A Woman’s Work is Never Done?
Exploring Housework in Interwar Queensland

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The woman who demands assistance from her husband in her home is failing in her part of the marriage bargain, and the husband who gives it is losing his prestige as head of the house.

— Letter from ‘Mother’ of New Farm, Courier-Mail, 6 February 1939, p 14

The letter from ‘Mother’ in the Brisbane suburb of New Farm endorsed the assumed and actual centrality of unpaid work within the home for most white women in Queensland — especially for wives — in the interwar years. It accepted a division of labour in which men were defined primarily as breadwinners; by contrast, and despite female participation in the formal economy, the major role for women was that of wife and mother. This allocation of responsibilities was a fundamental component of the gender segregation which characterised work and the Queensland economy in this period.

Feminist historians have long recognised the significance of women’s domestic labour, typically emphasising either the distinctive nature of the labour which constitutes housework or the particular relations of production under which it is performed. Yet, despite substantial academic interest in Australia in the history of women’s unpaid domestic labour, it remains a curiously elusive subject. In the early 1990s, historian Rae Frances referred to ‘our ignorance about the history of housework’, noting local historians’ reliance on overseas studies and Australian prescriptive literature: the latter told women what they should be doing as wives and mothers but did not necessarily reflect what they were actually doing. Certainly there is a wealth of prescriptive literature in the magazines, newspapers and health publications read by Queensland women during the interwar period. It offers valuable insights into the ideological primacy of the roles of wife and mother for women, but its relationship to lived experience is less clear. The exhortations of The Queensland Mothers’ Book, for example, on ‘faithfully carrying out all

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the essentials for the child' and its warnings against both 'too little ... [and] too 
much attention' do not reveal the work which Queensland mothers performed in 
caring for their children.2

Determining the specifics of that work is hampered by a confluence of factors, 
including a tendency in contemporary published sources to ignore such mundane 
activities as housework, and the scarcity in public collections of diaries and letters 
by Queensland women from this era which might be expected to offer recollections 
of daily life. Magazines included enticing advertisements featuring the latest 
household appliances — owners of the 'electric ironer' apparently enjoyed sitting 
in a 'comfortable chair' in front of the iron while it did the work — but there 
are few images of women working in their homes, with or without an electric 
ironer.3 Yet there are glimpses of women's experiences as housewives through 
that simultaneously highly personal and highly public source: letters that were 
published in magazines and newspapers such as the Courier-Mail, Everylady's 
Journal, the Australian Women's Weekly, Woman's Budget, Queensland Bank Officer 
and the Australian Woman's Mirror. Combined with data from the Census of the 
Commonwealth of Australia, state government reports, the musings of officials 
undertaking studies in Queensland and women's contributions to government 
inquiries, these letters provide a basis for identifying at least some of the features, 
both shared and distinctive, of wives' experiences within the home.

Within the gendered framework of Queensland society, responsibility for 
housework was among the most common experiences for women. In an era 
characterised by increasing professional intervention in the so-called 'private 
sphere', Leonard Morris, the Superintendent of Technical Education in Queensland, 
commented in 1929 that 'under ordinary circumstances, the majority of women 
have at some time in their lives to undertake the care of a home, and they should 
possess an intimate knowledge of the science and arts required for home-making'.4 
While 'care of a home' was a standard experience for most women, however, the 
details of that work and the ways in which it was combined with other forms of 
labour could vary among women and across an individual woman's lifetime. The 
gendered division of labour was not absolute for all households.

While most married women were subject to common relations of production, 
performing unpaid domestic labour in exchange for the economic support of a 
husband, not all of them were entirely financially dependent on a male breadwinner. 
A small proportion of wives actively participated in the formal economy. In the 
interwar period, about 4 per cent of married women were employers, self-employed 
workers or employees. Some of these women were separated from their husbands, 
but others combined marriage with participation in the formal economy. Mrs E. 
Vale of Alpha, for example, continued to work as a nurse after her marriage.5 
Other women were engaged in small-scale income-generation within the home 
that was not necessarily captured in the Census data but that could offer some 
minor financial autonomy. Foster mothers and some biological mothers exchanged 
their domestic labour with the state rather than with a husband: each year in the 
interwar period, the Queensland government paid between 154 and 287 foster 
mothers and between 1,945 and 2,597 biological mothers to care for children. In
the case of the biological mothers, the state in effect acted as a replacement for an absent or permanently incapacitated male breadwinner. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some husbands performed household tasks. The letter from 'Mother' of New Farm prompted 30 responses, all of which endorsed the concept of husbands 'helping' their wives, and the majority of which claimed that 'modern husbands ... help their wives as a matter of course'. Mrs W. of Charleville considered that a husband should assist his wife when she was 'tired, ill or perhaps going out', and argued that 'surely a woman will respect and honour her husband more if he helps her'. Recognition of variations in the management of household tasks, as well as the different relations of production under which women performed such labour, is necessary to develop an analysis which encompasses the diversity of women's experiences.

**Marriage, Motherhood and Housework**

During the interwar period, with few exceptions, magazines and newspapers as well as a variety of Queensland government reports presented marriage as the culturally sanctioned 'career' for women, or at least for Australian women of European heritage. In 1933, the *Australian Women's Weekly* asserted that 'marriage, in fact, continues in Australia to be the greatest career of all for women'. Most Queensland women became wives. Almost two-thirds of all women aged fifteen years and over who listed their conjugal condition on the interwar Census forms were or had been married, and many of the women aged fifteen years and over who were unmarried at the time of the 1921 Census married subsequently. The terms 'wife' and 'mother' were not, of course, synonymous. Not all wives had children; some mothers were unmarried, widowed or divorced. The 1921 Census reports presented data on just over 110,000 Queensland wives in relation to live births. The number of children to whom each wife had given birth ranged from none to 21 or more. Just over half of the wives had given birth to between one and four children at the time of the Census.

The specifics of household duties varied for different women. A wife's labour within the home was affected by the number of people and size of the dwelling for which she was responsible, the participation of other household members in unpaid domestic labour, her husband's income, the presence or absence of domestic servants, and her capacity to purchase consumer goods. While new household technology did not necessarily reduce the amount of time spent on housework, to some degree it altered the nature of that work.

It is extremely difficult to offer any estimate of the number of hours per week that women spent on household duties in the interwar period. Major time-use surveys of Australian households were not undertaken until the 1970s. Occasional articles and letters offered estimates of the time spent performing household tasks, but the accuracy and applicability of their conclusions are debatable. An article lauding mothers, which appeared in the *Queensland Bank Officer* in 1920, recognised that they did not work 'regular hours' and claimed that a mother 'works from ten to
twenty hours a day, and has never been known to go on strike. She belongs to no
union, and she works forty years or more for her board and clothes.' In her letter
to the Courier-Mail in 1939, Mrs W. of Charleville commented that 'a mother
with a young family cannot limit her exertions during the day and often has from
12 to 14 hours' work instead of a man's eight hours'.

Although restricted in its scope to particular towns, Raphael Cilento's report
as Director of the Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine, 'Observations on
the White Working Population of Tropical Queensland', offers some valuable
information on the working hours of housewives. In his analysis of Townsville
women's domestic labour, he comments:

By the time the mother has attended to her husband's breakfast and
lunch (the latter he takes with him), sent her three or four children to
school, properly fed and cleanly dressed, attended to her own food,
baby's bath etc., there is not much of the morning left in which to
complete the rest of her work, such as bed-making, sweeping, &c.

The report on Townsville noted that 'only about 33 per cent of the women
make any attempt to regulate their working hours so as to obtain sufficient rest
and recreation'. In its assessment of the hours spent by women on housework, it
estimated that, to an extent, the quantity of a woman's household labour reflected
her own preferences. It concluded that:

A fair percentage of the women are indifferent to the lack of recreation
and rest, working all day and late into the night, and are quite satisfied
as they are; others realize that their home life is a hopeless muddle
but appear to be incapable of improving matters. There is another
occasional type of woman who does a minimum amount of work,
and who spends her time gossiping over the fence to her neighbours,
or lying on a couch reading novels.

