THE POLITICS OF EXPERIENCE: WOMEN IN THE
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN CLOTHING TRADE, 1950-1970

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If you come in this factory, you see the front, this beautiful brick front. You think this is a nice factory and it is just an unlined corrugated tin shed.1

This article is concerned with the nature of the experience of women working in the Western Australian clothing trade between 1950 and 1970. The period is significant in that the clothing trades workforce was affected during this time by the arrival of a migrant workforce and by economic downturn in an industry traditionally characterised by low profit margins. Both of these factors together with a male-dominated Union contributed to the workers' extreme expendability throughout this time.

Source material for this study was generated in part from oral sources as conventional records of industrial and union activity do not reveal the kinds of pressures under which women worked.2 The 'official' records of the Western Australian clothing trade indicate that throughout the 1950s and 1960s there is no evidence of disputes in the conventional form of strikes walk-outs or go-slow actions. Recent studies of the history of women's work have been concerned to demonstrate that if the conventional definition of militancy is challenged then women have indeed been militant. A feminist definition of militancy has come to include such activity as absenteeism and frequent job-changing. While this study emphasises the unconventional ways in which women registered protest, its main concern is with why the women were so constrained in their activity. In order to counter ideas of women as 'passive' workers, feminist historians have uncovered a long record of militancy by working women. An essential counterpart to this is revealing the different levels of pressure and intimidation which create the more typical 'non-militant' workforces such as the Western Australian clothing workforce of the 1950s and 1960s.

The Western Australian clothing trade in its structure was similar to the
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trade in the Eastern States, that is, although it operated in an isolated market, its costs and concerns were much the same. The main concern of the trade as a labour-intensive enterprise was to keep labour costs down through low wages and through improved techniques and technology. Although Western Australia had fewer large factories than Victoria and New South Wales, all the States had a majority of factories which had small workforces and in this respect conditions affecting the women workers can be said to have been substantially similar. In the period 1950-1970, there was a decline in the Western Australian industry. Ready-to-wear clothing was replacing factory tailoring with a consequent loss of apprenticeships. Deskilling increased with new machinery and more section work. The workforce composition changed as more migrant women and young married women entered the workforce. (See Appendix) Outwork was also present although in much smaller numbers than in the Eastern States.

The wages of clothing workers fell during the period in relation to other manufacturing trades where women were employed. For example, clothing trade workers were comparatively well paid immediately after the war in relation to textiles and food and drink workers, but by 1959 they were the lowest paid of the three types of factory work. In the meantime the net productivity of each worker increased due to new machinery, section work and employer pressure. For example, in 1951 the average annual female clothing wage was $368 compared to the value of net production per worker of $1,148. This represents a difference of 51%. In 1968 the difference between the female clothing wage and net productivity was still in the order of 43%. In comparison the difference for male clothing workers was 14% in 1951 and 42% in 1968. This overwhelmingly demonstrates that women were being paid well below the value of the work produced and were therefore of great value to the industry.

The larger factories established in the late 1940s used modern machinery and the section work process to boost production. In the older factories in the early 1950s the machinery was often still the bench-type machinery typical of the Depression era. At G. & R. Wills for instance,

They were all black Singers, old industrial types. They weren't difficult but they were noisy. They were on a long bench, machines were worked on a pulley underneath worked by a big motor at one end. We faced one another on the bench.6

The bench system enabled the women to communicate with each other which was not possible once single machines were introduced and the workers sat separately. For the workers this meant that they were now 'one behind the other like in a schoolroom'.5 The schoolroom analogy is apt with its implications of discipline and control and constant supervision of the work process. The machines were often arranged so that all workers faced the employer. 'We had independent motors on all the machines which we found was a much better idea because you could control talking'.6

One English worker found conditions worse than in war-time England. At Frank Davidson's in the early 1960s

the employers would stand around and watch you and see what's going on, see if you were chatting too much....I found [the women] didn't sing in the workroom...there wasn't the atmosphere. There was more pressure with the boss standing over you watching your every move...and timing girls going to the toilets.8

Individual machinery also facilitated the increased sectionalization of the garment. In the 1950s new specialized machines were introduced such as overlockers and blind stitchers9 and toward the end of the 1960s twin-needle machines were bought for seam work reducing the amount of cloth required for a
The division of machine operations sanctioned the idea that workers' operations should also be divided and that they should remain on one machine doing one operation:

All the different machines they had you just couldn't work on one garment. They had a machine just for plackets. They'd possibly considered that changing you around wasn't worth the hassle.\(^\text{12}\)

As one worker observed of section work: 'It lowered the status, it took the skill out of it. You don't have to have too much brain to put two pieces of material together!\(^\text{12}\)

The employers increased the utility of the workers by keeping them on the same task so that the familiarity and ease of the job, alternatively expressed as the boredom and simple-mindedness of the job, increased the speed of the operation:

One Dutch lady did nothing but stitch collars. You know, a short bit, a long bit and a short bit, a short bit, a long bit and a short bit [laughs]. She had already been there ten years.\(^\text{13}\)

As one employer put it, in 1948,

If you can get continuity of work and a girl is doing the same job week in and week out, month in and month out her work becomes more or less automatic. She can do her work under those circumstances with her eyes closed. It makes a tremendous difference.\(^\text{14}\)

After the war, the factories responded to economic pressure by making sure that the workers spent all their time at the machines. Many women refer to short breaks gradually being phased out, either through management directives or through the pressure of the work process on the workers. One worker recalled that in 1957 at Esfit the workers had a ten-minute break on a Friday to clean their machines.\(^\text{15}\)

Another worker recalls that by the early 1960s most workers worked through that break, 'because they had bundles of work that should have been finished'.\(^\text{16}\)

The Union in 1966 records Frank Davidson's change in policy on ten-minute breaks between four-hour work periods. The workers were being asked 'to work an additional ten minutes daily to make up for the rest period'.\(^\text{17}\)

The effect of increased work pressure can best be expressed by recounting the experience of an Italian migrant woman who migrated to Australia in the early 1950s.

Carla was one of the many Italian women who were employed on work that had previously been assigned to juniors. She began at Frank Davidson's in 1956 after hearing of the job from her sister who worked there.\(^\text{18}\)

With her husband employed in unskilled factory work and three children she needed to work to help pay for their house. As an inexperienced worker she was put on 'finishing' which she says required only 'a good hand and a good eye'.\(^\text{19}\)

Before the arrival of a migrant workforce this job would have been done by a junior who would begin there as a start to learning the whole trade.\(^\text{20}\)

Her job was to tidy up the shirts when the machinists had finished with them. She averaged between 15-30 dozen shirts a day depending on their colour and the quality of the material: 'We had to tie and knot the loose ends and cut the cotton down to the level of the cloth and clean all the ends especially on the collar and on the sleeves.\(^\text{21}\)

As another worker commented, the job of 'finishing' was now so de-skilled that 'they didn't even have a needle in their hands'.\(^\text{22}\)

When this finisher first started she worked on one large bench with nine or ten other women 'finishers'. By 1960 they were separated onto single tables.\(^\text{23}\)

The machinists passed their garments to her from one side, and the presser took them from the other. Although she understood the new system to be more 'handy and practical', she also realised that it made communication
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even more difficult: 'You could exchange a few words, but you didn't have much time. We were one behind the other, so it wasn't easy to talk.' Carla stayed at Frank Davidson's for five years. During that time she had little contact with the Union because she found the English language very difficult to learn. Her only direct communication was with other Italian women:

It was hard not to be able to express myself. I would have liked to say what I was feeling but because I was not sure of what I was saying, most of the time I kept everything in myself.24

Her main problem was friction between herself and the other workers over her rapid work pace. The problem seems a general one between the Italian women and other workers, stemming basically from communication difficulties:

I found in Davidson's that...they thought I was too quick. They would try not to give me things to do, they used to take my work away. It would have been more honest to have approached me. They didn't come to me and say, 'Don't do it because if you do it we all have to do it.' We were doing it without thinking that we were that fast....It was just to keep busy.25

This conflict eventually contributed to Carla giving up work. She was experiencing menopause and felt that she was always being tricked into slowing down. 'I would ask for an open window and they used to close it. Everytime they shut it, I have to get up and open it. Just to slow me down!'26 This incident raises some of the problems confronted by these workers when a system was imposed which required a uniform response to the work process. Carla's work experience demonstrates that such a process divided women because it did not allow for differences of culture, temperament, age or physical-well being.

Due to the expendability of the workers throughout the period, employers were able to apply pressure both through the speed of the work process and through intimidation. The position of the women was further hampered by the absence of an effective union. The Clothing and Allied Trades Union was imbued with an ideology of co-operation and loyalty to the employers and never attempted to address the specific problems of women as workers. None of the women interviewed remembered any shop steward initiating activity. They simply thought that the shop steward collected union dues. Women assessed their Union's strength on its visibility and activity within the workplace. As one woman said:

They told me the Union man was there to have a look that everything was alright. I never saw him. I think he was just talking in the office you know....I don't remember the Union doing anything.27

Others remembered that 'the Union was not that strong, not like these days'; 'none of us ever had anything to do with the Union' and 'I can't remember the Union coming round at all during the fifties'. The common belief was that all wage rises were automatic, independent of Union advocacy. In 1972 a Federal Union broadsheet gave the Union's opinion of its difficulties with women workers. The comment reveals that the Union had a view of women workers which effectively relieved Union officials from examining their own role in supporting women in the workplace.

