It's been a bad month for women workers. They have been singled out and blamed for the main symptoms of the recession: unemployment and inflation.

The extreme rightwing led Clerks Union made the first attack. The March issue of the Victorian branch's journal explains: "... of all women in Australia with children under 12 years, 34.6 per cent were in the workforce - a total of 528,600 - more than one-and-a-half times the total unemployed. Whatever the rights and wrongs of that situation, it explains where all the jobs have gone."

Well, we don't expect much economic sophistication from such people nor even that they'll look after the interests of their own members: the 67.5 per cent of all clerical workers who are women and in particular the 60 per cent of these who are married.

The second attack, though, came from a more prestigious quarter. On May 5 the Financial Review carried an article by Peter Scherer, a lecturer in industrial relations at Sydney University, that nailed the blame for the 1974 "wage explosion" on increases in female earnings due to the move towards equal pay.

Next day, the Review argued in its editorial that this increase "was a major contributing factor in the squeezing of profits and the increase in unemployment".

The answer? Well, "if the Arbitration Commission had considered the impact of the move to equal pay on the total wages bill from an economic point of view", the paper goes on, "it might well have considered that a reduction in male wage rates should have accompanied the move so as to leave the total wages bill unchanged."

This bit of retrospective wishful thinking isn't tempered with any assessment of how workers generally - both men and women - would have responded to a cut in wage rates at a time when unemployment rates were relatively low and workers were confident and militant.

Even if such a wage cut had been achieved the paper believes the move towards equal pay would still have encouraged the substitution of male for female labor, thus boosting female unemployment.

The Financial Review of course is not against equal pay: "This is a principle which ought to be defended, as the only basis for a rational labor market."

"But it does demonstrate the kind of unfortunate effects the implementation of such a reform can have on the employment of some elements of the labor force."

In fact, what all this demonstrates is how the Review's version of capitalist ideology - in which the market dominates everything - obscures economic reality.

There is no single labor market in which the "substitution" the Review talks about takes place.

As Margaret Power has argued (1) the labor market is divided into different segments and the conditions under which men and women sell their labor power are very different.

Women are concentrated in industries like textiles and clothing which have historically maintained low wage levels. Women are now becoming unemployed in growing numbers precisely because these industries are being
hardest hit by the recession.

Low wages have meant capitalists in these industries have been able to avoid new investment and have allowed plant to rundown and techniques to remain backward. Capital per worker in the clothing industry, for example, is less than a fifth of the average for the whole manufacturing sector.

Capital per worker in, say, chemicals is nearly 14 times that in the clothing industry.

These industries now have to compete with imports from modern plants in low wage countries. For example, women textile workers in the Philippines get only 80 cents a day.

Blaming unemployment in these industries on the comparatively small increase in female wage rates in Australia ignores the structural crisis Australian capitalism faces - and lets off scot-free those responsible for this crisis.

The Financial Review is even prepared to see workers in inefficient industries carry more of the burden. In the interests of “less painful structural change”, it believes the whole concept of a National Wage should be abandoned and wages be determined for each industry in the light of their relative prosperity.

“It would then be up to the individual workers to decide”, says the paper, drunk with free-market ideology, “to stay in a job in a low-wage industry, or move, if qualified, to a job in a high-wage industry.”

What more needs to be said to show the gulf that separates such ideologists from the realities workers - especially women workers - have to face?

Looking behind these ideological attacks on women workers we can discern real structural changes in the workforce that are going to have continuing ideological - and political - effects.
The proportion of women - especially of married women - in the workforce has grown dramatically over the last decade. This process has not been checked by the recession, although many women have lost their jobs and unemployment among women is much higher than for men.

In the mid-1960s about one woman in three was in the workforce; for married women the proportion was about one in four.

Now 44.5 per cent of all women are in the workforce, as are 41 per cent of married women. The comparable figure for men is 80.2 per cent.

All through this period the female workforce was growing much faster than the male workforce. Between 1971 and 1974, for example, as the graph shows, female employment grew about twice as fast as male employment. When the recession hit both male and female employment stopped increasing and started to contract.

Unemployment in both groups rose dramatically with the female rate much higher - between 1½ times and twice the male rate.

The proportion of women who gave "keeping house" as their reason for not being in the labor force has been declining as female employment grew. In 1964, for example, there were 77 per cent more women keeping house than in the labor force; by last year there were only 11 per cent more. If this trend continues by 1980 there will be more women in the labor force than keeping house.

An important feature of the current recession is that the proportion of women keeping house has continued to fall. This contrasts with the experience of the 1972 recession.

The Australian Bulletin of Labour pointed to this last year:

"One of the most interesting aspects of the present recession", the Bulletin said, "has
been the extent to which female employment has been maintained despite the reduction (or at least slow-down in growth) of employment generally and the moves towards equal pay for men and women.

"The are two sets of statistics which illustrate this: the monthly payroll tax based statistics and the quarterly labor force survey statistics, both from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

"While one would not like to go to the stake on the precise magnitudes involved", the Bulletin concludes, "both sources agree that female employment increased while male employment fell."

Part of the explanation lies in the fact that there is a greater concentration of females in the government and service sectors in which employment continued to grow during the period the Bulletin examined.

"However, even within the private sector, female employment fell by much less than male employment. Comparing November 1975 with November 1974, male employment in the private sector fell by three per cent but female employment by only two-thirds of one per cent - despite the moves for equal pay."

We can bring this evidence up to date by looking at what happened last year. Between January 1976 and January this year, male employment in the private sector fell 0.5 per cent while male employment in the government sector fell 0.2 per cent.

Female employment in both sectors rose, however. In the private sector there was a small increase of 0.5 per cent, while in the government sector the rise was 2.9 per cent.

The Bulletin finds another explanation for why female employment has been maintained in this recession when it examines the recent dramatic increase in part-time work.

Part-time work accounted for 12 per cent of total employment in November 1972; now it’s about 15 per cent. Over this period, part-time employment increased by 27.6 per cent while full-time employment increased only 1.1 per cent.

Only about 3 per cent of males work part-time, but about 42 per cent of married women are part-time workers, as are about 19 per cent of other women.

"Hence", the Bulletin says, "growth in part-time employment opportunities are likely to attract disproportionate increases in female workers compared with male workers."

"Especially given the conditions attached to unemployment benefits: the alternative to part-time earnings for a married woman whose husband is working is no additional income; whereas, the alternative to part-time earnings for an unemployed male is unemployment benefits (which may not be very different from part-time earnings).

Sexist ideology, too, plays a role. Part-time work "enables married women to accommodate their (socially-approved) 'home' work", the Bulletin says, while "part-time work is not particularly socially acceptable for most males."

The Bulletin argues that the increase in part-time work is not simply due to lack of full-time jobs in the recession. "The increase in part-time workers who prefer part-time work is almost the same as the increase in the number actually employed part-time."

"This was especially true of females where the two trends were very close, but not so true of males, a greater proportion of whom were in part-time work because they could not find full-time work."

In fact, many married women search for part-time work precisely because even when they are working outside the home they still have all the responsibility for housework and childcare.

It's not what's "socially acceptable" that matters, nor what women "prefer". Working class women in Australia are caught between towering realities: their families cannot exist on one wage, but if they work outside the home they end up with two jobs, not one.

On top of this, they are blamed for unemployment and inflation. It's a bit much!

- T. O'S, 5.5.77.

FOOTNOTE: