

**“Give the single girls a chance!”**

EMPLOYEES' VIEWS ON PREFERENCE FOR SERVICE  
AND LAYOFFS AT WESTERN ELECTRIC IN THE DEPRESSION

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## Introduction

"The fifty-year old Hawthorne studies, however, are annually exhumed in academic journals and professional association conferences."<sup>1</sup>

The received historiography about contemporary views on married women's paid employment is that the Great Depression of the 1930s witnessed substantial public hostility to married women's right to be in paid employment. However, it is not clear from this existing literature whether rank-and-file employees were hostile to their married women colleagues. Moreover, the extensive literature on historical studies of women's experience in the workplace does not focus on married women's experience as married women. The aim of this paper is to begin to expand the literature on popular opinion about married women's employment by examining the opinions of rank-and-file employees.

To address this issue I use interviews with employees at the Western Electric plant in Cicero, Illinois conducted between 1929 and 1931 as part of the well known Hawthorne studies. In particular, I use a subset of interviews from the Roethlisberger collection that have standardized demographic information about the respondents that allows me to make some inferences about how opinions varied among different groups. The timing of the interviews—starting in late 1928 and running through 1931—are ideal for addressing this topic. In 1929 few respondents expressed concern about whether married women worked or not. In 1930 and 1931 the interviews reveal that married women's employment was a live issue in the workplace. In this paper I focus largely on addressing the question of what did rank-and-file employees at the Western Electric plant think about married women's employment?

The interviews reveal that opinion about married women's employment varied widely among employees. About half of the employees interviewed raised the topic, which indicates that the issue was not dormant. Yet it was not all consuming. We cannot assume that the remaining employees who did not engage the issue with interviewers

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey A. Sonnenfeld, "Shedding Light on the Hawthorne Studies," *Journal of Occupational Behavior* 6, no. 2 (1985): 1.

approved of married women's working. Yet we can say that, given an interviewing program that aimed to elicit as many thoughts from employees about their job as possible, these employees did not raise the issue even when they were voluble about other workplace issues. Interestingly, the most identifiable group to express opposition to married women working were single women who had significant financial responsibility within their families. Because many work groups at the Hawthorne plant were single-sex this meant that the debate about the propriety of married women's employment was often not between men and women, but amongst groups of women.

Amongst the nuggets of wisdom distilled from the Hawthorne studies was that the "total situation" of the employee had to be considered in understanding their motivation and behavior. A similar conclusion is warranted in looking at how firms responded to social demands to act in particular ways. The demands expressed by employees at the Hawthorne plant—that the company lay-off employed married women—echoed a demand made more generally in public, in the media and in state and federal legislatures. As other authors have shown school districts and large employers of clerical labor appeared to respond to these public demands by strengthening the marriage bar. Yet at Hawthorne, we observe only tentative concessions to these demands.<sup>2</sup> The company's remuneration structure—payment linked tightly to productivity—combined with a production process that rewarded individual and group learning, meant there was little pressure on the company to fire productive workers and disrupt productive teams. Even with the institution of an interviewing program that exposed Western Electric, more than most other companies, to the views of its employees the company did not respond to their demands in this area. In short, public hostility to married women's work during the Depression could only be put into practice where it coincided with firms' interests. The Western Electric experience suggests that it did not, and that companies response to social pressure is contingent on the profitability of those actions for the company.

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<sup>2</sup> F.J. Roethlisberger and William J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 340-41.

## Married women's employment in the inter-war era

The inter-war era saw married women enter the labor market relatively rapidly, compared to the previous forty years. In 1920 6.5 per cent of white married women were in the labor force, and their labor force participation rates rose to 9.8 per cent in 1930, and 12.5 per cent by 1940.<sup>3</sup> The change in participation rates obscures a change that went un-noticed at the time; the way in which families made decisions about who went out to work for pay changed substantially in the 1920s and 1930s. At the end of World War I, wives' decisions to enter the labor market were still strongly dependent on whether husbands were out of work.<sup>4</sup> Older children were more likely to make up shortfalls in family income caused by men being out of work. The higher wages available to better educated workers motivated parents to keep their children in school longer, reducing the ability of teenage labor to make up shortages in family income.<sup>5</sup> Yet by 1940 married women's decisions to enter employment were actually less dependent on their husband's employment status than they had been in 1940.<sup>6</sup> The Depression obscures this important change. With the huge rise in unemployment many married women entered the labor force to help maintain family incomes, yet the magnitude of this labor market entry by women was much smaller than it could have been.<sup>7</sup>

While married women's employment decisions were becoming more independent of their husband's the public reality was that unprecedented levels of unemployment co-existed with increased numbers of married women working. Public debate about married women's employment was predominantly hostile to the idea that married women should be in paid employment. Legislation to prohibit the employment of married women whose husbands held jobs was debated in state legislatures. At the federal level the 1932 Economy Act stipulated that both spouses could not be employed at the same time by the

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<sup>3</sup> Dora L. Costa, "From Mill Town to Board Room," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn M. Moehling, "Women's Work and Men's Unemployment," *Journal of Economic History* 61, no. 4 (2001).