The more our members are prepared to fight for themselves, the more use their officials can be to them. Our female members have problems in this regard of course. Many are married and have little time to spare. Many are still ingrained with beliefs that have come from brain washing as to a woman's place in the scheme of things.28

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The question of whether militant political consciousness and activity were thwarted by the Union or by the women themselves in conjunction with their prescribed roles in an important issue to untangle. The Union emphasized women's 'passivity' or structural constraints without considering the Union's attitudes towards women and its modes of communication with the workers. The Union, as it appears through the pages of its official journal, *Pin and Needles*, took a supportive and conciliatory approach towards clothing trades employers. The pages are replete with stories of how certain owners have struggled and succeeded in building up their businesses to a profitable level, and many articles are concerned with the specific trade problems in the industry. Those English-speaking women who read the Union journal would have had a clear idea of how their distinctive problems as women in the workforce were perceived by the Union. The non-English speaking migrant was effectively isolated from Union contact at all. Carla recalls that in the 1950s no effort was made by the Union to communicate:

We had to pay the Union. They didn't ask me personally. They came in sometimes and had some meetings but because I couldn't understand I never went there. 30

Women were outnumbered on the Union executive throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Because representatives were selected to represent the different trades within the industry the majority of the positions went to men. Of the 1957 executive positions held by men, the President was a presser; the Vice-President a cutter; and the Trustee a tailor. 31 All were trades which at this time were dominated by men. The position of presser was one which had been undergoing a transition from male position to female since the war period. In order to maintain the job for males the Union had argued for and won equal pay for pressers in 1947, stating that 'we as a Union want those equal pay clauses maintained for the men in the Industry today'. 32 When women were appointed as Presidents of the Union in 1952 and 1953 this brought the number of women to its highest level of two. 33 The only constant female representative was that of the dressmaker.

The women in the clothing trade in this period had little choice in employment. Working under pressure, often in small workshops, away from the public eye, they had neither the time, numerical strength or knowledge to make the Union an effective organisation. 34

Federal activity in the Arbitration courts did not compensate for lack of support within the workplace. The lack of Union presence and the impression that the Union's main allegiance was to the management did nothing to inspire confidence. The women were therefore isolated from their potentially strongest basis of support. In this atmosphere the women who did speak out, either as shop stewards or as workers jeopardized their employment. Workers knew that 'when work was short... they [the shop stewards] were always the first to be put off'. 35 Union minutes record an incident of a shop steward being sacked at G. & R. Wills in 1961 after an 'altercation'. The Union believed that she was provoked. 36 One worker, Doris, worked in the immediate post-war period 1946-1950 when there was a shortage of labour in the clothing trade. She was an Australian-born worker and took an active role in defending her own rights and those of fellow workers, ensuring that the women were paid correctly:

they weren't allowed to put girls off before public holidays and of course, they did...I could add up, so I would work out the pay that was due to them and make the girls front up for their pay...this didn't endear me to the bosses, so I changed my job quite often 37

The response from the Union Secretary, Ernest Phillips, to this worker was a warning: 'you won't stay in the trade long. They are onto you'. 38 The
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clothing trade employers were puzzled by Doris's articulate response as a clothing worker. They wanted to know why she was working at Pamela Noodles. Her response was: 'to earn my bread and butter what else'. Although she was not a shop steward she took an active role in enrolling newly arrived workers in the Union:

I went around and said 'Join the Union or else you can't work here'. I didn't have time to explain, so when the girl came round to collect Union dues they paid up.'

Her direct approach followed her employer's warning after the first displaced persons arrived, when he stated: 'You girls have got to realise the good times are over now. It's not a game. You've got to work hard or else you are out.' Whilst Doris realised that the Union was the only structure which the workers could turn to for support, her own experience was disillusioning.

The union people used to come in a very apologetic way. I got the impression they didn't want to be involved - the Union Secretary told me that I would never keep a job...I had two jobs that lasted a week...They [the officials] ran it as a job. They weren't concerned with what was going on.

The employers capitalised on the weak links between workers and Union by being overtly unco-operative when it came to Union-worker interaction. Another worker found that in the 1960s: 'We never got much chance to talk to them [the Union]...the boss was always there with us when the Union came so you weren't game to say anything.' In such a situation the only possible action was by an individual.

