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WITHOUT WRITER'S CONSENT

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB-#28
Women At Work

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Saugus, Mass. 01905
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Dear Mr. Nolte:



One of the first times I visited the Merrimack Valley plant I was given a tour by someone from the Public Relations department. We must have covered a few miles walking up and down stairs, in and out of shops, around the extensive plant. As we passed one department my guide said, looking out at row upon row of women doing bench work, "This is a good place to work, especially for women. I wouldn't mind my wife working out in the shops."

Richard Balzer is an Institute fellow currently studying the effects of social and economic change on the lower-middle-class.

While I worked in the shops I heard a variety of comments about women. "Women don't want to be promoted; women are better equipped to do bench work; women aren't as bored as men by bench work; 32 grade jobs pay a decent wage for a woman but not for a man; and, nowadays if you want to get ahead at Western you've got to be a minority or a woman."

I wondered what all these statements meant, and why women came to work in the shops. It didn't take me long to learn that unlike the highly publicized group of middle and upper-middle-class women who have been going to work in increasing numbers to find careers and a sense of personal fulfillment, as well as to earn money, the majority of women who come to work on the benches at Western do so primarily for economic reasons.

1

"I could have worked upstairs in the office," Claire told me, "but they don't pay what you can make out on the floor, especially if you're in a good department with a good bonus. Maybe the work isn't as interesting, but it isn't bad and the money is decent, especially for a woman."

Some of the women I met at work are primary breadwinners. However, the majority were working, they said, to supplement their husband's income. For many women like Mae Thomas, supplementing a husband's income means making enough to get the necessities of life. "I came to work," Mae said, "because my Joe and me, we couldn't make it on his salary." For many others like Jean Turley, supplementing means making enough to get some of the material extras society offers. "Sure we could get by," Jean said, "but we couldn't have the two cars or the boat. When we pull that boat out to the beach I'm really proud that I've helped make it possible."

Although sex roles are undergoing certain changes, most of the men and women I met at work had fairly traditional views about the responsibilities of men and women. The man was, if possible, to be the economic provider, while the woman's primary responsibility, even if she worked, was the home and the children.

Many men I met at work felt the need to be the sole economic provider. Terry Thomas told me, "Both my parents worked when I was young and it hurt me. I work two jobs so that my wife can be in the house with the kids where she belongs."

A man who moonlights, working sixty to seventy hours a week, is usually not doing it to find the job satisfaction in a second job which might be lacking in the first job, but rather so that he can be a better provider by bringing in more money. Generally, men who work two jobs are applauded as being ambitious and willing to sacrifice for the economic well-being of their families. We tend to overlook the fact that a man who works two jobs dramatically limits the time he spends with his wife and children. Women who work are frequently criticized for neglecting their husbands and children.

1. All the names in this newsletter have been changed.

The husbands I spoke with usually blamed economic conditions for forcing their wives to go to work. The married women I knew generally agreed. I met several women who had working daughters with small children. They all blamed economic conditions for driving their married daughters to work. They could not see any other reason why a young mother would work.

Factory women have the second job of wife, mother and housekeeper when their paid working day is finished. Unlike many working middle and upper class women, these women cannot afford a helper to come in and do cleaning or cooking for them. Several mentioned that there was dinner to prepare and cleaning to be done after work. Many women have household responsibilities which leave little time for relaxation and "self-development."

Some women are helped out at home. I heard women talk about their children doing cooking and cleaning. Many women were both pleased and surprised at what their husbands did around the house. Several remarked, like Ann Hope, "It's only fair, I'm helping Ralph by working, he should help me around the house."

As much as children and husbands helped out, many, if not most, women accepted the traditional idea that they were responsible for keeping the house clean, and that their husbands might not like to do certain things around the house.