The number of children and other dependents in a household was one of the
factors which affected the amount of domestic labour performed by wives and
mothers. 'Cawberre', a contributor to Woman's Budget, managed a household of
ten people: 'I do for the lot, bake bread, make butter, pickles, and jam, and do
the washing and mending, and all the making-up for my three girls. I buy the
boys' clothes ... I have no time to be idle.'

The range of tasks performed by a wife varied across households. One article
described 'the mother's job' as 'really "five jobs rolled into one". She is expected to
be wife, mother, general worker, household manager, and entertaining companion.'
Within this categorisation, however, the actual duties could differ. The content of
a woman's unpaid domestic labour depended partly on whether she was involved
in the production of food for household consumption. Miss C.E. Isbel recalled
that in the 1920s, her widowed mother 'grew rosellas for jam, and peanuts and
corn for us children, besides cultivating a fair-sized vegetable garden and quite a
lovely flower garden'. Their Brisbane home had fruit trees and the family kept
chickens. Isbel's recollections also indicate one of the problems associated with defining women's unpaid labour. For some women, gardening was a chore, while others regarded it as a leisure activity. As Belinda Probert notes, 'the same act of physical or mental exertion ... can be defined as work in one context and leisure in another'.

Some wives were solely responsible for the management of their homes while their husbands sought or undertook paid employment in other districts. The Queensland Country Women's Association (QCWA) presented evidence, including letters from some of its members, to the Sugar Enquiry Board in 1931 on the conditions under which cane farmers' wives lived. One letter stated, 'many women are left alone in lonely and isolated places while their husbands go away in the off season to do stumping and other work for neighbouring farmers in order that they might earn sufficient money to tide them over until they get their cheques from the mill'. The consequences for individual women of the absence of husbands from their homes are difficult to gauge. For some women, it may have reduced their housework whereas for others it could have increased both their labour and responsibilities if, for example, they were left in charge of a farm. 'Godsend' of Mackay explained in 1921 that she lived on a small farm and 'my husband only comes home once a week and I never go out or have anyone to see me, but the children'. Sadie Martin wrote to the North Queensland Guardian that 'these days a woman has to be jack-o-all-trades, wife, housekeeper, gardener, dressmaker, and at times a carpenter, plumber and boot repairer' because of husbands 'seeking or securing employment away from home'.

The Censuses of 1921 and 1933 suggest that a considerable number of wives in Queensland may have been solely responsible for their households for unknown periods of time due to the absence of their husbands. In 1921, just over 15 per cent of Queensland wives had husbands who were absent on Census night; in 1933, the figure was 13 per cent. Although these figures included women who were separated from their spouses, the Commonwealth Statistician concluded that the primary cause of 'absenteeism' was 'the temporary absence from home of husbands for business or other reasons'. The number of husbands and wives who were temporarily living apart may have been particularly high in Queensland in the two Census years, due to severe male unemployment in Queensland in the early 1920s and in Australia generally during the 1930s Depression. Lack of employment opportunities may have prompted larger numbers of married men to leave their place of residence in search of, or to secure, paid work than occurred in periods of relative prosperity.

The implications of male unemployment for wives' domestic labour included its effects on household income. Access to domestic servants and new household technology, and also the size of the house which a wife managed, depended in part on the availability of financial resources. As a contributor to Australian Home Beautiful commented, 'if one has unlimited cash there is no drudgery, because other people are engaged or machines are employed ... If one has no cash, well it's very hard to cut out drudgery'. For many wives during the interwar period, the financial resources available to their households came primarily from their
husbands. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth Censuses do not enable any specific analysis of husbands' incomes in Queensland during the interwar period. The 1921 Census did not include any questions on income; the 1933 Census considered income, but did not do so in relation to marital status. From the latter Census, it is apparent that male incomes for the year ending 30 June 1933 ranged from no income, or indeed from a financial loss for the preceding twelve months, to incomes equal to or greater than £260 at a time when the Queensland male basic wage was £192/8/-.

