

# Women's Work and Wages: The French Extreme-Right in the Interwar Years

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France in the interwar years witnessed the creation of many political leagues of the extreme and fascist right. To many of the fascist organizations (*Le Faisceau*, *Les Jeunesses Patriotes*, *La Solidarité Française*, and *Le Francisme* among them), the family, particularly the role of French mothers and fathers, was the focus of immense concern. One of the areas where they addressed these roles was in discussions of labor. As is often noted, the years following the Great War were accompanied by the call for women to abandon their jobs in the public sphere. At the same time that the leagues wanted women to be out of the public work force, and, ideally, laboring in the home, the groups were not immune to the important work that women had done for the cause of victory during the war. Nor were they unaware that in many households paid female labor, outside the home, was essential to the financial and material well-being of the family.

To the leagues considered here, *Le Faisceau*, founded in 1925 by Georges Valois, and *Jeunesses Patriotes*, created in 1924 by Pierre Taittinger, discussions about women's work were linked to a greater range of topics, including the French family and the legacy of the Great War. It is clear women's lives and women's work were sites of political discussion. Further, it is clear that gender ideology was an important component of fascist notions of the state and that the leagues examined here operated on that principle. For all these reasons, the concerns over the economic stability of France, the role of fathers and mothers, assumptions about gendered traits and the nature of public and private, were often addressed in discussions of labor.

Both the *Faisceau* and the JP were concerned with the structure of professions and labor within France. There were often elaborate plans for the rearrangement of labor, which included details on health care and retirement. Within these discussions, concerns about the family were paramount. Generally, the leagues considered the ideal French family to be one in which the father worked outside the home and was paid enough to support his family, insuring that his wife's work was confined to the domestic sphere. However, in other instances the leagues understood that it was financially

necessary for women to work, in which case the leagues offered qualified support for female labor which often included a manipulation of the parameters of public and private.

Further, the view of the groups also depended on the time. Early in the JP's existence they were more concerned with addressing issues of labor in general. By the 1930s, no doubt due to the impact of the Depression, the writers for the JP paper, women and men, raised specific questions about the problems of women's work outside the home.

Consistent with the general political arguments of the period, the leagues of the extreme right were ambivalent about the role of women in their movements. On the one hand, the groups were sure to mention at meetings that they had a "*section feminine*" and that women were encouraged to join and to recruit members. The production of women's and family pages in league newspapers indicates a desire for female readers and members. And, many of the leagues supported female suffrage. On the other hand, once the leagues had attracted women to political action they were not always sure what to say to them. The ambivalence was evident in articles and "policies" on women's work.

In their 1925 Statutes the Jeunesses Patriotes indicated their support of a labor system that included "caisse de compensation, family allowances, family bonuses, worker housing, the development of natalism for efficient aid to large families" as all of these "contribute to the practical application—in the social terrain, to ideas of justice and fraternity."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the JP's discussion of labor in general they often move quickly into concerns about a family wage and "*natalité*" (or "*denatalité*"). Women and the various forms of their labor were implicitly and explicitly connected to discussions of a family wage, as well as "*famille nombreuse*." The JP presented itself as an organization that placed social politics at its center, specifically, . . . the social defense of the individual and his work; 2) the organization of professions; 3) the encouragement of families."<sup>2</sup> As three of its most important principles, we can also see the ways in which they were connected: work and families were inseparable parts of social programs – workers were seen in their role as part of a family. And the family, for both the Faisceau and the JP, was the primary organizing unit of the league and the French nation.

The JP, while addressing paid vacations and 48 hour workweeks, also addressed some specific concerns about female workers and children.

The Jeunesses Patriotes wanted to establish specific regulations for those laborers, particularly, “ban on night work and prolonged shifts, continuous underground work, and all unhealthy work.”<sup>3</sup> This concern had been voiced many times and had led to an 1892 partial ban on night work for women. In general this speaks to the connected concerns of labor, maternity, and *natalité*. Women should not be working at night because they should be home cooking and cleaning for their family (topics which the leagues also gave specific advice on). Further, concerns about women working in mines and other unhealthy areas were often on the grounds that it was injurious to their reproductive capabilities or to their future children. And, certainly, the leagues had natalist interests.

