

# The Housewives' Wages Debate in the 1920s Australian Press

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The topic of housewives' wages has received almost no Australian historical consideration. Dorothy Campbell's fleeting reference is an extremely rare exception.<sup>1</sup> This article provides a much-needed historical examination of a neglected topic. Such examination shows that progressive and conservative arguments were mounted on both sides of the debate over housewives' wages in Australia in the 1920s. Both sides of the debate are also found to have sometimes pursued contradictory aims. Furthermore, this article contests sociologist Ann Oakley's claim that support for housewives' wages always has conservative ends.<sup>2</sup>

The closest a housewife's wage came to being awarded in 1920s Australia was in 1921, when the matter was debated in the Western Australian parliament.<sup>3</sup> This debate continued throughout the decade in the press, where arguments over financial remuneration for a housewife's domestic labour focused on the value of woman's domestic work and woman's place in marriage. The press both reflected and shaped the debate. It fulfilled the former role by reporting statements by key public figures on the issue. It fulfilled the latter role through publishing the opinion of staff columnists and citizen letter writers on the topic.

Oakley has argued that when the various tasks that comprise housework are isolated, housework is revealed as multiskilled, and the commercial value of these tasks becomes clear.<sup>4</sup> This strategy was apparent in a 1924 rationale for wages for housework that estimated the financial value of individual aspects of housework: based upon average weekly wages for a cook, laundress, assistant hired man, seamstress and nurse, a domestic science expert figured a housewife who performed the jobs of all of these workers deserved £455 per year.<sup>5</sup> *Australian Woman's Mirror* journalist 'Una Tached' contended that the housewife was grossly underpaid by the allowance her husband provided. She complained, 'in 1924 ... the washlady earns 12/- a day, ... the housemaid 30/- a week and ... the cook £2 a week ... while in 1903 this angel (wife) did it all for "ten bob and keep"'.<sup>6</sup>

This recognition of the financial value of female domestic labour was accompanied by an awareness of unpaid housework as what Oakley terms 'labour exploitation'.<sup>7</sup> Denial of monetary payment for housework meant a wife was a 'household slave' for her husband in the mind of American industrial analyst Maud Thompson.<sup>8</sup> Like-minded *Sydney Morning Herald* writer 'M J W' contemptuously labelled husbands who took advantage of the non-salaried domestic labour of their wives as 'parasites'.<sup>9</sup>

Housework was deemed to be of financial worth because of what historians Sally Alexander and Anna Davin see as a perception of housewives as workers.<sup>10</sup> Some maintained that the location of their workplace should not deny housewives the classification of workers and, accordingly, the benefits due to workers. 'Paragot' wrote in an *Adam and Eve* article that, 'the mere fact of her working in the home instead of going out into the world surely does not debar her from the

right to a small weekly sum'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Maud Thompson stated that women involved in 'home production' should be paid as producers.<sup>12</sup> Defining housewives as labourers was revolutionary. As historian Eileen Boris states, it rejected the prevailing definition of work as existing only within the public sphere.<sup>13</sup> Such justification of housewives' wages disputes Oakley's contention that support of housewives wages invariably promoted conservatism.<sup>14</sup>

Housewives were said to deserve wages not only because they were workers but because they were superior workers to men. Unlike many men, a housewife's energy was claimed to be always directed toward the good of the family. Maud Thompson described housework as 'productive in character and absolutely essential to the existence of the family'. She believed this work was more deserving of a salary than 'that non-productive class of labor [sic] upon which so much of man's labor [sic] is expended, such as advertising, gambling, and lawsuits'.<sup>15</sup> *Australian Woman's Mirror* journalist Gwen Spencer likewise favoured payment for housework over men's work where money was often frittered away on 'drink, hobbies, racing or investments which may quite possibly turn out a failure'.<sup>16</sup> Her colleague May MacFarlane proposed that housewives' salaries would act to safeguard family finances against such wasteful, hedonistic pursuits by their husbands.<sup>17</sup> Thompson, Spencer and MacFarlane displayed an awareness that the role of family financial provider was often badly performed by husbands.

Wages for housework were sought upon the analysis that women's work enabled men to undertake waged work. Maud Thompson described a wife as 'a necessary part of a wage-earning machine'.<sup>18</sup> Part of a husband's wage had been earned by his wife, asserted *Leader* writer C W Taber, for her 'work in the household ... made it possible for her husband to earn the income he enjoys'. This is why Taber described marriage as a 'business partnership'.<sup>19</sup> Fellow *Leader* writer Helen Normanton reasoned this way too. She believed the explanation that, 'many a man can earn a high salary and can sustain heavy mental and moral loads of business anxiety is largely due to the fact that he has in the background a silent partner whose name does not appear upon his business stationery'. A wife allowed her husband to reserve 'his whole energy ... for his public or professional career ... by subtracting from his life all the worry of domestic management'. Normanton contended therefore that a wife warranted payment for her housework because she was an economic 'helpmate' to her husband.<sup>20</sup>

Housewives' wages were further desired as a strategy to improve the status of married women. Wives lacking an income were said to be kept in a degrading, dependent state. *Sun* writer Nina Murdoch complained that wageless wives suffered 'the humiliating necessity of asking for money whenever they wanted postage stamps ... tram fares [or] new stockings'.<sup>21</sup> Kindred spirit *Leader* woman's columnist 'Nance' grieved for 'wives who are made to feel debased by begging for pocket money'.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, as Maud Thompson contended in her *Labor Call* article, a housewife with a salary had a 'dignified economic position'.<sup>23</sup> Her dignity stemmed from the destruction of her husband's total economic power. No longer would a housewife suffer from the demeaning accusation that she was 'kept' by her husband if she was salaried, asserted *Australian Woman's Mirror* writer May MacFarlane.<sup>24</sup> Dependence was to be

replaced by equality as the foundation of marriage for the housewife who received an income. Gloria Sims explained in her *Everylady's Journal* article that a wife's income for domestic labour would 'promote a feeling of fifty fifty ... between husband and wife'.<sup>25</sup>

Such progressive thought featured in other support for housewives' wages. The salaried housewife was seen as an individual who possessed the democratic right of freedom of choice. *Labor Call* journalist Mabel Brown claimed the absence of housewives' wages meant that married women who required money could only pursue work outside their homes. A wage for housework, contended Brown, would give these married women the choice to work inside or outside their homes.<sup>26</sup>

Reflecting a more conservative stance, housewives' wages were advocated for producing better housewives. These wages were claimed to force lazy wives to do housework. *Australian Woman's Mirror* writer Gwen Spencer argued that wages for housework would 'have the effect of shaming certain married shirkers into doing their fair share of home-making, by emphasizing the fact that they are cheating if they wear a man's ring and take what they can get from him while doing as little as they possibly can in return'.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, husbands' interests were served here as they would obtain a clean, well-ordered home to live in.

Husbands were also said to benefit through payment of housewives' wages by gaining a constantly cheerful spouse. Such wages were deemed to put a permanent smile on a housewife's face. 'I really believe that half the housewives who mar their home by looking as if they had a perpetual grievance would be blithe and gay if their husbands had the inspiration to pay them regularly', maintained *Sun* writer Nina Murdoch.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, *Leader* women's columnist 'Nance' believed that an occasional cheque given to a housewife for her domestic efforts would make her 'a much happier wife'.<sup>29</sup> These proponents of wages for housewives supported the prevalent notion that the job of a wife was to brighten her home for her husband.

Defence of existing sex roles was again apparent in opposition to wages for housewives for causing wives to reject their subservient domestic role. Monetary payment was deemed to transform her from an obedient and selfless wife and mother into a disobedient and selfish individual. A *Bulletin* cartoonist made this point with an illustration of a disgruntled husband holding a row of uncooked sausages on his fork and glaring at his wife as she lay on a couch reading and explaining to him that she would not cook his dinner as, 'My ten hours were up'.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, a *Table Talk* writer imagined a husband's 'chops ... being burnt to a cinder' as a pay dispute took precedence over cooking for his salaried wife.<sup>31</sup> The same criticism of the waged housewife was provided in verse by a *Herald* poet:

Father:-

I say! Come quick Maria!  
Here's little baby Ted  
He's fallen in the fire  
And burned his pretty head.

Mother:-

I cannot help it, Father.  
It's after union time

Besides, I would much rather  
Read Marx's work sublime.

Father:-

This chop's a little underdone  
I'd rather have some steak.  
It really is but little fun  
My teeth on it to break.

Mother:-

The board's determination  
is ninepence for a chop.  
'Twould cause you aggravation  
If I my work should stop.

The price of steak's a shilling  
Still, if you chose to pay,  
To cook I'd be unwilling -  
Because I'm off today.<sup>32</sup>

A waged housewife was presented as obsessed with her rights as a worker to the detriment of her responsibilities as a housekeeper.

Traditional familial roles further figured in the denial of payment of wages to housewives so that husbands could be portrayed as exemplary family breadwinners. A *Journal* writer observed that many a husband rejected such wages because 'my wife has everything she wants'.<sup>33</sup> This comment indicated a husband's success at providing for his spouse rendered wages for her unnecessary.

Keeping husbands as breadwinners necessarily entailed keeping wives as their dependants. Monetary remuneration for a wife's performance of domestic duties was dismissed as marriage and money were proclaimed to be mutually exclusive for a woman. An *Age* writer chastised the wage-seeking housewife as being in 'a much less congenial branch' of business than a single woman.<sup>34</sup> Employing the same logic, a letter-writer to the *Weekly Times* contended that the woman who chose 'marriage as a salaried position' made a bad choice. This person asked, surprised, 'why marry? Other occupations offer better pay and less worry'.<sup>35</sup> Denial of payment to housewives was justified on the basis that they forfeited any right to an income when they chose marriage and its associated economic dependence upon a man.