The earnings of husbands clearly affected the general domestic situations of families. Cilento found that about 5 per cent of the households examined in Townsville had 'neither home comforts nor sufficient food'. In these homes, according to Cilento, the husband was often unemployed or alcoholic, or the mother was alcoholic.

The financial ability to employ domestic servants was one aspect of the effect of a husband's income on his wife's labour, although capacity to pay did not ensure either the availability of a domestic servant or willingness to employ a servant. The author of a letter to the Courier-Mail noted the difference in labour between a woman who was able to employ a servant and a woman who performed all of her household duties herself. The mother from Inglewood commented that 'a woman whose husband earns good money and can afford to employ a girl may be able to rest all day', but a woman with six children and without that advantage was a 'tired wife'. She considered that such a 'tired wife' would 'wake up at 6 o'clock, cook the breakfast for 8, start on the household duties — not forgetting the huge washing, ironing, and mending'.

During the interwar period, a majority of Queensland wives undertook their household duties without the assistance of a domestic servant. According to the 1921 Census, there were 131,658 married women in Queensland, whereas it recorded only 12,689 women and 1627 men as engaged in 'domestic service and attendance'. By 1933 there were 176,400 married women in Queensland. In the Census of that year, 607 men and 14,973 women in the state described themselves as employed in private domestic service. The Censuses do not reveal how many families employed more than one household servant, or how many domestic servants worked simultaneously for more than one employer. They do not include all Aboriginal domestic servants, and it is possible that some women who undertook casual domestic work did not declare their employment on their Census forms. Despite these qualifications, it is clear, given the disparity between the number of domestic servants and the number of married women in Queensland as enumerated by the Censuses, that most wives did not enjoy the advantages of having a domestic servant.

The extent to which other members of the family, including the husband, undertook household duties was also a factor in the extent of a woman's unpaid domestic labour. 'Avis' of Tiaro urged:

Leave the management [of the home] in the wife's hands. To the man who works early and late (and that is what the man does who wrests a living from the land), I would say, 'Your share is done', and
he should come in at night to a peaceful home and a meal prepared and waiting.

'Avis' did expect her husband to 'share in the responsibility of the children', but did not describe what his role entailed. Similarly, Mrs W.A.D. of Ayr declared: 'I do not think a man should help with the housework. A man has his own work to do outside the home, and I think if he mows the lawn occasionally, tidies up the yard, and sees to the car, etc., he is doing his part in the home.' Mrs W.A.D. also commented, however, that her husband did some of the cooking when he was not in paid employment. She considered that a husband should help raise the children, especially in relation to discipline, and concluded with the remark that 'incidentally, when I am indisposed, my husband does everything [sic] for the children ... etc.' Some children assisted with household chores and, in rural areas, worked without remuneration on family farms. Tina Morgan's family owned a farm near Monto. After leaving school in 1930 at the age of thirteen, her tasks included 'dairying, mustering, dipping, cooking, washing, ironing'.

The availability of support from neighbours also affected women's experiences as wives and mothers, perhaps particularly during periods of family illness or other domestic crises. Notwithstanding the establishment in 1922 of the Queensland Country Women's Association, rural women may have been less able to draw immediately on female networks than their urban counterparts. The wife of a selector in central Queensland emphasised the significance of distance and isolation. Her husband's farm was 40 miles (65 kilometres) from the nearest township, and the closest neighbour was 6 miles (10 kilometres) away on poor roads; it did have a telephone, however, and there was a mail delivery twice a week.

The location of some women's homes could directly affect their duties as wives and mothers. In her 1923 article on white women in North Queensland, M.H. Brydon, the Inspector of Women's Work for the Department of Public Instruction, wrote 'life in the town or country districts for many women can only be a ceaseless struggle against unsuitable housing, heat, dust, flies, and difficulties connected with supplies of food-stuffs'. An article in Queensland Country Life in 1935 considered that women in the country encountered greater problems than their city counterparts in performing housework, citing in particular the difficulties of dust, pests and water quality in rural Queensland.