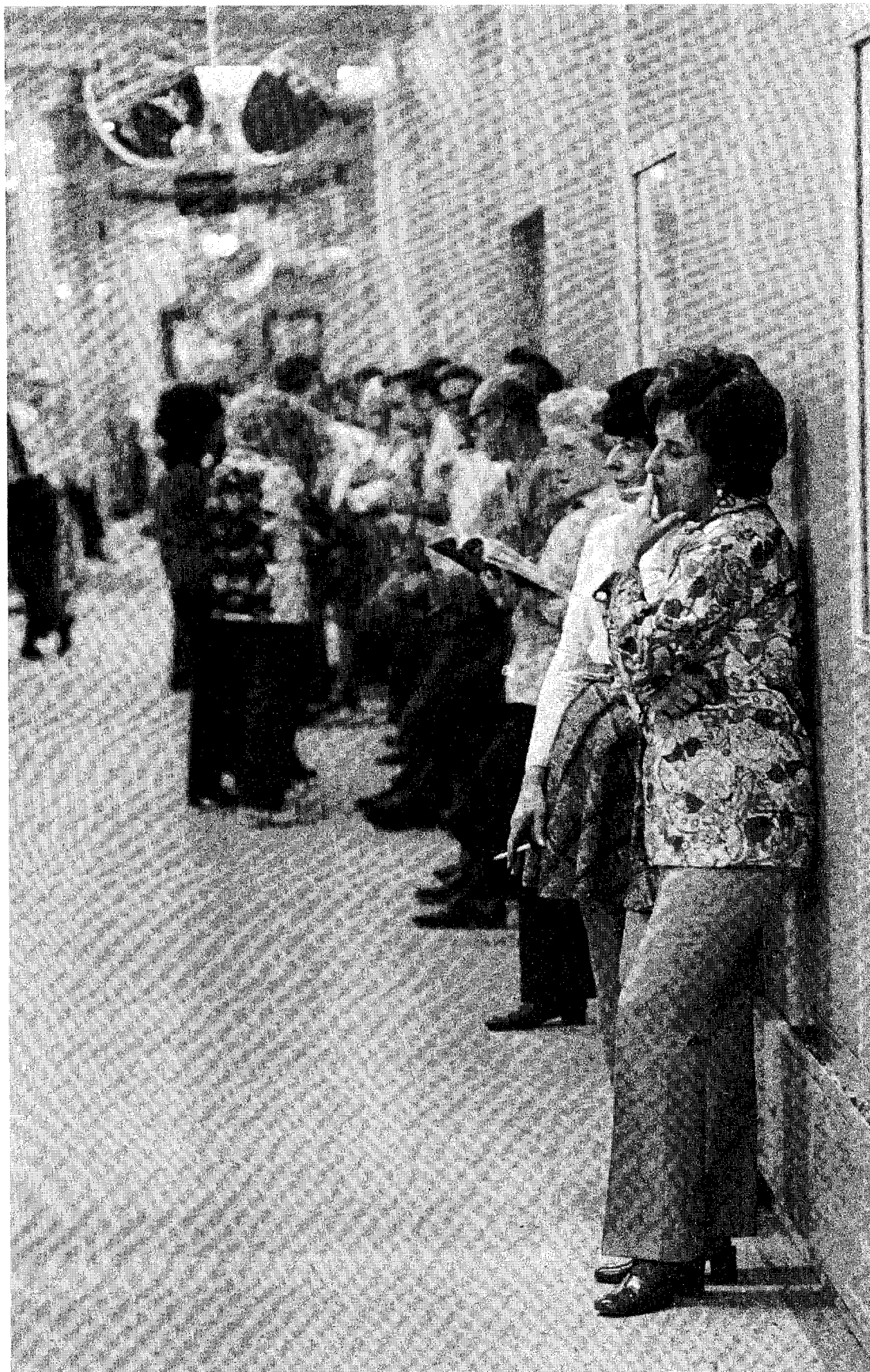
I remember a conversation between two women I worked with. JoAnn mentioned that her husband had hurt his leg and although he drove her to and from the supermarket he couldn't help her carry the bags in. She said it was the first time in the 32 years of their marriage that she could remember ever having to carry grocery bags into the house, and she knew how bad it made her husband feel. Janice laughed, and said, "You're lucky. When my husband is home he asks me to help with the outside work. One day I was helping him move something, and a neighbor asked if he could help. My husband, the big shot, said no, I would help him. I did, but do you think in the house he could pick up his socks, or hang up his clothes? Nope, he comes in the house, and where he takes something off that's where it stays. I walk in the house after work and I've got to clean up after him like he was a little kid. What are you going to do? I guess they're right, you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

For most of the women I met the most important responsibility they feel they exercise is the care of their children. Unlike a man, a woman who goes to work and has children, whether separated, divorced, widowed, or married, has to assure people that she is not neglecting those children, that adequate arrangements for their well being have been made.

I was surprised to find how few women I talked to availed themselves of professional day care services. Many single female parents, and married couples who worked the same shift, leaned heavily on parents and inlaws for child care, and not just for economic reasons.

I met many couples who chose to work different shifts in order to take care of their children. I thought the reason was that professional day care or babysitting was prohibitively expensive--it would eat up too much of a second income--and parents and inlaws were not available.





This would imply that less expensive day care programs would make working different shifts unnecessary. I learned, however, from several couples that although they had mentioned money, they were reluctant to allow professionals to raise their children, especially when they were small. "We brought them into this world," Ed Patrick said, "we figure we ought to raise them." Ann Dowd was resigned to the price she and her husband paid by working different shifts. She told me, "I don't want any strangers raising my children. Sure we don't get to spend much time together working different shifts, but we won't always be doing it this way."

Some couples who worked different shifts maximized the time they had together by having one work the first shift and the other the third, thus giving them six hours of the day together. It was, however, not uncommon for me to meet couples where one parent worked the first shift (usually the man) while the other worked the second shift (often called the mother's shift) thus leaving the couples less than ten minutes a day together. Lizzie Walker told me, "By the time my husband comes home I'm already gone. By the time I come home he's already asleep. It's not really a very good system, is it?"

Women, I found, unlike men, spend much of their time at work sharing information about child rearing, discussing new household purchases, and trading recipes. I think the amount of time they devote to this not only shows how important their children and homes are, but expresses a subconscious need to bring their families to work, to present themselves as adequate wives and mothers. Men almost never talked about their families.

Most women in the shops at Western enter as 32 grade operators. This is the lowest graded, supposedly least skilled, bench work. The work on the benches, whether downstairs in the equipment shops or upstairs in coil winding, or in thin film, tends to be repetitive in nature.

The starting salary for a 32 grade operator is \$3.14 (1973) an hour. Three years ago it was \$2.68. On top of the basic wage there is a bonus which, plantwide, averages about 25%, so many of the people working at the lowest grade are averaging approximately \$4.00 an hour.

Of the approximately 5,500 workers who are in the shops (Grades 32-38) approximately 2,000 are 32 grade workers and of those 90% are women². For a long time only women were given jobs as 32 grade employees. Men were started at 33 grade work. Although there was no company stated policy, many people said this was the policy because 32 grade work was not considered man's work, and the wage paid, though considered good for a woman supplementing a man's income, was not considered a decent wage for a man who needed to support his family. This procedure was discontinued in 1970 and men as well as women are now given 32 grade jobs.

2. Figures pertaining to these matters are taken from company supplied data.

Out in the shop many people still held a feeling that benchwork, especially that of 32 and 33 grade operatives, is woman's work. Men frequently commented that women were better equipped to do the bench work. I wondered if they meant that women could perform the tasks demanded of bench workers better than men. I'd say from watching people work for five months that the answer would be a qualified yes. In our department we primarily worked on printed circuit boards with small parts. Women seemed quicker at completing these boards. I heard many explanations for this. The most common, and the one which made the most sense, was that women have smaller fingers and consequently greater finger dexterity.

There was general acceptance of this notion that women have greater finger dexterity. Within the limited range of work assignments in our area there was a sex separation of tasks. Given the chance, our supervisor would put the 32 grade men on bigger boards, boards with large transformers, which the women, as he said, didn't like to work on. Both the men and the women in our group seemed to agree that bigger boards and jobs calling for greater physical exertion were men's work, while the jobs calling for work with small parts were women's work.

I worked primarily on the big boards. A couple of women told me they were glad when men started coming in the department because they used to have to do the big boards, and they hated them. "It's too tough for a woman," Jackie said. "I'm glad Jack has you guys working on them." Diane told me she used to work on the big boards and she wasn't, she said, "strong enough to do the work." Just as most women seemed to prefer the smaller boards, the men seemed to like the big boards. Larry said, "I don't think there is anybody who can do these big boards any quicker than me. I don't like the small boards," he continued, holding out his hands, "My fingers are too big, too clumsy, to work on those small boards."

Our work load didn't always permit the men to work on the large boards. We were often required to do small boards. I felt confident on the larger boards, but I didn't feel confident on the smaller boards. Like the other men I knew, I often complained about working on the small boards. I found I was saying how big and clumsy my fingers were. What was I saying by complaining, except that it was woman's work?

I realized after working a while that when men talked about women being better equipped to do the bench work they were not merely talking about finger dexterity. They were talking about a belief that women have a better capacity to tolerate the boredom, and repetitive nature of much of the work.

A man I knew who worked in the tool room told me he hated it when he used to do bench work. He said, "It was boring as hell. It bored all the guys I knew, but for some reason it didn't seem to bother the women. I don't know, once in a while one of them will tell you they don't like it, but the majority--I'd say 99% of them--don't seem to mind. I don't know if it's physical or what, but women don't mind the work and men can't stand it."

I was convinced by the end of my work stay at Western that women were much better at adapting to the boredom and repetitiveness of their tasks than the men. They might not like it any better, but they seemed to be more accepting of the boredom. I asked a woman I knew, who had more than 20 years of service with the company, if she thought I was silly to think that men had a more difficult time adjusting to the work than women. "No," she said, "It's much more difficult for men to be submissive and passive and that's why they have a harder time adapting."

Ruth's remarks made a lot of sense to me on the surface. It was easy to imagine that the attitudes of both men and women toward bench work were reflective of different character traits that we usually associate with men and women. Men, in this society, are taught to be aggressive and competitive, while women are taught to be submissive and passive. It would seem to follow logically that women should be better equipped therefore to tolerate long hours of work which are not intrinsically interesting.

Although the explanation made some sense, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it made more apparent than real sense. If women were more able to adapt to boring, repetitive work, how could I explain the fact that men do some of the most boring, repetitive industrial work. For example, it's hard to imagine many much more boring jobs than those performed by large numbers of men on the assembly lines in the automobile factories.

If women are not necessarily more acceptant of the boredom and repetitiveness of the work, and if the idea of women's work cannot, if at all, fully be explained by finger dexterity, what, I wondered, made certain jobs women's and not man's work. At Western I think some of it has to do with the physical requirements of the work. Work that requires physical labor, and which is dirty, is generally considered, I found, by both men and women, as man's work. Work requiring working with small parts, and which doesn't require, much physical exertion, is woman's work.

The wage is also, I discovered, important. Although men were disturbed by the boredom and repetitiveness of the non-physical low paying bench work, they were willing to work on equally boring jobs where the work is physical and the wages are better. So even though the 32 grade work is now open to men as well as women, it is still widely thought of as woman's work.

Joanne Bellini has worked for the company for four years. She said she and her husband started work on the same day. They both worked for a week, then her husband decided to quit, saying it was woman's work. She stayed and he went out looking for another job. She didn't disagree with him. Many women, especially older ones, were prone to saying that the lower grade bench work was woman's work. As much as they themselves might dislike the job, they felt sorrier for the young men who had 32 grade jobs.

There was one young male worker in our group who constantly complained about the work. Many of the women said the kid should be outside doing something else, not stuck in here doing woman's work. Grace Mazoola told me that although she wouldn't mind her daughter coming to work on the bench, she didn't want her son to because it wasn't a job for a man.