<sup>5</sup> Claudia Goldin, "America's Graduation from High School: The Evolution and Spread of Secondary Schooling in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of Economic History* 58, no. 2 (1998).

<sup>6</sup> T. Aldrich Finegan and Robert A. Margo, "Work Relief and the Labor Force Participation of Married Women in 1940," *Journal of Economic History* 54, no. 1 (1994).

<sup>7</sup> Erika H. Schoenberg and Paul H. Douglas, "Studies in the Supply Curve of Labor: The Relation in 1929 between Average Earnings in American Cities and the Proportions Seeking Employment," *Journal of Political Economy* 45, no. 1 (1937).

government.<sup>8</sup> Defences of married women's right to work narrowed significantly. In the 1920s following the introduction of female suffrage, feminists had been vocal in advocating for married women's rights to pursue careers.<sup>9</sup> During the Depression their position retreated to advocating married women's right to help support their families, not pursuing independent careers. Defenders of married women's employment strained to find evidence that women's employment was typically in low-status occupations where they would not compete with men.

Within the workplace the institution of the "marriage bar" became more common, and firms enforced its provisions more frequently.<sup>10</sup> Marriage bar policies came in two forms: "hire" and "fire" bars. Hire bars specified that women who were married would not be hired. Fire bars required that women who married while in employment quit shortly after getting married. Marriage bars were most common in occupations where salary progression was linked to tenure, but not to productivity. Clerical workers in insurance, finance and utilities were often subject to marriage bars, as were teachers. For example, the New York Times reported that "at some of New York's most important banks both husband and wife cannot remain at the same institution. If two bank employees are indiscreet enough to fall in love and get married, one of them has to leave."<sup>11</sup> Although marriage bars reflected some social stigma to married women's employment, they also had a real business and economic function. Goldin has explained the marriage bar as a device for increasing turnover, so that workers who were being paid more than their marginal output would leave the firm. Marriage bars were not as common in manufacturing, where earnings could be, and were, tied to output.

## **Interviewing workers at Western Electric**

The Western Electric Company's Hawthorne works in Cicero (IL) was not unusual then in paying wages on the "straight-line principle of compensation, according

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<sup>8</sup> Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed : Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression, Contributions in Women's Studies ; No. 15* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (1987).

<sup>10</sup> Claudia Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> "Working Wives of Now." *New York Times*. May 27 1923. p. SM7.

to which the remuneration was directly proportional to individual or group output.”<sup>12</sup> The research program undertaken by the Western Electric Company in conjunction with researchers from the Harvard Business School—principally Elton Mayo and Fritz J. Roethlisberger—are well known to historians of American business. Western Electric had opened the Hawthorne plant in 1905, moving their Chicago operations out into what was then the countryside on the western edge of Chicago. In part the company did this to find a stable workforce that would not be influenced too much by the labor "agitation" fermented by Chicago's strong labor movement. Over the next decade Western Electric concentrated its telephone production at the Hawthorne plant, becoming one of the largest workplaces in the United States in the early twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> By the 1920s the company employed 40,000 people in the Hawthorne works.<sup>14</sup> In an operation of that size, even small improvements in individual productivity could be repaid with improvements large enough to justify research into different methods of organizing work.

The Hawthorne studies have been characterized as "the most audacious social scientific study ever made in the workplace," but also as having stimulated "decades of ... confused debate about their meaning."<sup>15</sup> Their enduring relevance to scholars comes partly from the tentative conclusions reached by the original researchers.<sup>16</sup> The studies were documented in Roethlisberger and Dickson's 1939 *Management and the Worker*, that clearly and extensively lays out the motivation, procedures and contemporary results of the experiments and interviews. Yet a definitive modern work on the Hawthorne Studies probably still awaits us. Nearly eighty years after the Hawthorne experiments began researchers still return to the original data, and debate continues about their

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<sup>12</sup> Roethlisberger and Dickson, *Management and the Worker*, 12-14.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen B. Adams and Orville R. Butler, *Manufacturing the Future: A History of Western Electric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 83-84.

<sup>14</sup> Adams and Butler report "more than 40,000 workers in the 1920s" (p.6). Roethlisberger and Dickson report "approximately 29,000 workers [in 1927]" (p.6).

<sup>15</sup> Adams and Butler, *Manufacturing the Future: A History of Western Electric*, 119, Judith Sealander, "Whose Knowledge? Review of Richard Gillespie, *Manufacturing Knowledge*," *Reviews in American History* 22, no. 4 (1994): 649. Adams and Butler provide a concise 10 page summary of the studies that lay out what happened. Richard Gillespie, *Manufacturing Knowledge: A History of the Hawthorne Experiments* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Sonnenfeld, "Shedding Light on the Hawthorne Studies," 111-30.

<sup>16</sup> H.M. Gitelman, "Review of Richard Gillespie, *Manufacturing Knowledge: A History of the Hawthorne Experiments*," *Business History Review* 66, no. 3 (1992): 591.

meaning and significance.<sup>17</sup> What is clear is that the studies began with the modest scientific and commercial objective of determining the effect of illumination on labor productivity, and transmuted into social science somewhat by accident. While few remember what effect lighting had on productivity (not much), the impact on the fledgling inter-disciplinary study of individual and group behavior in the workforce was substantial.<sup>18</sup> Reflecting on the experiments at the end of his career, Roethlisberger described their evolution as having developed

through four phases: from an almost exclusive concern with employee productivity, to a concern with employee satisfaction, to a concern with employee motivation, and finally to a growing realization that the productivity, satisfaction, and motivation of workers were all inter-related.<sup>19</sup>

The results of the original studies of the effects of illumination on output were less definitive than the company had hoped, but stimulated further research into the “human factors” of production.<sup>20</sup> This led to the establishment of the Relay Assembly Test Room and Mica Splitting Test Room experiments, from which the company drew the conclusion that improvements in output were partly related to better supervision.<sup>21</sup> During the first two years of experiments in the Test Room the five women had been interviewed extensively. Although the Test Rooms had been set up to attempt controlled experiments in varying factors affecting production, the investigators concluded that multiple independent variables were changing. Changes in productivity in the Test Room could not be separated from the “total situation” of the room, including the social

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<sup>17</sup> Eg. Stephen R.G. Jones, "Was There a Hawthorne Effect?," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 3 (1992), Steen Scheuer, *Social and Economic Motivation at Work* (Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Sonnenfeld, "Shedding Light on the Hawthorne Studies," 115. Early reviews of *Management and the Worker* were not quite sure which academic discipline the research came from, with some combination of "industrial" or "occupational" with anthropology, sociology or psychology being common. See e.g: P. Sargant Florence, "Review of Roethlisberger and Dickson, *Management and the Worker*," *The Economic Journal* 51, no. 202/203 (1940): 308. Paul A. Dodd, "Review of Roethlisberger and Dickson, *Management and the Worker*," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 208 (1940): 230. This was seen as a virtue by C.W.M. Hart, "The Hawthorne Experiments," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 9, no. 2 (1943): 151-52.

<sup>19</sup> F.J. Roethlisberger, *The Elusive Phenomena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 46.

<sup>20</sup> Roethlisberger and Dickson, *Management and the Worker*, 15-18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 179.

relationships of the workers. Roethlisberger and Dickson described the change in the research strategy as being motivated by how impressed management was at

... the stores of latent energy and productive co-operation which clearly could be obtained from its working force under the right conditions. And among the factors making for these conditions the **attitudes of the employees stood out as being of predominant importance** .... Management decided, therefore, that everything pointed to the need for more research on employee attitudes and the factors to which they could be related.<sup>22</sup> (emphasis added)

The expanded interviewing program began in September 1928. Over the course of the next three years more than 21,000 workers from a peak workforce of 40,000 were interviewed. Initially the interviewers sought to elicit comments from employees about their likes and dislikes with regard to three subjects: supervision, working conditions, and the job.<sup>23</sup> These initial interviews were generally terse and the transcripts rarely exceeded one typescript page. The interviewers found that employees did not open up about their attitudes with this format, and in July 1929 the interview method shifted to the “indirect approach.” During the second phase of interviewing employees from all across the Hawthorne factory were interviewed.<sup>24</sup> In a third and final phase of interviewing in 1930 and 1931 the researchers followed 500 employees employed in about 20 departments continuously, and interviewed them repeatedly. The interviews that are retained in the Roethlisberger collection come from the group that was interviewed multiple times.<sup>25</sup> The indirect approach began with the interviewer explaining the program, and then allowing the employee to choose their own topic of conversation. The guidelines to interviewers stressed that

As long as the employee talked spontaneously, the interviewer was to follow the employee’s ideas, displaying a real interest in what the employee had to say, and taking sufficient notes to enable him to recall the employee’s various statements. While the employee continued to talk, no attempt was to be made

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 185-186.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 203.