Women in remote areas were likely to have greater responsibility for their children's education than women living in a town or city. The state provided teachers for groups of twelve or more children who were over the age of six; itinerant teachers and correspondence courses were provided for other children. Brydon noted, however, that some mothers in remote areas of northern Queensland were still 'almost wholly responsible for the physical, mental and moral training of children'. The Commonwealth Statistician commented in his 1933 report that Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory had comparatively high percentages of persons being educated at home. This was 'due to the sparsely-populated areas in which instruction at schools is impracticable'. In Queensland, 6,760 children aged thirteen years and under were included in this category in
1933. Some of these children would have been taught by governesses or tutors rather than by their parents.\textsuperscript{30}

The extent of a woman's housework was affected by the size of the dwelling in which she lived. Private homes and flats in Queensland ranged in size from one room to twenty or more rooms. There was, of course, no simple correlation between the size of a house or flat and the amount of housework undertaken in it. A woman responsible for a large house might have had one or more domestic servants, and hence have undertaken less work than a woman who oversaw a smaller house. Similarly, a small house did not necessarily imply that a wife undertook less work than women in larger dwellings. An investigation of housing at Julia Creek found that many of the women, especially those who were the wives of teamsters, 'were living under very uncomfortable conditions, some having one room, only, and that being unceiled, unlined, and with no flooring boards'. The absence of piped water for some of these houses meant that several of the women had 'to carry water long distances three and four times a week', thus increasing their labour. None had electric light or gas.\textsuperscript{31}

Not all European citizens in Queensland lived in houses during the interwar period. The 1921 Census included 3,332 Queenslanders who were categorised as 'occupants of wagons, vans and camps without dwellings'. The Census did not distinguish among these people on the basis of sex, but anecdotal evidence indicates that some of them were women. In 1931 the wife of a sugar cane farmer described their living quarters when they first arrived at the property: 'In the beginning we all lived in a tent. During the rainy season our beds were always wet, and we had to keep an open umbrella over the sleeping baby.'\textsuperscript{32}

Other evidence from cane farmers' wives on their conditions of living led the QCWA to conclude that this group of women did much of their domestic labour 'under the disadvantage of the absence of modern equipment in the home'.\textsuperscript{33}

The extent to which the presence of such 'modern equipment' affected women's work as wives and mothers has attracted considerable attention from historians and sociologists. Many authors contend that the introduction of newer household technologies during the twentieth century did not necessarily reduce the time women spent on household work. Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle argue that 'technological change in the area has indeed been dramatic but it has not reduced housework'. Changes in technology altered some of the content of that work, however, and some of the improvements, such as reticulated water supplies, offered the possibility of greater convenience for housewives. Duncan Ironmonger and Evelyn Sonius conclude that new technology 'drastically changed patterns of household productive activity' but was accompanied by 'new expectations of what "housewives" should be doing'.\textsuperscript{34}

In interwar Queensland, the access of individual housewives to such technology varied widely. In Townsville, most of the houses investigated for Cilento's survey had four rooms plus a skillion kitchen and verandas. One-third of the houses investigated did not have water connected to the kitchen, almost one-third did not have an ice chest and 40 per cent lacked a meat safe, while 60 per cent of the houses were classed as not having a suitable boiler or 'set-in tubs' for clothes washing. Only
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3 per cent of the houses had electric light and 35 per cent had gas. Most of the homes used kerosene lamps for light and wood stoves for cooking, which was cheaper than gas but was 'more inconvenient and troublesome'. Cilento stated that 'very few labour-saving devices were noticeable in any of the homes'.

The majority of the women did all of their own housework, reflecting the shortage of and cost of domestic servants. Cilento regarded this as a problem in Queensland generally, but suggested that in the tropics it 'perhaps is felt more keenly here, because the housewife has so many other disadvantages to contend with, such, for instance, as lack of labour-saving devices and the lack of proper facilities in connexion with her laundry work'. In Cairns, almost one-half of the houses surveyed did not have an ice-chest and almost one-quarter did not have a meat-safe. Although the houses surveyed in Cairns were described as similar in size and type to those examined in Townsville, more houses in Cairns had water available in the kitchen and a gas supply; 95 per cent of the houses had water in the kitchen, and 35 per cent had gas. Only about 2 per cent of the Cairns houses were classed as having 'suitable washhouses'.