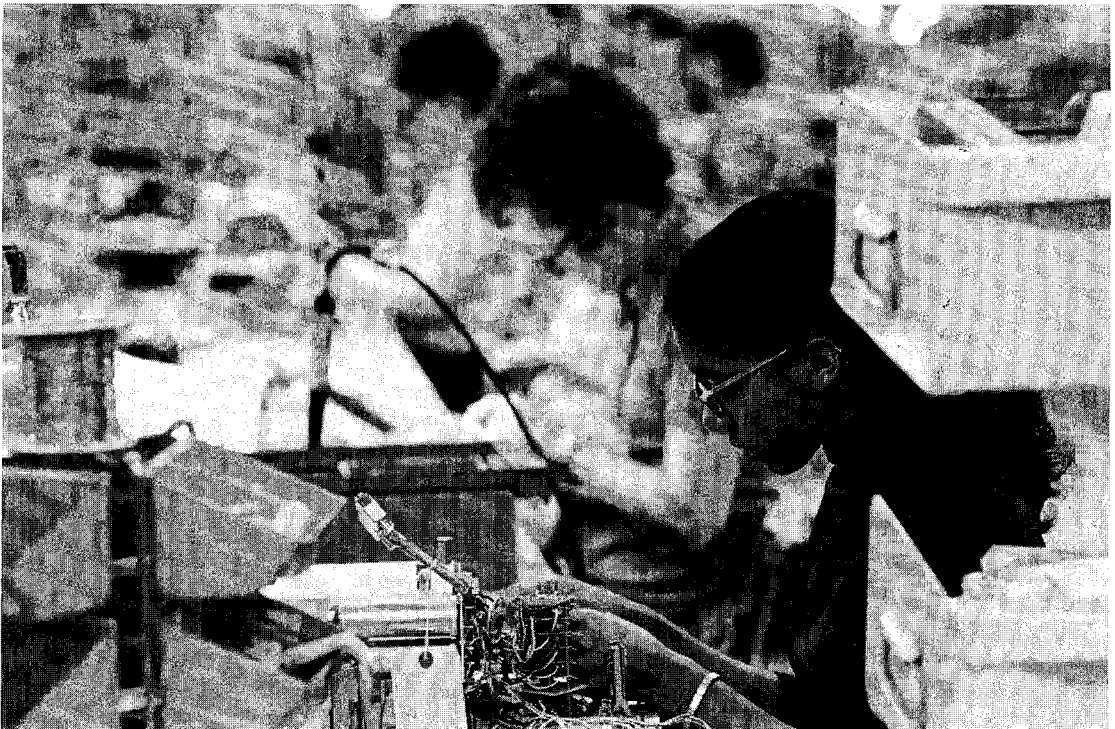
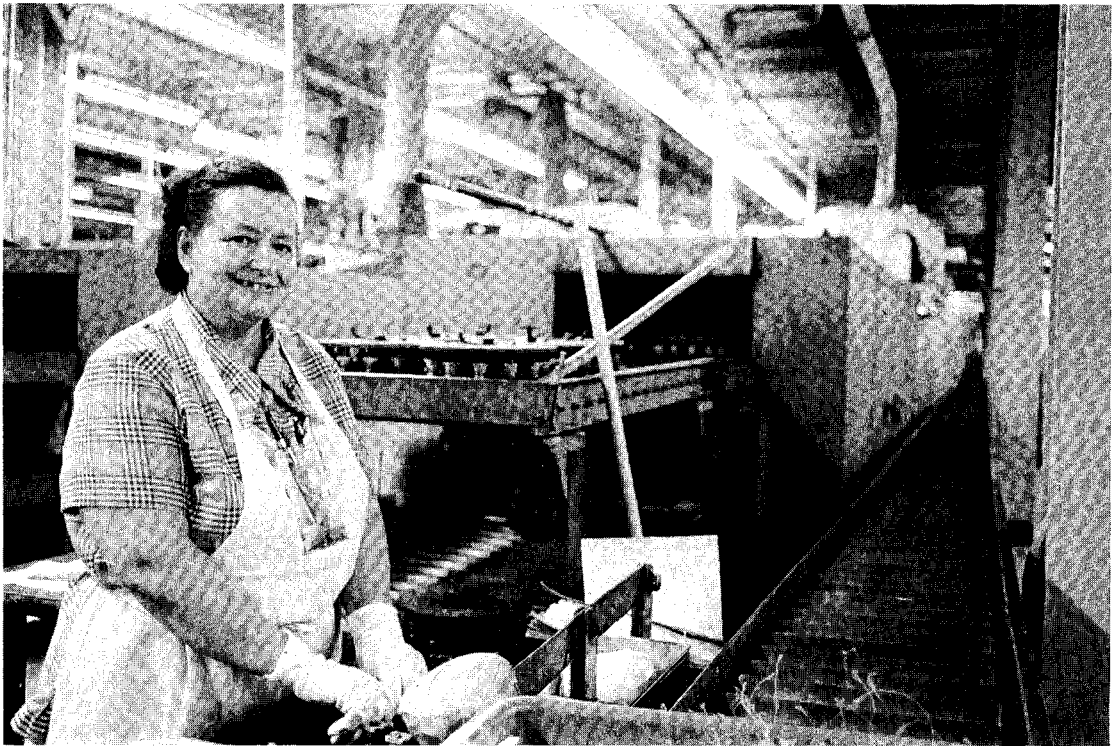
Although thousands of women have worked on the benches at Western since it first came to the Valley, relatively few of them have moved up the graded system and into supervisory positions. As one goes up the graded skill ladder the number of women dramatically decreases. Although women represent nearly 90% of the 32 grade workers, they represent only slightly more than 50 % of the 34 grade workers, 28% of the 36 grade workers and only 20% of the 37 grade workers (April 1973). Until 1970 there wasn't a single woman supervisor. In 1970 there were 10 women supervisors and today there are approximately fifteen.