A woman's response varied according to her economic situation and her perception of her rights as a worker. The demand to be treated reasonably and respectfully appears to have been the strongest demand the women were able to make throughout the period. Their disputes therefore mainly involved issues where the demand for 'reasonable interaction' had not been adhered to. They defined 'reasonable interaction' as the right to be addressed with some respect by the boss and by other workers; to be heard by the boss when they did speak out, and to be paid according to the award rate, however insufficient that amount may have been. The women concentrated more on how they were controlled as workers rather than with how they might gain more control in the workplace.

The women trivialised the areas of conflict and their own responses, even though the complaints were repeated and were obviously important: '[the workers] used to grizzle about when girls were put off at Christmas and they were always short paid'. Also,

I can remember arguments and girls bursting into tears. This would be over work or perhaps they think the boss dislikes them and he would pick on them, if they were absent too much, or leave too early, come in too late. The usual 'picky' things. Some girls would stand up for themselves, other wouldn't.

When asked what happened to the 'girls' who stood up for themselves, the reply was 'well, normally they got put off'. In such circumstances the act of leaving a job voluntarily or being sacked must be considered as a protest action by women.

In 1965, Dutch-born worker, Louise (who says that she was 'never one for demanding rights'), experienced problems with the lighting which ended with her leaving her job in frustration:

It was all temporary lighting, just strung up, and it would cast shadows all over your machine...I did a bit of complaining and she reckoned it
was my eyesight. In the end I just ended up leaving. I was getting headaches and I went to the eye specialist. He said there was nothing wrong... It was definitely the shadows. Nobody else was game to say anything.47

Louise had asserted her rights on only one other occasion. She became a shop steward for a short period in the early 1960s. This required that she overcame some of her own views about accepting injustices in the workplace:

In this Pils and Needles article it said that [the boss] should keep your scissors maintained. I walked up to him as bold as light and gave him this article and he had just charged us one shilling to sharpen them. He had to give it all back. He wasn't very happy. It took me a lot of courage to get up and show him that article.48

The expressions the worker uses to describe her actions reveal that the importance of the incident for her lay in the process of speaking out rather than in the specifics of the issue.

Other women held stronger views about their rights as workers. As Louise expressed it, 'You had to get on top, show him that you were women'.49 She resented being sworn at and often spoke out against her employer:

The boss came to me and said 'Did you switch your bloody machine off?' I said 'Listen, it is a Singer sewing machine not a bloody machine'. And he never swear after that again to me.50

The women understood that the way they were spoken to was part of their overall intimidation. On another occasion Louise took to the workplace some copies of a radical newspaper which had in it a critical article on the factory in which she worked, Ezifit. Only the other Dutch women took some papers from her to read; the others refused to have anything to do with them or her. When she was asked by the forewoman to remove the papers from her work space, she refused. The forewoman took the issue to the boss. He agreed that she could have them there as long as she did not read them in 'his time'. Louise felt that her fellow workers 'were all so frightened that they were involved in something to get better conditions'.51 She also confronted her employer on the issue of not being given sick pay. When she said that she would go to the boss about it the other women warned her:

he will swear and chop your head off...you can't do that. But I was an older woman, and I was around 35 and I thought 'Blow you, I'm entitled to sick pay...I have worked here and done my work proper. The employer did, in fact, try to intimidate her:

he stood over me and said 'Oh you think you can get anything'...and he started...I said I'm entitled to it...I got it a week later, but those girls were too frightened to ask.52

As well as the constant real threat of dismissal the women were also subject to personal intimidation. In an employment situation where a male employer employed a predominantly female workforce this was always a factor. In interviews women constantly spoke of being 'too frightened to speak out'.53 Workers comment that 'there was pressure with the boss standing over you'; 'if you chat you get told off, if you go to the toilet too often you get told off'; 'if you make mistakes he'd go crook'; 'He was a very stern boss...but we all knew what he was like'.54 The Union Secretary in the 1960s remembers that the employers were particularly hard on the junior staff, 'They got youngsters of 14 and they'd have those kiddies in tears. They would make
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a mistake and have to stay back at lunch time.58

Women's responses were undoubtedly affected by the power of the employer
to fire them at will in the knowledge of a good labour supply. Union minutes
record instances of women being dismissed at a minute's notice and of women
being sent dismissal notices whilst on annual leave.59 The employers also
sought to control the type of worker to whom they gave employment. For
example, the forewoman at Frank Davidson’s between 1934 and 1964 recalled
that whilst she usually did the hiring of female workers and the owner/manager of
male workers, the owner/manager intervened on several occasions and overruled
her decision.

