectedness of social policies and the labor market within Denmark in the last 15 years. It is a policy which has resulted in women being formally equal yet structurally marginal, structurally marginal yet central in their marginality. Women are defined as ephemeral, short-term 'nonworkers' yet they are encouraged to enter sectors central to economic growth as permanently part-time, marginal workers who work more

cheaply than men. The centrality of their higher labor output for needed economic growth was planned by an economic planning commission with social policy measures more or less consciously directing these women workers--ideologically 'suited' (i.e., 'willing') and appropriately burdened with domestic responsibilities for part-time work--into sectors hitherto known as marginal to production. Social policy measures are then used to control and discipline these workers without a direct confrontation.

Social policy measures, to be sure, have not been entirely repressive or progressive; it is the form and context out of which such measures arise, the structural economic conditions and assumptions of social relations upon which they are based, that determine what is positive and negative in policies vis-a-vis human needs. Thus, within a welfare state in which the capacity to counter the inequities of economic advance depends upon the very strengthening of that economy and conversely, the strengthening of that economy depends upon social policies, the ambiguities of such measures become understandable. Reforms tied to the requirements of capital and the 'needs' of a traditional family will inevitably encourage women's 'marginality' and women's double labor. Within this prism of social and labor market policy, often enshrouded in terms of equal opportunity, lies a double impediment for women: not only are they exploited by traditional gender roles but also their marginalization and double labor is institutionalized in the very framework of social policies 'enacted for their own good'.

The irony is that these social policy measures have encouraged women workers in Denmark to view themselves as 'workers' first, with a high tendency to unionize<sup>6</sup> and take direct actions, such as wildcat strikes. This prescribed marginality may result in women workers developing an awareness of their centrality to economic growth and deliberately trying to overcome this double impediment. This is when such social and labor market policy becomes a political force.

<sup>6</sup>In 1973, women represented only 25 percent of all insured workers in Denmark. By 1979, 42 percent (or scarcely 2 percent below their 43.7 percent in the labor force) were insured. (One can be insured, i.e., belong to a union fund, without belonging to a union.) Women's union membership within the central confederation of unions (LO) rose 85 percent between 1973-79, with their portion of the membership increasing from 30 to 41 percent (Borchorst 1981:61). One of the reasons given for women's rising union and union fund membership is that with their rising unemployment, they want to be able to receive unemployment benefits. Women thereby see themselves now as a permanent part of the workforce.

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