There was also overwhelming concern that a worker's wage be enough to support a family: “[the wage] must permit a worker to live normally with his family.”<sup>4</sup> The JP wanted male workers to make a wage which would guarantee that his wife would not need to work (outside the home). It was understood that the worker was a family man, and further, that a fair wage (“*juste rémunération du travail*”) was by definition one that allowed a man to earn for his family.

While the JP spent a great deal of time and publication space on the concern over a man's ability to support his family, the movement had a principle of “To work equal in value, an equal salary—without distinction of sex.”<sup>5</sup> It is unclear the lengths to which the JP was willing to go to see that principle was held. Equal pay for equal work at least promised some commitment to women's economic parity, although it could also be used to eliminate competition from female workers.

The JP clearly had an interest in looking after the families of a deceased husband—according to their platform an indemnity would be paid in case of a worker's death.<sup>6</sup> No such mention was made for the provision of a family in the case of a deceased wife.

The interest in the family life of a laborer was not limited to the strict work-related environment of medical benefits and work hours. As part of creating a family and worker friendly France the concern for the worker's family was paramount—the wage-earner, assumed to be married, was a unit of concern to the JP and the reformed state they were planning.

Within the JP social tracts the discussion of plans for labor moved directly to the “*Protection de la Famille*.” For most of the groups of the ex-

treme-right it is difficult to see where discussion of domestic labor began and discussion of family life ended. The topics were intertwined. The question of women's work outside the home warranted prolonged discussion in the pages of the JP newspaper, *Le National*. In a column, "La femme hors de foyer," the columnist, Madeleine Varéze, asked readers, male and female, to respond to a few questions:

1. Do you believe that working outside her home in order to live has been a triumph for women, a conquest, a step towards her emancipation?
2. Do you believe that this inescapable fact can have grave repercussions for the French family?
3. Do you believe that one can remedy this state of things and find a solution that permits most women to resume their traditional role? . . . which frees a number of places for men.<sup>7</sup>

The responses ranged from a man who wrote to say that "women's work was essential to insuring women's influence in social and political life"<sup>8</sup> to a woman who wrote that female work outside the home was "slavery" and that women "by nature were not made to work outside [the home]."<sup>9</sup>

The concern about labor, specifically female labor, also became connected to questions about female education. In a column, "*Femmes de France*," Madeleine Varéze raised the issue of education for girls and asked what kind of education was most appropriate for them (mixed schools? sports programs?). She noted that all great nations had made youth development a priority. She claimed that, "Unfortunately, in France too many young people are seized by the tentacles of the soviet-communist octopus. We must make our daughters sane, right and energetic, and in their turn they will transmit these qualities to their children. The health of France lies in that."<sup>10</sup>

Varéze traced changes in youth culture and behavior from the chaos and impact of the Great War and after some discussion recommended that girls be educated in a profession, "not to become the emulator/equal (*l'émule*) of man, but because she knows that she must be ready to struggle in order to live."<sup>11</sup> She encouraged girls to participate in social work because it "teaches devotion," and in sport "which develops grace and beauty." "Am I an optimist," Madame Varéze wrote, "to say that so prepared, a young

girl will become a woman more than ever to be the true companion of her husband, the mother who will form true *Français* and *Françaises*.”<sup>12</sup>

In Madeleine Varéze's column we see a sort of Republican motherhood. She claimed that a girl should have access to varied and professional education and should be given the tools to make her own living, but in the end only because this would make her a better wife and mother. This appeared to be the general Jeunesses Patriotes philosophy about women, but then came Marie-Thérèse Moreau's column on the same topic.