One time I had a girl on trial, the boss came out and stood behind her.
He seemed to think she'd been there before. He went up to her and told
her she wasn't welcome in the factory...he must have known something.60

On another occasion the forewoman gave an Aboriginal girl a job:

After I came back from interviewing her, the boss came up to me and said
'What did she want?' I said 'She wanted a job'. He said 'Well you
haven't taken her on...?' So I said 'Yes I have....' He said 'You write
to her and say the job is not there....' that caused a big argument
between him and I, ....I said you've got every nationality here, yet you
won't give that girl a chance....He turned around and said 'The
Australian girls wouldn't stand it', but he didn't give her a try....I
thought it was very wrong.61

The incident provides a good example of an Australian employer applying racial
prejudice to the group most discriminated against within Australian society
whilst utilising other nationalities for his supply of cheap labour.

I have suggested that personal intimidation was particularly likely in
the situation where a male employer employed a predominately female
workforce. However, the experiences of individual women defy any notions that
women were a 'passive' workforce who were absolutely unwilling or unable to
act due to the constraints of family, migrant background or of female
socialisation. The current high unionisation in the trade and the historic
types of action taken by other women workers all give strength to the idea
that women can act together in certain circumstances to improve their work
situation.

In this chapter I have examined the sort of responses that Individual
women were able to make to an oppressive working situation notable for
employer intimidation, a union-management alliance and unstable employment.
Women's experience of working in a female 'trade' was determined by their
lives both in and out of the workforce. This article has concentrated on
activity within the workplace, yet this must be understood within the broader
constraints of the sexual division of labour, which allocates to woman
responsibility within the family, and the sex segregation of the labour market
which confines women's choice of work to mainly unskilled, poorly-paid
trades.62 These factors together with the historical situation of the
availability of a female workforce and increased pressure in the work process
itself all militated against the growth of a politically-conscious workforce.
APPENDIX

GRAPH: PERCENTAGES OF FEMALE CLOTHING WORKERS ACCORDING TO AGE

SOURCE: ABS Census Data - Females classified according to Industry and Age in Western Australia.

TABLE 1

FEMALE CLOTHING AND BOOT TRADE WORKERS - ACCORDING TO COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Yugoslavia</th>
<th>Greece</th>
<th>West Germany</th>
<th>Africa</th>
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<th>Asia</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total Born in Australia</th>
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<td>154</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>1,196</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961</td>
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<td>247</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>105</td>
<td>692</td>
<td>1,185</td>
<td>1,185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: A.B.S. Census Data - Females classified according to Industry and Birthplace in Western Australia.
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REFERENCES

1. Interview P, a Dutch migrant worker.
2. All interviews were conducted throughout 1982 and were given in response to several news items which described my research. For full accounts of the women interviewed the reader is directed to my honours thesis, Women and Work: Women in the West Australian Clothing Trade 1860-1970. Murdoch University 1983. The alphabetical ordering of the interviews refers to the thesis and where names are used these are pseudonyms.
3. The net productivity of each worker is the gross productivity minus depreciation. In layperson's terms net productivity can be expressed as the value to the employer of the work done, while the value to the worker is expressed by the wage.
4. Interview B with English migrant worker.
5. Interview C with English migrant worker.
6. Interview D with Western Australian born female employer.
7. Interview E
9. Interview Ruth Geneff, Clothing and Allied Trades Union Secretary, 1982.
11. Interview P
12. Ibid.
14. Interview D
15. Interview C
17. Interview R, Italian migrant worker, Pseudonym - Carla.
18. Ibid.
20. Interview E
21. Interview P
22. Interview C
23. Ibid.
24. Interview E
25. Ibid.
27. Interviews E, P, O, N.
28. Interview D
30. Interview E
31. Clothing and Allied trades Union minutes, Western Australian branch, June 1955 and December 1952.
32. Clothing and Allied Trades Union minutes, West Australian branch, June 1957.
34. Not all women workers in small workforces are as limited in their activities as the clothing workers were in this period. See in particular article by Wendy Brady, this Journal.
35. Interview C
36. Clothing and Allied trade Union, West Australian branch minutes, April 1961.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid
42. *Ibid*
43. Interview H
44. Interview D
45. Interview C
46. *Ibid*
47. Interview G
48. *Ibid*
49. Interview F
50. *Ibid*
51. *Ibid*
52. *Ibid*
53. Interview D
54. Interview L, Australian worker
55. Interview C
56. Interview B
57. Interview H, English migrant worker
58. Interview, Stan Lapham, Secretary, Clothing and Allied trades Union, 1960-1968.
60. Interview H.
61. *Ibid*