The company acknowledges that women, though unintentionally, have like minorities been precluded from advancement, and are strikingly underrepresented in higher paying and supervisory jobs. The company considers the problems of women and minorities somewhat different. Whereas the minority population (Blacks, Spanish surnames, and American Indians) is relatively small in the immediate area, nearly 50% of the local work force is women.

The company wants to rectify this situation. In an internally distributed document the company states..."All jobs are open to all of our employees and we expect that gains will continue to be made especially in the case of females, where attitudes previously held regarding jobs are changing in a positive direction. We will attempt to accelerate this change by encouraging females to consider all available job opportunities and by publishing the fact that we have no jobs that are considered "male only". "

The company is anxious to find qualified women and move them ahead. There are many women who wish to get ahead who feel, with some justification, that they have been held back or ignored because they are women. There are, I believe, a great number of women who might be interested in promotions but who have a major concern which often makes them hesitate. It is a concern to which most men don't seem to give priority, and that is their children. Whether a woman is married, separated, divorced or widowed, if she has children, those children will cause her to hesitate about any promotion which will require her to change a shift, or will demand more of her time. Similarly, many of the older women whose children are now grown, and who have been working to help husbands build a little nest egg for retirement, are reluctant to take a promotion if it requires that they spend more time away from their husbands.

For a long time many people in the company said that the reason there weren't more women in higher positions was not so much the company's policies or omissions but that women didn't want to be promoted. A supervisor I knew, who had worked for the company for 27 years, told me that in his experience, women were much more reluctant than men to accept a promotion. "I don't know," he said, "offer a man a few extra pennies and he will take a different department, a different shift. He wants to get ahead, but women for a couple of extra pennies will worry more about their family and won't move so quickly.





It isn't a question of men as opposed to women. It really is who is the primary breadwinner, and who is the secondary breadwinner. If the woman is the primary breadwinner, she'll move, but still she'll move less quickly than most men."