Madame Moreau, the leader of the JP women's section, as well as a lawyer and an active member in the *Union Nationale pour le vote des femmes*, responded to those who believed that the young girls of the day “took too many liberties” and “acted in ways that would have been considered inappropriate yesterday.” Many members and readers had expressed their outrage at the behavior of young girls. To them Moreau responded,

The young girl of yesterday was a charming object, who depended entirely on others, and was subject to a fortunate or unfortunate fate, without having the power to change any of it. . . . The girl of today knows that she may have to earn her living, she knows that marriage is problematic. She arranges it all herself.<sup>13</sup>

Madame Moreau offered a more unequivocal support of women's liberation; she did not want them to be dependent on others, but to be able to control their own lives—which may mean deciding not to marry and to become a lawyer.

Le Faisceau also offered conflicted views on female labor. In general, Le Faisceau hoped that women would not work outside the home. However, the league understood that in some families it was necessary for the wife to work. In those cases the movement had recommendations for the most appropriate jobs for women. “The best occupations for women are those that allow them to earn a living while staying at home. Bookbinding is one of those. Without being too hard, it demands care, attention and taste, all essentially female qualities.”<sup>14</sup>

If it was not possible for women to have work that allowed them to remain in the home then at least they should have jobs that allowed them to express their true feminine nature. In that vein, another profession encour-

aged for women was assistant school nurse/hygienist. The growth of this area of female employment was traced back to women's activity during the war and it was advocated as a job that used a woman's natural talents and traits: nurturing, patience, and sympathy.<sup>15</sup>

Like many of the leagues, the Faisceau believed that the war had been socially transformative—particularly for women. Women had worked hard and suffered great loss, they had proven themselves worthy of admiration and they deserved to be acknowledged for their war effort. The war had also been transformative because it had created a generation of women who were unmarried. It was assumed that women were unmarried because of the destruction of a generation of young men in the Great War.<sup>16</sup> These women, the "*Vieilles Filles*," were pitied figures in the Faisceau. The league's greatest concession to female labor was in the discussions of unmarried women — one pitied that they must support themselves but accepted that this "abnormal" situation must be acknowledged, and so, some women must work outside the home. The Faisceau's treatment of the "*Vieilles Filles*" should also be understood in the context of the pronatalist climate of the 1920s and 1930s. The unmarried woman, while pitied, was also a subject of national anxiety, as she had shirked her duty to the state by failing to establish a family and populate. And so, she became a symbol of the perceived decline of France. In that way, for the leagues of the interwar years, an economy and culture that required both spouses in a family to work was an indication of the ineptness and impotence of the government of the late Third Republic.

While the war, which the leagues considered another indictment of the Parliamentary system, had brought tragedy to French families, Le Faisceau also noted that women's war work had been important. If female work was necessary then some of the examples of female careers that came out of their war work might provide guidance:

It was after the war that the school nurses were organized. No longer having the wounded to care for, they busied themselves with protecting childhood. Little by little the idea was born to use these devotions to provide an honorable career for many women.

Their role is very important . . . teaching cleanliness to children (and often to parents) . . . looking out for contagious diseases, helping doctors, they go to homes and inquire into

school absences. Hygiene, cuisine, household care, child care, they need to know all this. Morally and materially they are called upon to exercise a great deal of influence . . . for which their feminine qualities serve them very well.

And that is why the career of school nurse is one of the best that our daughters could embrace.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly ideas about female labor were connected to assumptions about women's inherent nature. The Faisceau and JP approved of female jobs that did not challenge assumptions about gendered traits and abilities. The jobs they recommended for women often replicated women's domestic work and skills, albeit in the public sphere. Nursing, particularly in its connection to war nurses, was a career that the leagues, and many in post-war France, could support as it was an image of heroic femininity that reinforced maternal ideology. Though the war was over, nurses, and former war nurses, continued to symbolize an acceptable version of modern femininity. A nurse was a career woman who was doing maternal and domestic work in the public sphere. She took care of herself and others and reaffirmed traditional womanhood. Nurses were the wartime form of women mobilized. In peacetime motherhood would be mobilized in the war for French regeneration, and nurses, and other "maternal" careers were acceptable forms of public motherhood.