<sup>25</sup> Coded Interviews, Cartons 11-13, Series VI, F.J. Roethlisberger Papers, GA 77, Historical Collections Baker Library. Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration.



to change the subject. The interviewer was not to interrupt or try to change the topic to one he thought more important. He was to listen attentively to anything the worker had to say about any topic and take part in the conversation only in so far as it was necessary in order to keep the employee talking. If he did ask questions, they were to be phrased in a non-committal manner and certainly not in the form, previously used, which suggested the answers.<sup>26</sup>

The interviewers were selected from groups of supervisors interested in the topic of human relations in industry. Interviewers were assigned to interview employees who they did not know, so that employees could speak freely about their views on the workplace and their supervisors. After being transcribed and purged of identifying information the interviews were used in supervisory conferences, where supervisors met to discuss issues raised by employees and how they could improve their management of employees.<sup>27</sup>

From the 520 coded interviews that are extant in the Roethlisberger collection I randomly sampled 305 interviews for analysis. I entered all the standardized employment situation and demographic information that was collected, and recorded employees' comments about married women's work, marriage, and the employees' perception of their economic role within their family. In this paper I explore the variety of opinions about married women's paid employment revealed in the Hawthorne interviews, and suggest some correlates of people's views. Eventually the standardized demographic and employment data will permit some more definite analysis of what factors were associated with opinions about married women's work.

### **Rank-and-file views on married women's employment**

Rank-and-file awareness of married women's employment as a social issue occurred in the context of the company's preference for retaining long-serving employees during layoffs, and for giving supervisors some discretion in furloughing workers during a downturn. It was because the company lacked a clear, formal policy on dismissing

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<sup>26</sup> Roethlisberger and Dickson, *Management and the Worker*, 203. See also pp.270-291.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 211-214.

married women that it became an issue for some employees. The majority of employees who spoke about married women's employment in their interviews acknowledged that the issue was a complex one. Both codified rules and supervisory discretion could be justified by appealing to reasonable sounding principles. Calls for a consistent policy of firing married women, or ignoring marital status when furloughing staff, could result in particular individuals suffering. Particular cases of individuals who would suffer unduly if they were laid off contributed to support for supervisory discretion in layoffs, yet rank-and-file employees could not be sure that supervisors were making the right decisions with their discretion.

The 1930 and 1931 interviews occurred when the plant's production was running well below peak capacity, with demand for telephone products declining rapidly in the Depression. The company's wage policies tied remuneration directly to output. Even clerical workers in accounting and typing roles were subject to a "bogey," to ensure that they maintained a steady rate of work. If they fell below their bogey their wages declined. Thus, the Western Electric company faced little economic pressure to lay off people whose productivity had fallen below their wages. The company culture also valued length of service. Although tenure had a strong effect on status within the workplace, many of its effects were informal rather than codified.<sup>28</sup> Within some work groups a consistent policy of laying off married women would have eliminated most of the department. Indeed the employee whose comment "give the single girls a chance" provides the title of this paper acknowledged that if they "lay off all the married women .... in our department, they wouldn't have any left. It seems that almost all of them are married."<sup>29</sup>

Amongst supervisors, the company's policy of preference for length of service was sometimes controversial. One supervisor interviewed by Roethlisberger was particularly voluble feeling that “

... it was unfortunate that single girls were being discharged while married women were being retained. He recited a pathetic story of nineteen single girls dismissed from his department last week who would probably have to “go wrong” in order to make a living. He painted a disagreeable picture of married women who just in order to retain their unduly high

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 361.

