WOMEN IN SOCIETY A Feminist List edited by Jo Campling

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The 1970s and 1980s have seen an explosion of publishing by, about and for women. This new list is designed to make a particular contribution to this process by commissioning and publishing books which consolidate and advance feminist research and debate in key areas in a form suitable for students, academics and researchers but also accessible to a broader general readership.

As far as possible books will adopt an international perspective incorporating comparative material from a range of countries where this is illuminating. Above all they will be interdisciplinary, aiming to put women's studies and feminist discussion firmly on the agenda in subject-areas as disparate as law, physical education, art and social policy.

WOMEN IN SOCIETY

A Feminist List edited by Jo Campling

Published

Sheila Allen and Carol Wolkowitz **Homeworking: myths and realities**
 Jenny Beale **Women in Ireland: voices of change**
 Angela Coyle and Jane Skinner **Women and Work: positive action for change**
 Gillian Dalley **Ideologies of Caring: rethinking community and collectivism**
 Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (editors) **Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: women's history and women's work**
 Emily Driver and Audrey Droisen (editors) **Child Sexual Abuse: a feminist reader**
 Diana Gittins **The Family in Question: changing households and familiar ideologies**
 Frances Heidensohn **Women and Crime**
 Ursula King **Women and Spirituality: voices of protest and promise**
 Muthoni Likimani (*Introductory Essay by Jean O'Barr*) **Passbook Number F.47927: women and Mau Mau in Kenya**
 Jo Little, Linda Peake and Pat Richardson (editors) **Women in Cities: gender and the urban environment**
 Sharon Macdonald, Pat Holden and Shirley Ardener (editors) **Images of Women in Peace and War: cross-cultural and historical perspectives**
 Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover **A Hidden Workforce: homeworkers in England, 1850-1985**
 Vicky Randall **Women and Politics: an international perspective (2nd edn)**
 Rosemary Ridd and Helen Callaway (editors) **Caught Up in Conflict: women's responses to political strife**
 Patricia Spallone **Beyond Conception: the new politics of reproduction**
 Taking Liberties Collective **Learning the Hard Way: women's oppression and men's education**
 Clare Ungerson (editor) **Women and Social Policy: a reader**

Forthcoming

Eileen Aird and Judy Lown **Education for Autonomy: processes of change in women's education**
 Niam Baker **Happily Ever After? Women's fiction in post-war Britain**
 Jennifer Breen **Women and Fiction**
 Maria Brenton **Women and Old Age**
 Joan Busfield **Women and Mental Health**
 Ruth Carter and Gill Kirkup **Women in Engineering**
 Lesley Ferris **Acting Women: images of women in theatre**
 Tuula Gordon **Feminist Mothers**
 Frances Gray **Women and Laughter**
 Eileen Green, Diana Woodward and Sandra Hebron **Women's Leisure, What Leisure?**
 Jennifer Hargreaves **Women and Sport**
 Annie Hudson **Troublesome Girls: adolescence, femininity and the state**
 Susan Lonsdale **Women and Disability**
 Mavis Maclean **Surviving Divorce: women's resources after separation**
 Jan Pahl **Marriage and Money**
 Lesley Rimmer **Women's Family Lives: changes and choices**
 Susan Sellers **Language and Sexual Difference: feminist writing in France**
 Jane Thompson **Introducing Women's Studies**
 Deborah Valenze **The Other Victorian Women**
 Janet Wolff **The Art of Women**
 Ann Woodhouse **Sex, Gender and Transvestism**

A Hidden Workforce

Homeworkers in England, 1850–1985

Shelley Pennington
and
Belinda Westover

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To our mothers

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Preface

Homeworkers are most often women who work in their own homes for an outside employer. They are paid on a piece-work basis. In general they work alone but they are sometimes helped by members of the family, neighbours or friends. The work is usually unskilled and of a boring and repetitive nature. The economic status of the homemaker, stemming from her structural position in the economy, has little or nothing in common with the independent craftsman working in his own home before the onset of industrialisation. Homeworkers work without supervision and the employer passes judgement only on the finished product. They have no real contact with the economic sphere, generally meeting the employer or the sub-contractor only when collecting or returning work.

This volume is an analysis of the economic and social position of the predominantly female labour force of the homework industries from 1850 to 1985. We have set the discussion of homeworkers in the context of the changing socio-economic status of women during this period. The type of work women have been able to do and the wages they could and can expect are constrained not only by material factors but also by the prevailing ideology. The nineteenth-century view that a 'woman's place is in the home' meant that women who wished to work, or more often those who *had* to work, were extremely limited in their choice of employment. This situation has continued through the twentieth century to the present day.

One way that married women could earn money and not contradict the assumptions about their domestic role was to take in homework. A study of homework illustrates the fallacy of the belief that the working class has ever existed on a family wage earned by the male breadwinner. The Industrial Revolution transformed the

work of women and created the division between home and work. This meant that problems of childcare and domestic responsibilities arose when married women tried to engage in paid employment outside the home. Many of them had to make ends meet by taking in lodgers, housecleaning for others, charring, child-minding or taking in homework.

The homework labour force was recruited from a cross-section of the female population. Lower-middle-class girls did homework as a respectable way of earning money before marriage, and many continued this as a clandestine occupation after marriage. In the countryside large numbers of single and married women worked in the rural home industries, and in the urban centres married women, unmarried mothers, single parents and widows might all take in homework at some time in their lives. Today, the composition of the homework labour force is slightly different but many of the reasons for choosing homework remain unchanged. Women need to earn money and yet are often confined to the home by domestic commitments.

This book looks at the composition of the homework labour force throughout our period and also at the alternatives open to women and how these have changed. The industries employing homeworkers in the period 1850–1914 were many and varied, and were distributed all over the country. We take a detailed look at the work processes involved in some of the most important of these industries, for example glove-, boot- and shoe-making, lacemaking, straw plaiting and sack making. The tailoring industry, which was one of the largest employers of homeworkers, is discussed in detail. There have been some attempts over the years to improve the situation of homeworkers either by organising them into unions or by legislation and we critically evaluate these attempts. After the widespread concern about homeworking in the early twentieth century, it almost appeared as if homework had died out and very little was heard about it in the inter-war or post-Second World War periods. There was a revival of interest in homework in the mid-1970s and researchers found that very little had changed for this ‘hidden workforce’. Relatively little has been written about homeworkers, and material relating to this group of workers is sparse. Documentary material has been supplemented in this work by the use of oral evidence from women who were themselves homeworkers. In this way, it was possible to get some idea of how

women fitted in their waged work with their unpaid domestic responsibilities.

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