Entry type: Concept
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Broken Hill Union Ban on Married Women Working

(1930 - 1981)

Born	19300101, Broken Hill New South Wales Australia
Died	19811231

Summary

For over fifty years, union policy in Broken Hill prohibited married women from taking on paid employment unless they were professionally trained. Clerical and retail positions were to be kept open for young unmarried women or widows.

Details

By the mid-1920s Broken Hill had become a fully unionised city and all workers, whether they worked on the mines or in town, had to have an ‘O.K.’, or union ticket, to be eligible for employment. Union tickets were distributed by the powerful peak union body, the Barrier Industrial Council. With the exception of the six years during World War Two when the bar on married women was lifted, the Barrier Industrial Council excluded women from paid employment after they married. The policy was intended to encourage young women to stay in Broken Hill by ensuring that there were positions available for them when they left school. An article in the *Barrier Miner* in March 1957 explained the policy as an attempt to ‘combat the difficulty of girls leaving school and struggling to find work’. The article also described the three-point-plan devised and adopted by the union: employers were requested not to offer employment to married women; to dismiss women if they married and make their position available for a single girl; and to put off married women first in cases of retrenchment. Teachers and other professionally trained married women were allowed to continue working on condition that there were no qualified single women available for the role. Women working in unskilled or low-skilled professions such as shop assistants, receptionists and domestic staff would lose their jobs upon marriage.

This long-standing union policy was challenged in 1981 by Mrs Jeanine Whitehair, who was employed as the most senior of five dental assistants at the Town Dental Clinic in Broken Hill. After her marriage in November 1980, Jeanine was one of three people who lost their jobs at the clinic purportedly for economic reasons. With the support of the New South Wales Equal Opportunities Board, Jeanine was successful in her attempt to seek reinstatement. This was a landmark case which not only engendered a significant shift in the nature of women’s employment in Broken Hill, but also signalled the beginnings of the erosion of the power of the Barrier Industrial Council.

This entry was researched and written by Georgia Moodie.

Published resources

Newspaper Article
Union Closes Book: Ban on Married Women in Shops, 1957

Women Against the Barrier - SMH, 1981

Jeanine looks back on a turbulent time, 2009

Fighting for what's right, 2009

Women Up Against the Barrier, Hope, Deborah, 1981

Conference Paper
Exploring Peak Union Purpose and Power: The Origins, Dominance and Decline of the Barrier Industrial Council, Ellem, Bradon and John Shields, 2000,
http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/departments/Strategy%20and%20Human%20Resource%20Management/Airaanz/old/conferce/n

Site Exhibition
Unbroken Spirit: Women in Broken Hill, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/bh/bh-home.html

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