<sup>29</sup> FJR Collection Carton 12, Folder 68, Interview with employee 436536. December 5 1930, p.5.

standard of living were giving sob stories to the bosses because they couldn't live on the money which their husbands alone earned.<sup>30</sup>

The recurring elements in discussion of women's work are both present, first that single women without work will turn to prostitution, and second that married women who worked gave themselves and their families undeservedly high standards of living. The fear of young women adrift in the big city was recurrent in the United States between the Gilded Age and World War II.<sup>31</sup> Yet most of the young women interviewed at Western Electric were not "adrift" in the city, they were living with their families, and had financial responsibilities for them. As Margo Anderson has pointed out the number of young women, even in large cities like Chicago, who were living outside their family was quite small.<sup>32</sup> Yet some supervisors assumed that all the single women in their departments were boarding and 'adrift' from their families. Indeed, one interviewer noted parenthetically after interviewing several supervisors who had talked about single women turning to prostitution, "What does it mean? Is it wishful thinking of which they are horrified?"<sup>33</sup>

The second claim this supervisor makes, that married women who worked gave their families an undeserved higher standard of living is more pertinent. Without praising or condemning this opinion, it does deserve to be taken seriously. It was expressed repeatedly throughout the Depression. In some ways, it is a claim that when unemployment is high society should be concerned about equity in household income, a point of view many would have sympathy with. While proponents of this view often made exceptions for a woman whose husband was unemployed, they rarely considered other aspects of the situation. For example, few acknowledged that women might remain in employment as a form of *insurance* for the possibility that their husband might lose their job. In a depressed labor market where job openings were scarce and many firms

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<sup>30</sup> Interview No. D-47, June 16 1931, 10:30 – 11.40am. Interviews Operating Branch Assistant Foremen (by FJR) 1931, Folder 38, Carton 10.

<sup>31</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988

<sup>32</sup> Margo J. Anderson "Women in 1900: Gateway to the Political Economy of the Twentieth Century (review). *Journal of Social History* 36(2), 506-508.

<sup>33</sup> Interview no. E-73. June 26 1931, 10.30 to 11.45am. Interviews Operating Branch Section Chiefs (FJR) 1931, folder 46, carton 10.

preferred to retain long-serving employees it made little sense for households to give up one of two incomes, when they did not know how long they would be employed. It also ignores that families might have basic outgoings for food and housing that could not be met by one income alone.

It is not clear what opponents of married women working would have thought about the situation where the same income was being brought in by the husband and a teenage daughter. Indeed, unmarried daughters were objects of sympathy from supervisors and co-workers for their financial responsibilities, even if their fathers were working:

There is another thing about the single girls that are being laid off. Why don't they lay off the married women whose husbands are making \$75 or \$80 a week. Why don't they lay her off, instead of a single girl, who maybe has to support her parents, or maybe she is an orphan who has to support herself. Just last week, some of the poor single girls were laid off. They were standing in a corner up in the department, crying about losing their jobs. And here, the old married women are sitting at the bench, laughing their fool heads off. What they should do, is lay off the married women, whose husbands are making good money, so they could stay home and raise children.<sup>34</sup>

Whereas some employees assumed that every married woman had a husband who was working, they assumed that single women were often supporting parents unable to earn. For example, one employee commented "Well, how about the single girls who help support the family, they think just because she has a mother and father she doesn't have to work. I don't see it like that at all," continuing on to say "There are lots of other married women in there who do nothing else but pile up their money."<sup>35</sup>

Rank-and-file male employees were more likely than supervisors to oppose married women's employment on the grounds that wives had responsibilities at home. One man stated simply that "a married woman's place is at home .... she can find plenty

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<sup>34</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 13, Folder 154 Interview with employee 957045, March 21 1930, p.2.

<sup>35</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 11, Folder 23, Interview with employee 042834. April 26 1930, p.4.

to do there.”<sup>36</sup> His opinion was echoed by others, including single women. One woman explained how

When you select a man for your husband, he should be capable of taking care of you. I think if I thought enough of a man to marry him, I would be willing to do without a lot of things that I would be able to get myself if I was working. There’s plenty of work to be done at home, and in order to keep the home fires burning the way they should be, I don’t think the woman’s place is down here. It is at home cooking good meals for her husband and doing the necessary work she should do.<sup>37</sup>

Much more common was the view that married women’s employment was unfair to other households. Some employees were resolutely opposed to any married women working, while others allowed that some might really need to work because of their family situation. A common perception was that married women who worked gave their families a high standard of living. “They are all buying cars and fur coats, and then if they don’t work they can’t pay for it,” was how one employee described married women’s motivation for working. His opinion was echoed by a woman who claimed her married colleagues admitted they were just working for the clothes:

Some of them even say themselves that the reason they are working is because they can get a lot of new clothes – well, if that’s the case they ought to be laid off right there and then – especially a woman that would make a remark like that. If they’re only working down here for clothes I am in favor of the idea that they should be laid off outright –let their husbands take care of them when it comes to providing clothes for them. I cannot see the idea – there are a lot of poor single girls and married men with large families and they should have to stay out of work because the married women are working to buy themselves a lot of clothes. I am not in favor of it.<sup>38</sup>

Just as common was the view that some discretion was needed, and that each case should be decided on its own merits. Women whose husbands were unemployed or sick, and who lacked other support were generally considered most worthy of continued

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<sup>36</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 11, Folder 13, Interview with employee 020836. December 22 1930, p.2. See also FJR Collection, Carton 11, Folder 156, Interview with employee 278674. October 22 1930, p5-6.

<sup>37</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 11, Folder 13, Interview with employee 020836. December 22 1930, p.2

<sup>38</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 11, Folder 33, Interview with employee 060395. October 21 1930, p.6.

employment. One employee commented on two women in his department who exemplified the worthy and the unworthy employed wife:

She is married, but **she's had a lot of hard luck**. They are keeping her. I believe **it would be a tragedy if they laid her off, because her husband has been in the hospital for an operation**. So it wouldn't look fair if they let her go. They've got to let her stay a little while longer, I think. **But this other girl** that is helping me on my work never did this work before. She's worked in the department, but she worked in the office on a clerical job. Well, since the depression came they haven't got any work for her there, so they put her out on the bench with me. **I really think that girl could stay home**. She has no idea of quitting, though, just because she's not laid off. I do believe that she could stay home. **Her husband is working and it would give another single girl a chance to work ....** if something should happen, if trouble should come after you are married, it is a different thing.<sup>39</sup>

It was acceptable according to this employee for a wife to look for work if her husband should lose his job, but she should not keep one while he was working.

This reflected an alternative concept of fairness, that the company should attempt to make sure that all families were coping in the Depression. Employees were never clear on how family circumstances would be compared and a list of suitable candidates for layoffs determined. Some acknowledged that this would take considerable time and effort, but most of the employees who expressed support for considering individual needs did not consider how it would be done. By the length of their qualifying statements some employees acknowledged that investigating individual circumstances to ensure fairness might be challenging:

I believe that if some of the married women were laid off, and the single girls be left to work in their place, conditions wouldn't be as bad as they are. Maybe it is possible that some of the married men that are out of work could be put in their places. I don't think it's right that these married women should be left to work – especially in cases where their husbands are also working. Of course, I agree that every individual cases should be investigated, and wherever possible a married

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<sup>39</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 11, Folder 13, Interview with employee 020836. December 22 1930, p.2

women should be laid off, if possible. Of course, there are exceptions in cases where it might be that their husbands happen to be out of work. A case of that kind should be considered in another way. But I do not think it is right that the married women that they have working here in the various departments should be allowed to work.<sup>40</sup>

The differing policies introduced in different departments about furloughing married women made for some confusion. Employees heard rumours about what was occurring in other departments, and often asked the interviewer if they knew what the definitive policy was. Interviewers typically responded that matters would be decided on a case-by-case basis, taking individual circumstances into account, and trying not to push their own views on the subjects. While the discretionary investigation of individual circumstances was pushed by many employees, some argued that the process would not be entirely fair. With many Western Electric employees living as neighbours in Cicero and western Chicago, workplace tensions could spill over into the neighborhood:

I suppose they don't tell the truth because they're quite nice up in this department about investigating cases and if they find where a family is real hard up and there is only one working they won't lay you off. I think that is quite nice, only they do things funny. When they send investigators out why do they send them to the neighbours homes to find out. May times neighbors aren't good friends and they may tell things that are untrue just for spite and the Western takes their word for it. I have heard of cases like that.<sup>41</sup>

Conversely, other employees were suspicious that if there was discretion for married women to ask for continued employment based on hardship they would create spurious responsibilities to justify their work:

There are a lot of them that don't need the work and still they put up a hard luck story and get away with it. I think when it comes time to lay off they would have been wise to have laid off all the married women at once and not given them a chance to frame up things. I'm pretty sure that a lot of them who are working up there now have just framed their stories. Taking

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<sup>40</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 11, Folder 33, Interview with employee 060395. October 21 1930, p.6.

<sup>41</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 11, Folder 150, Interview with employee 263975. December 2 1931, p.2-3.

other people to live with them and doing all that sort of thing in order to hold their job.<sup>42</sup>

Married women were aware of the discourse that while some employees were opposed in general to married women working, many believed it was acceptable for married women whose circumstances justified it. When interviewed married women would often justify their circumstances, and why they deserved continued employment. One woman who was married was very concerned to distinguish her situation from other married women who were spending their money on luxuries:

He [husband] only works two days a week now, and only brings in twelve dollars or fifteen a week. That's not so much to get along with. I get so tired of hearing everybody yell about the married women. Why don't some of them quit that can quit? They're buying bungalows and cars and all the luxuries and they stay down here working, and then everybody nags a woman like me who are married and are in debt and have so much trouble. I should think that that they'd shut their mouths and not be bothered with women that have to work like I do, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. If you're married all they do is nag at you to quit. If I had my debts paid I wouldn't care. I don't know how I'm ever going to get them paid.<sup>43</sup>

Several employees commented that while they could afford to survive on just their husband's income, they would have to liquidate the equity in their houses to meet expenses on just one income.<sup>44</sup>

The group of employees who were most consistently hostile to married women's employment were single women with significant financial responsibilities. While supervisors may have opposed married women's employment out of jealousy, single women saw themselves in direct competition with married women for jobs. A policy that gave preference to length of service often preferred married women who were, on

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<sup>42</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 11, Folder 167, Interview with employee 302964. October 27 1931, p5-7.

<sup>43</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 12, Folder 107, Interview with employee 510405. May 6 1931. p.3-4.

<sup>44</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 12, Folder 77, Interview with employee 450936. October 17 1930, p.4. ; FJR Collection, Carton 12, Folder 77, Interview with employee 450936. October 17 1930, p.5. ; FJR Collection, Carton 12, Folder 77, Interview with employee 450936. October 17 1930, p.8-9. FJR Collection, Carton 12, Folder 77, Interview with employee 450936. October 17 1930, p.9. ; FJR Collection, Carton 12, Folder 83, Interview with employee 464444. September 23 1931, p.1.



average, older than single women. Many of the single women interviewed were also under considerable stress at home from the pressures of having to bring in income for their family. They contrasted their own situation with married women, who they perceived as living relatively easy lives on two incomes:

of course the women who are married and have working it would be all right, they wouldn't mind it I guess, because they could get home earlier and make supper for their husbands, but when you're single and have somebody to take care of it's hard when your time gets cut that way.<sup>45</sup>

Another employee in a department that furloughed married women commented:

I'm glad they're going to lay off the married women instead of the single women in our department, because I don't know what we'd do in our family ... You see my father hasn't worked for about five years.<sup>46</sup>

The misperceptions went both ways, however, with some married women lamenting that they had to work to support a family in the Depression. They looked back fondly on being single, and having money to spend on themselves:

I'm not crazy about working. I got married hoping that I would be able to quit working, but from the looks of things I guess I'll have to work pretty steady. Well I haven't got a very large flat – I'm only paying sixteen dollars but there are a lot of things that I have to do without because I am married. Now if I had been single, probably I could have had those things. When a girl is single, she doesn't know how well off she is! One of the girls – a darn fool – in our department, she got married last Saturday night!<sup>47</sup>

Other single women perceived married women to be working for small families of themselves and their husband, while single women at work had to support extended families:

There are so many single girls who have old fathers and mothers, some have younger sisters and brothers, and they must lose their jobs while some married woman is working and

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<sup>45</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 12, Folder 167. Interview with employee 623253, September 10 1930, p.3.

<sup>46</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 11, Folder 170, Interview with employee 303864. October 24 1930, p.2-3.

<sup>47</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 13, Folder 170 Interview with employee 993736, December 31 1930, p.2-3.

her husband is too. I really think they ought to do something about that.<sup>48</sup>

With less experience on the job their wages were slightly lower than married women's. Also feeding single women's resentment of married women's continued employment was their perception that men were delaying marriage because of the Depression. As the Depression wore on single women began to question whether their expectations of leaving work after marriage, and being supported by their husband would actually be realized:

I don't want that kind of marriage for mine although it's easy enough for me to say those things because I've never met anyone that I thought a lot of. I suppose I would do just the same as [end p.2] all the other girls do if I met someone I thought a lot of, I'd work for him too, but I always say I won't anyway ....<sup>49</sup>

Some single women worried that with married women going out to work in the Depression husbands would lose their sense of responsibility for providing the family income:

I know plenty of married men that are just taking it easy because their wives are foolish enough to go out and work for them. I think you can spoil a man. That's one thing I'd never do if I was to get married -- that is to work.<sup>50</sup>

... It is awfully hard to find a good husband these days. I know that is the way I feel about it. Most of the men that I know are not so good. They expect their wives to work all the time and bring in the money, but they don't want to do anything that they are supposed to do.<sup>51</sup>

One employee's interview encapsulated both financial pressures at home, and concerns about delayed marriage:

I was to have been married but now that it is such hard times I would rather stay home and help my parents because I do not want to work after I am married. I feel that no man has any

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<sup>48</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 13, Folder 28. Interview with employee 705234, April 25 1930, p.2.

<sup>49</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 13, Folder 28. Interview with employee 705234, October 16 1931, p.2-3.

<sup>50</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 13, Folder 65 Interview with employee 773563, September 30 1931, p.3-4.

<sup>51</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 13, Folder 95 Interview with employee 849784, May 15 1931, p.5-6.

business marrying a girl if he can't support her, so I told my friend as long as he wasn't working full time I was not going to get married. I was going to stay home and help my people. My father and mother are both very old, and if I get married that leaves all the responsibilities on my sister, and you can never tell. Maybe I would have to go home too, so I am going to stay and work until things pick up, and when they do, then I might consider getting married ... I am going to stay single until my boy friend can support me without making me come back to work .... I believe there is time enough to go out and work for a man when you've had hard luck or sickness, but to get married and come right back to work when it is not necessary, that I wouldn't do.<sup>52</sup>

Ironically, the same ideology that husbands should provide for the household that single women espoused to justify the firing of married women contributed to men being reluctant to marry. Few saw the contradiction in their own position, moving seamlessly from asking that married women be laid off to wondering when "their steady" [boyfriend] would propose. It is important to note that not all single women expressed this hostility to married women's work. Indeed, the majority of single women, like a small majority of other employees did not express an opinion about married women's work. However, single women with relatives dependent on their incomes were the most likely to express hostility to married women's continued employment. Many single women acknowledged the procedural rules favoring long serving employees that led the company to retain married women. While they could see the rationality of these rules from the company's perspective, they demanded that the company consider notions of fairness and justice in assigning work that were largely extrinsic to the company. The company did not bear any costs for its policy, giving it little incentive to alter policy in response to employee demands.

## **Conclusion**

Exploring the views of Western Electric workers about married women's employment during the Depression expands our knowledge of contemporary opinion about this issue. Competing conceptions of fairness—procedural or material—underlay

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<sup>52</sup> FJR Collection, Carton 12, Folder 99, Interview with employee 495736. January 27 1931. p.7-8.

the discussion, intertwined with concern for personal position. The most identifiable opponents of married women's employment were single women who had significant financial responsibilities at home, and perceived themselves in competition for jobs with their married women colleagues. This alone complicates our understanding of opposition to married women's work; it was just anti-feminist, it also reflected frustration by younger women at their lives not evolving in the way they expected.

Despite the unprecedented vehicle these young women had for expressing their frustrations to the company, and the responsiveness of the company to employee concerns, the Western Electric Hawthorne plant did not introduce any consistent policies to dismiss married women. With payment linked to productivity there was little reason for the firm to fire productive individuals, and disrupt productive work groups. Without a way to align employee demands with the company's interests, the company was able to largely ignore complaints about married women's employment. Understanding the way in which firms reacted to public pressure during the Depression can only be done by looking at the firm's remuneration policy and interests in retaining staff.

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## **Appendix: Data collected about interviewed employees**

Carton

Folder

1. ID number

2. Branch

3. Department

4. Sex

5. Works in (Shop/Office)

5. Works during (Day/Night)

6. Works on (Bench/Machine/Clerical)

7. Rate basis (Gang piece/individual piece/Salary)

7. Rate period (Weekly/Monthly)

8. Age (In 5 year age groups)

9. Years service (Grouped)

10. Marital status (Married or single, with/out dependents)

11. Posture (Standing/Sitting/Walking)

12. Education (Grade School / Years of high school / Post-high schools)

13. Average earnings (To nearest \$5 band, per week)

14. Race (Distinguish between American and various European groups)

15. Nativity (Native born with native parents, Mixed born, Foreign born)

16. Interviewer (1)

16. Interviewer (2)

17. Classification of employee attitude

18. Dissatisfaction

19. Employee concerns

Interview date 1

Interview date 2

Interview date 3

Interview date 4