Conclusion

Although the gendered division of labour that existed in interwar Queensland was not absolute, marriage was regarded as the preferred destiny for white women, a majority of women fulfilled that destiny and most wives were financially dependent on their husbands. In their roles as wives and mothers, women had primary responsibility for unpaid domestic labour within their households. In addition to their shared experience of housework, many women performed their tasks under similar relations of production, as dependants of their husbands. Not all wives and mothers were subject to this particular relation of production, however, and some women combined roles in the formal economy as employees, self-employed workers or employers with their domestic duties. Moreover, the quantity and nature of housework and the conditions under which it was performed varied for different households.

The extent of housework, and the specific tasks encompassed within the designation of housework, differed according to numerous factors, including the size of a household, a husband's income, whether families lived in urban centres or rural Queensland, the presence or absence of domestic servants and access to technology. Some of these factors were interrelated: the financial resources available to a household influenced other circumstances which affected wives' experiences, such as the capacity to hire servants. Analysis of such factors is complicated by their lack of consistent effects. There was no simple correlation between the size of the house which a wife managed and the extent of her work. Further complicating any exploration of women's experiences of domestic labour is the degree of autonomy which individual women could and did exercise. Raphael Cilento's disapproval of those Townsville housewives who allegedly spent their days gossiping and reading novels reminds us that women themselves were not merely subject to economic...
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and other forces, but were instead active participants in shaping their own lives. While the primary sources that have survived from interwar Queensland are not especially conducive to the exploration of housewives' capacity to determine the specifics of their household tasks or their working hours, any analysis that does not at least acknowledge that capacity is likely to be seriously flawed.

Notes

1 Raelene Frances, 'Shifting Barriers: Twentieth Century Women's Labour Patterns', in Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (eds), Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 250–51.
2 The Queensland Mothers' Book, rev. ed. (Brisbane: Home Secretary's Department, Brisbane, 1931), 14.
3 Australian Woman's Mirror, 23 February 1926: 21.
4 Fifty-fourth report of the Secretary of Public Instruction for the year 1929, Queensland Parliamentary Papers, vol. 1, 1930, 141.
6 Annual reports of the Director, State Children Department for the years 1919–1939, Queensland Parliamentary Papers, 1920–1940.
8 Australian Women's Weekly, 10 June 1933: 7.
9 Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1921, vol. 2, Statistician's Report, 346. The Census material on average numbers of children included only married women who were 'enumerated with their husbands', thus excluding wives whose husbands were absent on the date of the Census and mothers who did not conform to this category. The ABC of Queensland Statistics and Queensland Year Books indicate that about 5 per cent of births in interwar Queensland were ex-nuptial.
10 Queensland Bank Officer, September 1920: 18, Courier-Mail, 13 February 1939: 13. This letter was part of the debate over whether husbands should assist with housework.
12 Cilento, 'Observations': 10.
13 Woman's Budget, 19 February 1921: 5.
14 Queensland Bank Officer, September 1920: 18.
17 Council Letter (Journal of the QCWA), March 1931.
18 Woman's Budget, 14 May 1921, 5; North Queensland Guardian, 21 August 1937: 2.
20 Australian Home Beautiful, 2 July 1928: 60.
22 Cilento, 'Observations': 11.
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24 Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1921, vol. 1, 482; vol. 2, 1350–51, 1358–59; and 1933, vol. 2, 1114. These figures do not include persons who listed their usual occupation as domestic service but who were unemployed at the time of the Census.


27 Everylady's Journal, 1 October 1926: 301.


29 Brydon, 'Women's Life in North Queensland': 167.


33 Council Letter, March 1931.


35 Cilento, 'Observations': 8. A skillion kitchen was a kitchen located in a lean-to or a structure separate from the house.