A related argument against wages for housewives focused upon the wealthy housewife's disassociation from commerce. Historian Gerda Lerner states that a lady's identity was once dependent upon her not receiving pay for work.<sup>36</sup> It is therefore obvious that only a financially comfortable housewife, such as one cited in an *Australian Woman's Mirror* article, could afford to object to wages for housewives as 'horribly commercial'.<sup>37</sup>

Accordingly, monetary payment was rejected in favour of what sociologists Silvia Federici, Belinda Probert, Wendy Edmond and Suzie Fleming term 'emotional payment' for housework.<sup>38</sup> A great grandmother quoted in a *Weekly Times* article contended that, 'The love and affection of my husband and children were ample payment' for her housework.<sup>39</sup> Mrs A C Guthrie thought similarly. In an address to a branch of the Mother's Union of the Church of England, she

approvingly quoted John Ruskin who wrote, 'In a man's house his wife is his slave — in his heart she is Queen'. Guthrie maintained, 'It is the position in his heart that a woman values'.<sup>40</sup> Another emotion that substituted for money as payment for a housewife's labour was pride. A *Freeman's Journal* writer maintained that a salary was not necessary for a housewife, as 'She gets her reward in the knowledge that ... civilization has moved to a ... higher plane as the result of her labors [sic]'.<sup>41</sup> These critics depicted emotional payment as honourable and the ultimate form of payment for housework.

Another argument maintained that wives' work at home should not be salaried because it was unskilled. Maud Thompson elucidated upon this in her *Labor Call* article. She explained that in an era of job specialisation, housework was generally perceived as 'unskilled because [it was] so diversified' and thus financially devalued.<sup>42</sup> Conversely, public sphere work usually conducted by males, which consisted of 'endless effort in one direction', was termed skilled.<sup>43</sup> Such valuation of a man's public work over a woman's private work was brilliantly captured by a *Smith's Weekly* cartoonist: a housewife who praises her husband's ability to focus all day long on the solitary task of book-keeping for his firm is depicted, whilst she fails to acknowledge her ability to simultaneously combine cooking, knitting, babysitting, reading and thinking.<sup>44</sup> Deeming the monoskilled to be skilled and the multitasked to be unskilled displays what historian Chilla Bulbeck sees as masculinist logic in skill definition.<sup>45</sup>

Wages for wives' housework were also opposed as non-egalitarian. The status of wives was said to be lowered if they were remunerated as employees for their housework. This criticism was expressed by *Herald* letter-writer 'Sympathy', who complained, 'I took my wife as a partner, not an employee'.<sup>46</sup> Mrs J K Wallace, president of the Women's Organizing Committee of the Australian Labor Party, agreed. She disagreed with Western Australian parliamentarian Edith Cowan's campaign for wages for wives' domestic work as she maintained it contravened 'equality of the sexes' by forming a hierarchy with one spouse 'an employer and the other ... an employee'.<sup>47</sup> This theme of inequality was also raised by an *Age* writer. This person asserted the word 'wages' implied obedience as the payer of wages possessed authority and thus superiority over the payee.<sup>48</sup> A housewife who earned wages shared the same low status as her domestic servants, believed *Table Talk* writer and *Weekly Times* women's columnist Marjorie Pryor.<sup>49</sup> The concept of marriage as a relationship between equals was perceived to be threatened by paying housewives for their work.

Protagonists and antagonists in the debate over housewives' wages were in conflict about the definition of woman's domestic labour as work. They differed on whether housework was skilled and whether housewives were workers. Common ground was found amongst these two groups regarding women's place in marriage. Both favoured subservient, dedicated housewives and, paradoxically, sought high status for married women.

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- 4 A Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework*, Martin Robertson, Bath, 1974, p 48.
- 5 *Everylady's Journal*, 6 October 1924, p 48.
- 6 *Australian Woman's Mirror*, 23 December 1924, p 17.
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- 8 *Labor Call*, 12 August 1920, p 1.
- 9 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 May 1922, p 4.
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- 15 *Labor Call*, 5 August, 1920, p 1.
- 16 *Australian Woman's Mirror*, 3 February 1925, p 24.
- 17 *ibid.*, 18 December 1928, p 10.
- 18 *Labor Call*, 5 August, 1920, p 1.
- 19 *Leader*, 24 January 1920, p 43.
- 20 *ibid.*, 19 March 1921, p 43.
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- 23 *Labor Call*, 5 August, 1920, p 1.
- 24 *Australian Woman's Mirror*, 18 December 1928, p 54.
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- 27 *Australian Woman's Mirror*, 3 February 1925, p 24.
- 28 *Sun*, 29 May 1926, p 7.
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- 31 *Table Talk*, 24 November 1921, p 8.
- 32 *Herald*, 12 April 1922, p 4.
- 33 *Freeman's Journal*, 25 February 1926, p 3.
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- 39 *Weekly Times*, 5 May 1928, p 64.
- 40 *Church of England Messenger*, 18 June, 1925, p 298.
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- 42 *Labor Call*, 5 August, 1920, p 1.
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- 44 *Smiths Weekly*, 16 July 1921, p 13.
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- 46 *Herald*, 19 April 1924, p 6.
- 47 *Argus*, 19 November 1921, p 20.
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