Within the "Page de la Famille" of *Le Nouveau Siècle*, the Faisceau's weekly paper, there were often articles on "Les Métiers Féminins" and the proper education for girls. One such column, "Ce qui veulent nos filles," written by a man, often explored the role of work and education in a woman's life. The articles invariably encouraged and reaffirmed the necessity of women's connection to the home:

To insure the future of the family in the countryside, one needs to give a woman the means to connect herself to her foyer—avoiding the burdensome work that is off-putting.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, other articles did try to assure women, or their parents, that for a woman to work outside the home did not mean the end of her femininity or the destruction of her chance at marriage. In an article, "Le choix d'un carrière" the author reassured a mother who was concerned that a skill or job would be "declasser" for her daughter and would make her unattractive to a prospective husband:

On the contrary. . . . To have a *métier* is often helpful for the present and a security for the future. Certainly, it is preferable that a man not have to count on his wife's earnings as there are professions that do not leave enough free to spend in the home, particularly when their are children. . . . Nonetheless, the possibility of work can benefit men at the beginning of a career. This kind of marriage has much to recommend it. But, above all, in accepting that a woman graced with a career renounces the practice of it to consecrate her life to her family, to the man who contemplates the risks of the future, of his possible disappearance, it should not be negligible that his wife can earn her daily bread.<sup>19</sup>

The article went on to recommend career possibilities, again using the opportunity to reinforce an understanding of female attributes as well as highlight connections between promising female careers and women's work in the family:

Is the girl well-read? Does she have the taste for research in philology and history? One can direct her toward a career as a librarian, archivist or museum *conservatrice*. This is one of the areas in which women have had great success. Interesting posts, sufficiently paid and sedentary and so more compatible than others with the life of a woman in her family.<sup>20</sup>

The ways in which the leagues talked and wrote about labor, male and female, as well as family, illustrate the extent to which these issues were linked for the groups. On the one hand, the leagues upheld the traditional divisions of public and private, as well as the gendering of those spheres. On the other hand, the family and reproduction were public issues, and labor and legislation were connected to the private sphere.

The leagues of the extreme and fascist right were not alone in engaging in discussions of labor and the family. In many ways they echoed much of interwar discourse on *denatalité*, the role of government in social legislation and family law.

For the leagues of the interwar years the family was not just the source for more children and soldiers for France, while those were both very important concerns. The family, with its seemingly timeless existence and traditionally ordered hierarchy, was also a primary unit within the organiza-

tion of the fascist leagues. And, to those leagues, the family was a perfect symbol for the *patrie* itself. Through their very structure the leagues made clear their devotion to the family but also their desire to link the family to all other areas of French life. In doing so they often replicated the familiar gendered hierarchies of traditional family. However, it was not simply a matter of leaving domestic cares to the women and public labor and politics to men. The entire family was to be involved in the service of the nation.

The ideas that the leagues espoused about labor and family effaced the distinction between politics and family and illustrate the ways in which fascism often collapsed the public and private spheres of French life. The leagues did also use separate spheres rhetoric and ideology. However, by their very structure—having women work for the movement, attending public rallies, giving speeches and writing for the press—it is clear that the leagues depended on women's public action. Further, the feminine traits that the leagues emphasized—nurturing, sympathy, quiet sedentary interests—would be challenged by female members of the league who would march in the streets, in uniform, giving fascist salutes, at league parades.

## NOTES

1. Archives Nationales, F7/13232. Statuts Jeunesses Patriotes, Article 2. Attached to Mai 1925 Report from Prefecture to le Directeur de la Sureté Générale.
2. Ibid, Extraits de notre Programme de Politique Sociales.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., "RISQUES DU TRAVAIL."
7. *Le National*, 29 decembre 1934.
8. *Le National*, 9 février 1935.
9. Ibid.
10. *Le National*, 25 mai 1935.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. *Le Nouveau Siècle*, 28 mars 1926, "Les Metiers Feminins."

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15. Ibid. 21 mars 1926.

16. Ibid.

17. Le Nouveau Siècle, 21 mars 1926.

18. Le Nouveau Siècle, 14 mars 1926, "Ce que veulent nos filles."

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.