I wondered if this was really true. Over the months I got to know quite a few women and men and talked to them about promotions. Most of the men I knew were willing to take most promotions if it meant getting a higher grade and a little more pay even if it meant rearranging home schedules. I met a man with four children. He had worked days for 12 years and less than three months before had switched to nights. "They offered me a 35 grade on nights, and I thought maybe I could get to 36 grade quicker working nights. I don't like it but with the extra money, the night bonus (10%) and the chance for further promotion, I felt I couldn't say no."

The attitude among the women I knew was quite different. Several women who had long service records told me they had quit work more than once during the year, because they were switched to another shift. "I was working on the first shift," Beth said, "and they bumped me. They were going to send me to the second shift. It meant I couldn't be with my kids (then school age) so I quit. It made it tough on us, but I waited until they had an opening on days again. I was out of work for more than a year." Several women I knew told me if they were surplussed or bumped onto another shift they would quit rather than take the transfer.

Even when a woman is the primary breadwinner, she often has to arrange her shift according to her family, and she feels less freedom than a man in switching shifts because of children. I knew one woman who worked on nights for nine years. She was divorced from her husband, and needed to work. She took a job on the second shift not because she wanted to, but so that she could be home during the days with her children. Once they were in school she switched to days. She would like to be promoted, but if a promotion came along which required her transferring back to the second shift she would not, she thought, accept it because she wouldn't have time with her now teenage children.

I found, in addition, that many women didn't want to do men's work". Unlike the men, the women frequently mentioned a clean environment, and not being physically tired, as important aspects of work.

Many women came to work wearing very nice clothes, clothes one doesn't usually associate with a factory. As Kay Cole said, "The girls who work in here don't wear cotton house dresses. They come to work nicely dressed." Another woman told me, "I wanted to find a job that wouldn't tire me out. I need some energy for my home and children." And Carmen Lingetti said, "I don't want a job that will make me get dirty. I don't want to do a man's job even if they make it available." Still, there are some women who wouldn't mind doing what other women consider physical jobs, and there are plenty of jobs that women might be anxious to do, which wouldn't require great amounts of physical work.

The company is pushing hard to get women to think about promotions. It has a plan of affirmative action to comply with the Equal Opportunity Employment Act, which required certain numbers of women in certain places at certain times. The company is encouraging women in different ways. One of the most interesting that I heard of was a course given to twelve women to raise their work aspirations. Behind the program lies the belief that women have been conditioned to hold back and that with a little encouragement they would move ahead.

I asked several women about this. I got no clear picture, except that most didn't want to be the first in a job formerly considered to be all male; they preferred to wait and see what happened to the women who moved into those positions.

The company should make the necessary changes to promote real equal opportunity. However, it will make a mistake if it overlooks the potential problems, both at work and at home, that affirmative action may create. There is already a backlash developing on the shop floor because the company's openly stated policy of equal consideration is perceived as preferential treatment in promotion of women as well as minorities.

Many of the people who are most critical of the company's programs are men, whose potential for upward mobility within the company may be seriously reduced. Formerly, even when men entered jobs as 33 grade workers there was some feeling that with service and a good record there was a fairly good chance to move up in the company. Although there were large numbers of women, most were considered not interested in promotions, and therefore bypassed, thus leaving a much smaller pool of people to compete against. So the best paying jobs in the shops, and all levels of supervisory positions were, and still are, dominated by men. In the skilled crafts where there are 600 workers there are only two women, one of whom is a trainee. There are 378 section chiefs (1st line supervisors) and only 11 are women, and of the 137 department chiefs only one is a woman.

Women are now being encouraged to compete for these jobs. Competition for higher paying jobs has always been keen. Now many of the men realize that they will not only have to compete against one another, but that they will have to compete against women and minorities. Many believe, although the company insists that it is not true, that a less qualified minority or woman will be given preference.

I found that, as a group, male layouts are particularly sensitive about the issue of female promotion. There are approximately 300 layouts and three quarters of them are men. Many men see becoming a layout as a stepping stone to higher employment in the shops and a possible move into supervisory positions. Now many of these men feel that things will be tougher, and that less qualified women will be moved up over them. You hear them talk about how you can't get ahead any more in the company unless you are a minority or a woman. They talk about this or that "dizzy broad" being promoted, or as John Thomas told me, "Hell, they'll keep promoting those women to look good to the government, and then we'll have to carry them."

Another thing that bothered many of the men was the fact that the company was dropping certain requirements from jobs so that women could enter what were previously considered all male jobs. Several tool and die makers said the company had seriously reduced the weight lifting requirements for the jobs because women couldn't pass them.³ Earl Smith told me, "Not that I have anything against women. If a woman can qualify for the job the same way a man can, she should get it, but don't change the qualifications just to make it easier for the women."

There also may be problems because now that there are no jobs which are for men only, there are supposedly no jobs which are for women only. Men have begun coming in as 32 grade operators. Although men are currently given the more physical 32 grade tasks, as their numbers increase this will be increasingly difficult if not impossible to do. I don't know how numbers of men working on low grade bench work will react to that work or how their presence on the bench will affect things.

Men's reactions at work are, of course, not the only problems that serious efforts to promote women may create. There will undoubtedly be problems at home for both men and women.

Many women are reluctant to make changes in work or move ahead if it will upset their home relationships. This is particularly true of the women who suggest that they have come to work to supplement a husband's income. Many of them acknowledge that their working bothers their husbands. Alice Smith told me, "I wanted to go to work, the kids were grown, and I didn't want to sit in the house. When I told my husband he said he didn't like the idea, that he made enough so that I didn't need to work. I told him, 'George I want to.' He still said no. Then I told him we could get some of the things we always wanted if we both worked, and he finally agreed." Another woman told me, "My husband agreed to my working but when I said I was going to get a job as a waitress he nearly blew his stack. He said he didn't approve of his wife doing that kind of work. I couldn't argue with him so I came to work at Western, even though it meant making less money."

Women seemed very concerned about how their working made their husbands feel. "You know," Arlene said, "they talk about how it's good that women are going to work, but they don't talk about what it does to a man. A woman working makes a man give up to a certain degree his sense of dominance, his feeling of 'I can provide'."

Few women, I noticed, bragged about how much they made, and how much their husbands needed their contribution. Instead, most were quick to point out that they were supplementing their husband's income, even if they were making nearly as much.

What will happen when women begin to assume positions which will equal or possibly surpass those of their husband's? I found quite a few women who were concerned about this. Maybe their husbands shouldn't be disturbed by the prospect, but many admitted that it would be threatening to their

3. The company spokesman assured me that no weight requirements had been dropped.

husbands and that they weren't interested in doing that.

I heard some women discussing a woman who had recently been promoted. "Did you hear," said Jane, "they moved Ann up to 211. It's pretty good, isn't it?" "Yeah" said Alice, "but I hear she and her husband are having a hard time." Later I asked Alice what she had meant. She said she had heard that Ann's husband had a maintenance job with the town of Methuen. When Ann had come to work at Western she had started out on the benches. At that time she and her husband were supposedly getting along. However, since she had been moving up she'd been hanging out with a different group of people, and now she makes more than her husband, and there's tension at home. Alice was one woman who strongly believed that women should support their husbands emotionally and was committed to very traditional ideas about the roles of men and women. It wasn't clear from her telling of the story whether economic conditions were causing tensions for Ann and her husband or whether that's how Alice needed to see them.

Affirmative action may have a major impact on many people who work at Western Electric. Jobs will undoubtedly open up for many women; whether or not large numbers of women will gravitate to the new openings is still a question. There certainly are some who as primary breadwinners still need and want the chance to move up. However, whatever the new social values, most women I met at work, young and old, retained very traditional views of sex roles. They accepted the idea that a woman's place is in the home. In fact, if anything, most wished they didn't have to work.



Richard Belfrage