

Anne Revillard

**Bringing the movement within the state:
the *Comité du Travail féminin* (1965-1981),
or the unknown origins of French state feminism**

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Abstract

State feminism has become a focus of inquiry for political and social scientists since the 1990s, and the historical description of governmental institutions in charge of women's interests and rights is still a work in progress. Whereas accounts of French state feminism often focus on the experience of the Roudy ministry (1981-1986), this paper aims at shedding light on an earlier, much less known experience, that of the *Comité du Travail Féminin*, an advisory committee for women's labor that was created within the department of Labor in 1965, and lasted until 1984. This work is based upon an analysis of the archives of the committee, and interviews with former members and employees. First, I will give an account of the origins of this committee, showing that it was created following demands that had been made by feminine organizations since the beginning of the 1950s. Then, analyzing the committee's work over the years, I will focus on two main aspects in order to shed light on some stakes implied in the penetration of women's rights activists within the state. First, I will analyze the committee's relationship to the department of labor, which levels issues of organizational and symbolic autonomy: What means are made available to the committee, in terms of budget, space, staff? What level of autonomy does the committee have in defining its subjects of inquiry and its stand? To what extent can it publicize its stands? Second, I will analyze the nature of the subjects the committee chose to tackle over the years, showing how it extended its official mission beyond the question of women's labor, raising broader issues regarding women's status in society. Finally, I will show that although this committee did not have much power and visibility, its experience contributes in explaining some key aspects of French state feminism.

¹ This paper stems from a research project funded by the DARES, part of a larger research initiative launched by the French Department of Labor for its centenary (2006). This project is supervised by Professor Jacques Commaille. A description (in French) of the research project can be found at the following address: http://www.melissa.ens-cachan.fr/article.php3?id_article=687

Introduction

In most Western countries, governmental bodies have been created since the 1960s-1970s with the specific aim of promoting women's rights and interests². Their activities are generally labeled under the term "state feminism", and at least this is the name given to the body of research devoted to studying them, which has developed since the 1990³. Given the recent character of this body of literature, the historical description of governmental institutions in charge of women's interests and rights is still a work a progress. Whereas accounts of French state feminism often focus on the experience of Yvette Roudy's *Ministère des droits de la femme*⁴ (Ministry for women's rights) (1981-1986), this paper aims at shedding light on an earlier, much less known experience⁵, that of the *Comité du Travail Féminin* (CTF), an advisory committee for women's labor that was created within the department of Labor in 1965, and lasted until 1984. This Committee was first created under the name "*Comité d'étude et de liaison des problèmes du travail féminin*" (Study and link Committee on women's labor issues), and turned into "*Comité du travail féminin*" (Women's labor Committee) in 1971. It is an advisory body composed of members coming from the Department of Labor, women's and family organizations, trade unions and employer's organizations, as well as members selected for their expertise on women's labor issues. Endowed with a double mission of research and advice regarding women's employment, it indeed undertook research on various aspects of women's labor over the years (i.e. training, work conditions, pay, unemployment), leading to demands to governments. This study of the CTF's activities is based on the content analysis of its archives, which comprise of minutes of the members' meetings, the CTF's monthly news bulletin (*Actualités du travail féminin*), annual reports, reports by the Committee's various taskforces, and advisory reports (see Frame I).

² Dorothy Mc Bride Stetson and Amy G. Mazur, *Comparative state feminism* (Thousand Oaks, 1995).

³ Amy G. Mazur, *Theorizing feminist policy* (Oxford, 2002).

⁴ See, for example, Jane Jenson and Mariette Sineau, *Mitterrand et les françaises: un rendez-vous manqué* (Paris, 1995), Françoise Thébaud, "Promouvoir les droits des femmes: ambitions, difficultés et résultats," in *Les années Mitterrand. Les années du changement (1981-1984)*, ed. Serge Berstein, Pierre Milza, and JL Bianco (Paris, 2001). A more systematic description of the varieties of French women's policy machineries has been undertaken by the *Research network on gender, politics and the state* (RNGS), convened by Amy Mazur and Dorothy McBride Stetson. See Amy G. Mazur, ed., *Appareils gouvernementaux chargés des droits des femmes, représentation et démocratie en France. Une étude internationale et comparative* (Paris, 2000). For an overview of the RNGS project, visit: <http://libarts.wsu.edu/polisci/rngs/>

⁵ However, accounts of the Committee's work can be found in Martine Lévy, "Le féminisme d'Etat en France - 1965-1985: 20 ans de prise en charge institutionnelle de l'égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes" (Thèse de doctorat, Institut d'Etudes Politiques, 1988). See also Amy G. Mazur, *Gender bias and the state: symbolic reform at work in fifth republic France* (Pittsburgh, 1995).

Women's policy machineries have been described as an interesting challenge for political science, as they stand at the interface between the state and the women's movement⁶. Indeed, they were often (but not always) created following demands by the women's movement. Further, because of their official aim to promote women's rights and interests, they are enticed to position themselves regarding the movement's goals and stands, and it is not uncommon for women's movements' activists to come to work in these institutions. This often puts them in an uncomfortable position, as they must abide by the possibly conflictive criteria of state administration and feminist activism⁷. Therefore, the form and activities of women's policy machineries can be analyzed as the result of a complex interaction between governmental constraints and women's activism⁸.

This position at the interface of women's activism and the state will be the focus of the first two parts of this paper. First, I will give an account of the origins of this Committee, showing that it was created following demands that had been made by women's organizations since the beginning of the 1950s. Within the broader context of the post-war French women's movement, I will stress the role played by individual activists who were characterized by their double affiliation, to women's organizations and political parties. Most prominent among them was Marcelle Devaud, who became the president of the Committee. Then, turning to the Committee's actual work, I will focus on its relationship to the Department of Labor, which, given the activist origins of the Committee, levels issues of organizational and symbolic autonomy: What means are made available to the committee, in terms of budget, space, and staff? What level of autonomy does the committee have in defining its subjects of inquiry and its stand? To what extent can it publicize its stands?

Beyond the institutional analysis of the way the Committee stands at the interface of the state and the women's movement, this paper aims at shedding light on the more cognitive

⁶ Jonathan Malloy, *Between colliding worlds: the ambiguous existence of government agencies for aboriginal and women's policy*, The Institute of Public Administration of Canada series in public management and governance. (Toronto, 2003).

⁷ This tension, as experienced by individual « femocrats », has been well described in Australia by Hester Eisenstein, *Inside agitators: Australian femocrats and the state*, Women in the political economy. (Philadelphia, 1996), Suzanne Franzway, Dianne Court, and R. W. Connell, *Staking a claim: feminism, bureaucracy and the state* (Sydney; Boston, 1989), Marian Sawer, *Sisters in suits. Women and public policy in Australia* (Sydney, 1990).

⁸ This interaction may also strongly affect the women's movement. This aspect of the relationship between the state and the movement will not be analyzed in this paper. For a study of such effects of the institutionalization of women's rights within the state, see Leslie A. Pal, *Interests of state. The politics of language, multiculturalism, and feminism in Canada* (Montreal, 1993).

dimension of the Committee's activities. The question I wish to raise in this respect is how the Committee defines the "women's issue". In order to do so, I will analyze the nature of the subjects the committee chose to tackle over the years. This study shows that although the Committee remained very much attached to its commitment to women's labor issues, it *de facto* extended its official mission beyond these, raising much broader issues regarding women's status in society.

Finally, I will show that although this committee did not have much power and visibility, its experience contributes in explaining some key aspects of French state feminism, among which I will stress: the importance of the issue of labor equality in the way women's rights are conceived in France, and the crucial role played by the interaction with the supranational level.

Methodology

This research is mainly based upon a content analysis of the *Comité du travail féminin's* archives, which have been deposited at the *Centre de ressources documentaires multimédias* (CRDM) of the French Ministry for social affairs, labor and solidarity.

Five types of available documents can be distinguished:

- Minutes of the Committee's meetings from 1966 to 1980 (this is the most interesting source)
- The Committee's monthly news bulletin (called *Info-Flash*, and then *Actualités du travail féminin*), which started being published in 1971;
- The Committee's activity reports (1971-1979);
- The reports of the various thematic commissions within the Committee;
- Advisory reports (1967 and 1977-1980).

I have also conducted 6 interviews with former Committee members or employees as a complement to this archive-based study.

Frame 1: Methodology

The origins of the *Comité du travail féminin*

The CTF was created by means of a decree enacted on September, 29th, 1965 (see frame 3), and its members gathered for their first meeting on April, 29th, 1966. During this first meeting, Marcelle Devaud referred as follows to the circumstances under which the Committee was created:

« After the war, more and more women and women's organizations, who had been struck by the role played in foreign countries by Women's Bureaus, started wishing

something similar would be created in France. This is how many confrontations led to the Decree of September, 29th, 1965⁹ ».

Here, we learn two things regarding the Committee's creation: it had been demanded by women's organization, and their idea was to follow the example of « foreign » Women's Bureaus. The interview I conducted with Marcelle Devaud, as well as her biography¹⁰, give us more details about the circumstances under which the CTF was created. Indeed, it appears that a women's organization played a particularly significant role, the CLAF, which later became the CILAF, or International Women's associations linking committee (*Comité international de liaison des associations féminines*). In turn, the origins of this organization provide us with useful information regarding the profile of the women who initiated the CTF. The CILAF was founded by the same women who, after the war, created "Free French Women" (*Les françaises libres*), an organization devoted to favoring women's political participation following the right to vote that was granted to women in 1944. The CILAF was led by right-wing women – its main leaders were Marcelle Devaud and Irène de Lipkowski – and aimed at gathering non-communist women¹¹.

In 1952, Marcelle Devaud went to visit the US Women's Bureau in Washington, and decided to lobby in favor of the creation of a similar institution in France. This campaign was undertaken by the CILAF¹², but Marcelle Devaud herself played an important role in it by means of the personal ties she had with the French political elite of the time. Indeed, she was herself one of the first and few women elected at the Republican Council (*Conseil de la République*, the ancestor of the Senate) in 1946, where she stood as the vice-president of the Republican Freedom Party (*Parti républicain de la liberté*), a small right-wing group of fifteen members, and remained until 1958. Her double affiliation, as an elected member of a political party and leader of a women's organization, was certainly an asset in her campaign in favor of the creation of a Women's Bureau.

According to her, this campaign was far from easy. Indeed, she started lobbying as soon as she returned from the US in 1952, and only succeeded in 1965. She recalls making demands

⁹ *Minutes of the first meeting of the Comité d'étude et de liaison des problèmes du travail féminin*, April, 29th, 1966, p.5. All the quotations in French were translated by the author.

¹⁰ Victoria Man, *Marcelle Devaud. Itinéraire exceptionnel d'une femme politique française* (Paris, 1997).

¹¹ Sylvie Chaperon, *Les années Beauvoir: 1945-1970* (Paris, 2000). 92. The CILAF stood as a rival to the big left-wing women's organization, the *Union des femmes françaises*.

¹² So far, I haven't found traces of lobbying in favor of a Women's Bureau by other women's organizations, but a more firm answer would imply a systematic investigation of the archives of the different women's organizations of the time, which I haven't done within the frame of this research project.

to each and every Labor Minister over the years, until her demand was accepted by minister Grandval in 1965. According to her, the fact that she personally knew Grandval before he was minister helped her succeed.

Beyond the fact that the creation of the CTF can be obviously linked to women's lobbying, it is worth stressing that it also fitted into governmental priorities of the time. Indeed, in the 1950s and 1960s, France suffered from a labor force shortage, which governments tried to remedy by two means, mainly immigration and, to a lesser extent, the encouragement of women's labor force participation¹³. Therefore, the demands made by Marcelle Devaud and the CILAF also echoed with some governmental preoccupations of the time¹⁴.

Therefore, it is worth stressing that it is right-wing feminist women who initiated the Committee. Marcelle Devaud played a key role among them, thanks to her double affiliation, to a women's organization and a political party.

Moreover, some of the key members appointed to the Committee were also important women's rights activists of the time, within different fields of activity: trade-unionists Marguerite Thibert and Jeannette Laot, employer's representative Ms Nousbaum, lawyers Marcelle Kraemer-Bach and Simone Veil, sociologist Madeleine Guilbert, and Jeanne Chaton, who was the French representative at the UN Commission on the status of women from 1965 to 1975.

The Committee's relationship to the department of Labor

Given the activist origins of the Committee, and the activist profile of its members, how did the relationship between the Committee and the Department of Labor unfold? I will analyze

¹³ Norbert Holcblat, "La politique de l'emploi en perspective," in *40 ans de politique de l'emploi*, ed. DARES (Paris, 1996). It should also be stressed that France has an old tradition of encouraging women's – and mother's – labour, that dates back to the turn of the XXth century, although it has fluctuated since then: see Jane Jenson, "Gender and reproduction, or babies and the state," *Studies in political economy* (1986), Jane Jenson, "Paradigms and political discourse: protective legislation in France and the United States before 1914," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 22 (1989). To give a few figures, women's labour force participation rate, according to Marchand and Thélot (calculated taking into account the evolution of the limits of the life cycle devoted to occupation over the years), was 37.6% in 1806, 39.1% in 1851, 45.2% in 1896. It then decreased until the 1946 poll (it was 38.4% in 1936), and remained stable until 1962, then increased very fast in the past forty years (from 39.8% in 1962 to 64.1 in 1996). P. 49 in Olivier Marchand and Claude Thélot, *Le travail en France, 1800-2000* (Paris, 1997). Between 1962 et 1999, the number of women in the labor force increased in practically half, going from 6.6 millions to 9.6 millions. P.17-20 in Margaret Maruani and Emmanuèle Reynaud, *Sociologie de l'emploi*, 4e éd. ed., Collection Repères; 132 (Paris, 2004). 20.

¹⁴ Lévy, "Le féminisme d'Etat en France - 1965-1985: 20 ans de prise en charge institutionnelle de l'égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes". 65-70. Martine Lévy also stresses the role played by the demand expressed by women themselves of further participation in the labour force, as well as the development of an expertise on women's labour issues (chapter 1).

this by means of two sub-questions: what means were made available to the Committee?
What autonomy did the Committee have within the Department of Labor?

The struggle over means

The means made available to the Committee always remained very drastic – for example, it never had a budget of its own – , although they increased significantly between its creation in 1965 and its reform in 1971 (see frame 3).

The Committee initially had very few material and human means. In 1966, it was given small offices in an annex of the Department of Labor, “halfway in a passing corridor” :

« As we started off, we had practically no means. We were given offices in the Department of Labour, it was awful. [...] We were in an annex of the Department with low ceilings, halfway in a corridor where people were passing by... We were really the “poor of the house”” (interview 5).

Its human means were very limited, since it only had a “Secretary General” working full-time. In 1971, these increased significantly, however remaining scarce: a permanent office (“*Secrétariat permanent*”) was created, in which two additional people were employed beyond the Secretary general herself. Moreover, two employees were appointed to the newly created library¹⁵. All these employees of the Committee were recruited specifically for this task, and were not previously civil servants of the Department of Labour. According to them, their pay and employment status were lower than what they could have hoped for in other services of the Department of Labour (see *infra*).

Following the 1971 reform of the Committee, the latter was also allotted larger office space:

« we were given five offices very well located within the Department of Labour. There, we had a room for a library, a meeting room, we each had our own office” (interview 1).

Even though the means awarded to the Committee improved in 1971, they remained scarce, and where an important subject of debate and complains among members and employees of the permanent office. In fact, the means issue is a good test to account for the Committee’s

¹⁵ I will not develop this here, but it should be stressed that the provision of information, notably by means of the library/resource center that was created in 1971, is a key aspect of the Committee’s activities. This has notably been stressed by Françoise Cabes-Gex, *La documentation dans une structure paritaire. Exemple du comité du travail féminin entre clientèle et contraintes politiques. Mémoire de maîtrise des sciences et techniques de l’information et de la documentation, Université de Paris XIII, UFR des sciences de l’expression et de la communication* (Paris, 1979), Lévy, “Le féminisme d’Etat en France - 1965-1985: 20 ans de prise en charge institutionnelle de l’égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes”. 91 sqq.

activism within the Department of Labour, both on the part of the members and on the part of the employees of the Committee's permanent office.

Indeed, this issue was frequently discussed by Committee members, and spurred conflictive debates over the opportunity to protest openly against this situation and claim further material and human means (see frame 2).

The struggle over means as an indication of the relationship between the Committee and the Department of Labour

During the January, 30th, 1968 meeting of the Committee, sociologist Madeleine Guilbert presents a resolution written by her work group (that on working conditions), to be addressed to the minister, regarding "the operating of the Committee, the fate that is reserved to its work and the weak means it has". This resolution is discussed on the February, 14th, meeting, when a counter-resolution is presented by M. Bayard, in charge of the "vocational training" group. M. Bayard says that "his group fears that the proposed resolution (by Madeleine Guilbert) may start a polemic with the administration, and he wonders about the opportunity of such a move that might be disturbing for the Committee in the future. His group doesn't see how they could associate themselves to the sending of this text that represents in a way an attack¹⁶". However, this is a minority stand within the Committee, and a resolution is finally sent to the minister, in order to protest against both the lack of operating means and the lack of attention given by the ministry to the Committee's demands.

Frame 2: The struggle over means as an indication of the relationship between the Committee and the Department of Labour

This example sheds light on the conflictive strategies among Committee members, between those who favour a more assertive and activist stand toward the Department of Labour, and those who would prefer a more 'low-profile' option, for fear of a bad reaction of the ministry in charge. Generally speaking, as will be stressed below, the Committee finally endorsed the more activist stand, and did not hesitate to address its ministry in charge to express its discontent regarding its means and impact.

The means issue was also discussed among the employees of the Committee's permanent office. According to them, their employment status and pay were lower than what they could have hoped for in other services of the Department of Labour. When they complained about this situation, they were actually offered by the Department of Labour to move to another service where they would get a better pay and work contract. They then decided to refuse collectively, and fight for an improvement of their status within the Committee... which they did not obtain:

¹⁶ Comité du travail féminin, meeting minutes, February, 14th, 1968, p.3.

«I came to work for the Committee on what they call a third category contract [i.e. one of the lowest categories, when I had received higher education]. They said: take it or leave it. So I took it. To console me, they said: if you want to go and work for another service where they deal with other issues, you will get a higher category contract. So we waged a war. We decided that we would stay with the Committee, and demand an improvement of our contracts within the Committee. We fought all the time we were there to obtain this.[...] When we demanded that improvement, we were offered to go and work for another service. And we refused, we refused collectively: this shows you the spirit we had. [...] We refused collectively to fare better individually by going to work elsewhere. So we had completely integrated the fight for recognition by our head ministry, the Department of Labour, of the value of our work. That is, we believed that working on women's issues shouldn't be paid less than working on social security or other issues. [...] But we lost” (interview 3).

This struggle illustrates the employee's activist involvement in the Committee, and their personal commitment to the improvement of women's rights (sometimes at the price of their own). This is also reported by another former employee of the permanent office:

«The Secretary general, at the time, wasn't paid much. People got very low pays, there were very few means. Simply, everybody was passionate about what they did. That was the motivation » (interview 2).

Therefore, the struggle over means confirms the generally activist orientation of Committee members and employees. Within this context, what degree of autonomy was left to the Committee by its ministry in charge?

“Freedom at the price of indifference”?

First, it should be stressed that the control exerted by the Department of Labor on the Committee is limited, as legally defined. Indeed, according to the first decrees governing the Committee, the Committee is not explicitly expected to account for its actions and modes of organization to the ministry. It is not supposed to ask for the ministry's agreement before deciding to work on a particular topic, or regarding the way it organizes itself. No formal mechanism of submission by the ministry is provided for. However, this changes slightly in 1971, when along with the further means allotted to the Committee, more precise means of control by the ministry are provided for: the Department of Labor's general head for labor and employment (*Directeur general du travail et de l'emploi*) is automatically vice-president of the Committee, and the decree specifies that the Committee must submit a presentation of its

work and agenda, as well as its annual report, to the minister. Finally, the ministry can command the Committee to work on specific subjects or give advice on a draft bill in preparation. But generally speaking, the decrees governing the Committee (see frame 3) provide for few formal means of control over the Committee's work. How did these legal provisions translate in the Committee's daily operating?

In fact, the Committee enjoys a large independence regarding the definition of its agenda and the stands it takes; however, this freedom of speech within the Committee is severely limited by *de facto* restrictions placed on the publicity of its work.

As the minutes of the Committee's meeting show, the Committee is very autonomous in the definition of its agenda and its operating mode. The subjects tackled by the Committee are the result of debates among members, much more than suggestions coming from the ministry¹⁷.

Beyond the definition of its agenda, the Committee is very free in the stands it endorses, and does not hesitate to take an activist stand on women's issues, which implies a criticism of existing legislation and policies. For example, as Martine Lévy¹⁸ and Amy Mazur¹⁹ stress, the Committee was an early promoter of the principle of equal pay.

Here, it is important to stress that the latitude it had in defining its agenda and stands did not imply that the Committee endorsed the same type of discourse as the women's movement at large. Because it was aware of its governmental status and of the efficiency of such discourse in order to convince the department of Labour, the Committee emphasized the production and use of expertise to press its points. While driven by a belief in the need to encourage women's labor force participation and gender equality, its reports were always well-documented and carefully demonstrated. This did not necessarily correspond to a governmental constraint, but came out of a belief that it was the best way to convince.

To sum up, the Committee enjoyed a relatively high level of independence in the definition of its agenda and its stands, while conforming to administrative norms of proper discourse. However, this freedom of speech is severely limited by *de facto* restrictions placed on the

¹⁷ Although some ministers do intervene on a regular basis (about once a year), presenting speeches to the Committee, in which they identify subjects that they would like the Committee to work on. This is particularly noteworthy following the 1971 of the Committee, when minister Fontanet requests the Committee to advise him on ways of increasing women's labour force participation, following recommendations made by the VIth Plan. Source : Comité du travail féminin, meeting minutes, May, 25th, 1971, p.1.

¹⁸ Lévy, "Le féminisme d'Etat en France - 1965-1985: 20 ans de prise en charge institutionnelle de l'égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes".

¹⁹ Mazur, *Gender bias and the state: symbolic reform at work in fifth republic France*.

publicity of its work (this aspect is never mentioned in the decrees regarding the Committee, it derived from informal rules). This can be analyzed as the strongest means of control exerted by the Department of Labor on the Committee. Committee members initially had to keep the Committee's debates secret, and any publicity given to the Committee's work and reports was prohibited by the minister himself²⁰. The Committee then gradually acquired the ability to publicize its work²¹, which became clearer in 1971, with the creation of the permanent office and the library²².

More generally speaking, as stressed by one of our interviewees, the Committee suffered from a form of indifference on the part of the Department of Labor:

«We were both free and suffering from a form of indifference. We had that kind of freedom that is sometimes the price to pay for not being taken into account. So it wasn't a very positive kind of freedom, coming from them. Now what we did of this freedom was something else. I think we used this freedom in an extremely rich way. So it was this kind of situation»(interview 3).

Here, the latitude granted to the Committee in terms of agenda definition and stands is linked and balanced with its lack of means and with the little interest the Department of Labor had for it. This should however be qualified according to context. The people in charge at the ministry, and the broader economic context in terms of resort to women's labor force, have influenced the Committee's audience from and impact on the Department of Labor.

Regarding the influence of the people in charge at the Department of Labor, one can mention the example of when a woman, Marie-Madeleine Dienesch, was appointed Secretary of state for social affairs, and was given the responsibility of the Committee. According to the traces that can be found in the minutes of the Committee's meetings, Marie-Madeleine Dienesch seems to have been an ally for the Committee: for example, she convinced the ministry in

²⁰ Lévy, "Le féminisme d'Etat en France - 1965-1985: 20 ans de prise en charge institutionnelle de l'égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes". 98.

²¹ This process, between 1966 and 1971, is hard to trace based on the Committee's archives, because the reports don't indicate who they were addressed to and how publicized they were. However, traces can be found of claims made by Committee members to acquire the right of to publicize the Committee's reports: see frame 2. In 1968, the Committee formally gained the ability to publish the results of its researches in the *Revue française des affaires sociales*. Source : Comité du travail féminin, meeting minutes, September, 28th, 1968.

²² Cabes-Gex, *La documentation dans une structure paritaire. Exemple du comité du travail féminin entre clientèle et contraintes politiques. Mémoire de maîtrise des sciences et techniques de l'information et de la documentation, Université de Paris XIII, UFR des sciences de l'expression et de la communication.*

charge to allow the publication of the Committee's work in the *Revue française des affaires sociales*, and committed herself to transmitting the Committee's demands to the minister²³.

As far as the influence of the broader context in terms of economic policy is concerned, the work done by the Plan²⁴ had an important influence on the way the Department of Labour perceived the Committee. Indeed, the VIth Plan recommended an increase in women's labour force participation to compensate the labour shortage. The Plan was also concerned with increasing the birth rate, and demographic concerns led to an encouragement of work-family reconciliation devices – a topic on which the Committee could provide much-needed expertise. This is the context behind the previously described 1971 reform²⁵, which led to increased means for the Committee along with increased interest for – and control over – it by the Department of Labour.

Therefore, even though the Committee generally speaking had a hard time drawing the ministry's attention to its work, some specific contexts favored an increased interest for it on the part of the Department of Labor.

Main decrees regarding the *Comité du travail féminin*:

(1965). Arrêté ministériel du 25 septembre 1965 portant création d'un Comité d'étude et de liaison des problèmes du travail féminin. *Journal Officiel*. 3 octobre 1965: 8786-8787.
Creation of the Committee. Definition of its mission: art.1: "[The Committee is to] examine the problems that waged labor entails for women and study measures that may facilitate their paid employment and advancement within their occupation ».

(1966). Arrêté du 11 mars 1966 relatif au Comité d'étude et de liaison des problèmes du travail féminin. *Journal Officiel*. 18 mars 1966: 2239.
Change in the Committee's composition: further representation of family interests.

(1969). Arrêté interministériel du 23 mai 1969 relatif au Comité d'étude et de liaison des problèmes du travail féminin. *Journal Officiel*. 12 juin 1969: 5835.
Change in the Committee's mission (article 1): "[The Committee is to] examine the problems that an occupation, *waged or not*, entails for women, and study measures that may facilitate *both this occupation and women's advancement* ».
Change in the Committee's composition: inclusion of representatives of the crafts and

²³ Comité du travail féminin, meeting minutes, September, 28th, 1968.

²⁴ The « Plan » is an administrative body in charge of defining the main priorities and orientations of economic policy in France. It had a very strong influence at the time of the *Comité du travail féminin*.

²⁵ As asserted by minister Fontanet himself : Comité du travail féminin, meeting minutes, May, 25th, 1971.

agriculture.

(1971). Arrêté ministériel du 16 avril 1971 relatif au Comité du travail féminin. *Journal Officiel*. 12 mai 1971: 4547.

The Committee's name changes from « *Comité d'étude et de liaison des problèmes du travail féminin* » to « *Comité du travail féminin* » (article 1). Change in the Committee's mission (article 1): "[The Committee is to] study all matters related to women's vocational training, occupation and job advancement ». Change in the Committee's composition: further representation of trade unions and decrease in the representation of women's and family organizations.

Creation of the permanent office. Reinforcement of the links to the Department of Labor.

(1977). Arrêté ministériel du 2 novembre 1977 relatif au Comité du travail féminin. *Journal Officiel*. 18 novembre 1977: 7554.

(minor) change in the Committee's composition: further representation of trade unions and employer's unions.

(1981). Arrêté interministériel du 30 septembre 1981 relatif au Comité du travail féminin. *Journal Officiel*. 2 octobre 1981: 2688.

Following the creation of the ministry for Women's rights (Ministère des droits de la femme), the Committee is now under this minister's responsibility, and not the Department of Labour's. The notion of a promotion of women's "rights" is added to the Committee's mission: article 1: "[The Committee is to] study all matters related to women's occupation and vocational training, to their economic and social advancement, and to their labour rights ».

Change in the Committee's composition: decrease in the representation of employer's unions. Reinforcement of the ministry's control over the Committee.

(1984). Arrêté interministériel du 22 février 1984 - abrogation de l'arrêté du 30 septembre 1981 relatif au Comité du travail féminin. *Journal Officiel*. 26 février 1984: 719.

The *Comité du travail féminin* is abolished, and a new *Conseil supérieur de l'égalité professionnelle entre les femmes et les hommes* is created.

Frame 3: Main decrees regarding the *Comité du travail féminin*

Gendering employment, gendering labor

In analyzing the subjects the Committee chose to tackle over the years, the question I would like to answer is: to what extent has its analysis of employment issues lead to a broader questioning of women's legal and social status? I will first show that the legal definition of the Committee's mission has evolved over the years, and then turn to the way it actually defined its agenda. This study shows that it *de facto* extended its official mission beyond women's employment. However, it also remained very much attached to its commitment to women's labor issues, as will be illustrated by the analysis of its confrontation to newly created women's policy machineries.

A good starting point in order to apprehend the subjects the Committee chose to deal with over the years is to analyze the way its mission was legally defined (see frame 3). The definition of the Committee's mission has fluctuated over the years, de-centering and re-centering itself from its core, which is women's waged labor. In the first definition of the Committee's mission, waged labor is both characterized as a "problem" for women, and as something that needs to be encouraged (and this is the Committee's mission):

"[The Committee is to] examine the problems that waged labor entails for women and study measures that may facilitate their paid employment and advancement within their occupation »²⁶.

Then in 1969, the Committee's mission is extended to a broader notion of "advancement of women", and the decree specifies that the Committee must also take into account women's unwaged labor:

"[The Committee is to] examine the problems that an occupation, waged or not, entails for women, and study measures that may facilitate both this occupation and women's advancement »²⁷.

In 1971, in relation with the broader political stake of increasing women's labor force participation, the Committee's mission is again restricted to labor issues:

"[The Committee is to] study all matters related to women's vocational training, occupation and job advancement »²⁸.

Finally, in 1981, the new definition of the Committee's mission is influenced by its switch from the Department of Labour to the newly created ministry for Women's rights (*Ministère des droits de la femme*). Indeed, the notion of a promotion of women's "rights" is added to the Committee's mission:

"[The Committee is to] study all matters related to women's occupation and vocational training, to their economic and social advancement, and to their labour rights »²⁹.

²⁶ , "Arrêté ministériel du 25 septembre 1965 portant création d'un Comité d'étude et de liaison des problèmes du travail féminin," in *Journal Officiel* (1965).

²⁷ , "Arrêté interministériel du 23 mai 1969 relatif au Comité d'étude et de liaison des problèmes du travail féminin," in *Journal Officiel* (1969).

²⁸ , "Arrêté ministériel du 16 avril 1971 relatif au Comité du travail féminin," in *Journal Officiel* (1971).

²⁹ , "Arrêté interministériel du 30 septembre 1981 relatif au Comité du travail féminin," in *Journal Officiel* (1981).

To sum up, except from the 1969-1971 and 1981-1984 intervals where the Committee's legal mission has been extended to the advancement of women generally speaking, its mission has always had at its core women's waged labour.

Beyond this legal frame, how has the Committee defined its agenda? I argue it *de facto* extended its official mission beyond women's employment. Indeed, the gendering of employment lead to a broader gendering of labor, and the reality of the gendered division of labor (which was not labeled as such by the Committee) lead to an extension of the Committee's preoccupations beyond a definition of labor restricted to the public sphere. I will give two examples of such extension.

First, very early in the Committee's work, the issue of work-family reconciliation was discussed. Indeed, following the Committee's first meeting, one of the three thematic commissions³⁰ that were created dealt with "the problems faced by women workers with family responsibilities"³¹. This commission was divided into three work groups. The first one, which was also the most controversial within the Committee, targeted "the impact of women's work on women and the family". The second one targeted "maternity issues and the support to be provided to mothers", dealing mainly with child care issues. And the third one aimed at studying the "special adjustments" that could be envisioned in the organization of labour in order to take family responsibilities into account: part-time work or a general decrease in work time, flexible working hours, improvement in transportation facilities, work at home or temporary work... Here, the reality of the gendered division of labour pushes the Committee to extend its definition of labour from the public sphere to the interaction between the latter and the private sphere.

Second, the *de facto* questioning of the male-breadwinner model³² (here again, the Committee did not label it as such, but its encouragement of women's labor force participation had that effect) led to a broader questioning of the social rights system that derived from it. For

³⁰ The two other commissions that were created dealt with legislation and the study of women's occupations and working conditions.

³¹ Comité du travail féminin, meeting minutes, April, 29th, 1966.

³² For a definition and implications in terms of social rights, see Jane Lewis, "Gender and the development of Welfare regimes," *Journal of European Social Policy* 2 (1992), Jane Lewis, "Gender and welfare regimes: further thoughts," *Social politics* 4 (1997). In France, social rights were strongly defined on a male-breadwinner model notably following WWII (for example when the social security system was established in 1945), with an extended system of derived social rights. However, it should be stressed that this model was conceived in spite of women's actual long-standing labour force participation. Therefore, the drive for this system of derived social rights in France might be more accurately described as a *paterfamilias* model, implying a dominance of the husband-father within the family regardless of women's employment status, rather than a male-breadwinner model strictly speaking.

example, Simone Veil, who was responsible for the legislation commission from 1971 to 1974³³, put forward the issue of children's social security rights, which at the time were automatically derived from the father's. This provision, she argued, was especially damaging for children and mothers in case of divorce. Therefore, she lobbied in favor of the legal possibility of a coverage of children by their mothers' social security. Here, we are apparently far from women's employment issues, but this reflection can be entirely related to a criticism of the social rights system based on a male-breadwinner model.

Therefore the Committee did extend its focus of inquiry beyond the strict definition of women's paid employment, challenging the public-private dichotomy.

However, I argue that women's paid employment remained the core of the Committee's activities. This can be illustrated by the following list of topics on which the Committee produced reports between 1972 and 1976 (see frame 4).

List of (research) reports, notes and advisory reports by the Comité du travail féminin between 1972 and 1975

- **Research reports and notes**

1972

Women's vocational training

The state of women's occupation and training in the regions

1973

Regional disparities in women's occupation

Child care facilities

Women's role in the economy (OECD command)

Women's permanent vocational training

1974

Study of women's labor force by economic sectors

Occupation or homemaking: women's choices according to age

The situation of women's occupation in March 1974

High rank women civil servants

Part-time work

1975

Women's vocational training in rural areas

Regional disparities and perspectives in women's occupation

³³ Simone Veil left the Committee when she was appointed minister of Health, a mandate under which she presented the law that granted French women the right to abortion in 1975.

The evolution of women's status in society

Women's permanent vocational training

1976

An assessment of the implementation of the December, 1972 law on equal pay between men and women

Issues related with women's working conditions

- **Advisory reports**

1973

Advisory report on the decree regarding the 1972 law on equal pay between men and women

Advisory report on the draft bill on the improvement of working conditions (title 3)

Advisory report on governmental project regarding the crafts and retailing

Advisory report on the « social status of mothers » project by the family advisory committee

1975

Advisory report on mothers' social pay

Advisory report on the draft bill on manual workers' and mothers' retirement

Advisory report on three draft bills (regarding the labour code, the family code and the status of civil servants)

Frame 4: List of (research) reports, notes and advisory reports by the Comité du travail féminin between 1972 and 1975. Source: *Bilan des propositions et avis du Comité du travail féminin*, June 1976.

Further, the Committee's deep commitment to women's labor issues can be illustrated by the analysis of its confrontation to newly created women's policy machineries. Indeed, from 1965 to 1974, the Committee was the only governmental body devoted to women's issues. Starting in 1974, it was confronted with the creation of new women's policy machineries³⁴, that raised the issue of its position at the interface of women's issues and labor issues.

In 1974, president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing appointed the first Secretary of state in charge of women's condition (*condition féminine*), a position that he attributed to Françoise Giroud, a very famous French journalist. The creation of this new governmental structure implicitly raised the issue of the Committee's affiliation. Before the question was even raised by Françoise Giroud or by minister of Labor Durafour (which finally did not happen), Marcelle Devaud reasserted the Committee's commitment to the Department of Labor and its will to remain under its responsibility when Durafour intervened in front of the Committee on September, 26th, 1975³⁵.

This commitment to the Department of Labor was reasserted when a delegation on women's condition was created in 1976 and attributed to Nicole Pasquier. This time, the government

³⁴ For an overview of women's policy machineries in France, see Mazur, *Gender bias and the state: symbolic reform at work in fifth republic France*, Mazur, ed., *Appareils gouvernementaux chargés des droits des femmes, représentation et démocratie en France. Une étude internationale et comparative*, Mc Bride Stetson and Mazur, *Comparative state feminism*.

³⁵ Comité du travail féminin, meeting minutes, September, 26th, 1975.

asked the Committee for its opinion on whether it wanted to remain under the Department of Labor's responsibility, or become part of the delegation³⁶. An extraordinary session was held, where the members debated and decided to assert their will to remain within the Department of Labor. Far beyond an institutional issue, this event revealed the centrality of the issue of women's labor for the Committee, and their commitment to the goal of equal employment, as the rationale that was produced by the members to justify their belonging to the Department of labor clearly illustrates:

« Women represent more than 38% of the labor force. Women's labour issues are within the area of competence of the Department of Labour. The legitimacy of this attachment could not be questioned.

Since its creation, the Comité du travail féminin has achieved a lot of work. This has convinced it that women's labor issues should not be envisioned only as issues that are specific to one particular category of workers. On the contrary, they must constantly be replaced within the broader framework of labour issues and evolution. It is only within this Department that this orientation and this method can be fruitful. It is here that the Committee's work has become notorious.

The Committee believes that being detached from the Department of Labour would inevitably intice a separation of women's labour issues from issues pertaining to the whole of the labour force, and a treatment of these issues that would differ from the perspective the Committee is attached to.

Worried to pursue its work within the direction of its initial mission, and keeping on cooperating with the administration, the Committee unanimously demands its attachment to the Department of Labor to be maintained"³⁷.

In this quotation, it is interesting to note that equal employment is not mentioned as such, but it is indirectly addressed by means of the idea that women's labor issues should not be dealt with separately from men's labor issues. Therefore, the will to remain within the Department of Labor revealed both the Committee's attachment to an equalitarian view of women's employment, and its commitment to labor issues as the core of women's rights. This idea also clearly appeared in the interviews I conducted. For example, when I ask this former employee of the permanent office whether the Committee had lobbied in favor of the creation of a broader ministry in charge of women's issues:

« AR: it is interesting for me to try to understand whether the Committee may have pushed in favor of a broader institutionalization... I don't know if you remember if there might have been, I don't know, for example, demands in favour of the creation of a ministry; or was it simply about asking for more means?

³⁶ Comité du travail féminin, meeting minutes, September, 6^h, 1976.

³⁷ Comité du travail féminin, meeting minutes, September, 14th, 1976.

R: we certainly did not demand the creation of a ministry. As far as we were concerned, I think we were all deeply attached to being part of the Department of Labour, because of the dominance of the labour issue, in relation with individuals such as Marguerite Thibert, but also Marcelle Devaud, who always considered that work, economic autonomy, was the spearhead, and everything else would follow” (interview 3).

For members and employees of the Committee, fighting for women’s rights meant first and foremost fighting for their employment rights, and notably for equal employment. This, I argue, had long-lasting effects on the definition of French state feminism.

The Committee’s long-lasting effects on French state feminism

According to Amy Mazur³⁸, the Committee didn’t have much immediate impact on policy-making. One of our interviewees, as mentioned earlier, also complained about the lack of attention the Committee received from the Department of Labor – and this was the subject of protest by Committee members (see frame 2). However, beyond the very broad recommendations that were hard to get through (that in favor of equal pay, for example), the Committee may have contributed to small steps to improve women’s employment status. These can be traced in the Committee’s archives – a work that remains to be finished.

Further, I argue that the Committee had long-lasting effects on French state feminism – although French state feminist themselves are not always aware of this filiation. Here I choose to stress two among these: the importance of the issue of labor equality in the way women’s rights are conceived in France, and the crucial role played by the interaction with the supranational level.

Defining women’s rights as labor rights

Among the studies that have been devoted to state feminism in France, labor rights and employment equality issues have often been the main focus of inquiry. This is no surprise, since these have indeed been the core of the definition of what I suggest to label “the

³⁸ Mazur, *Gender bias and the state: symbolic reform at work in fifth republic France*.

women's issue" by women's policy machineries³⁹. To give but one example of this, equal employment was Yvette Roudy's main concern when she was minister for women's rights, and this translated into the 1983 law on equal employment⁴⁰.

The fact that the women's policy machineries that followed were very sensitive to the issue of women's equal employment can be linked to the work done for twenty years by the *Comité du travail féminin* on this issue – and to the fact that this Committee chose very early on to endorse an equalitarian perspective on women's labor⁴¹.

The supranational level as a resource for French state feminism

Another important feature of the strategies developed by women's policy machineries since the *Comité du travail féminin* is the resort to the supranational level (be it the UN or the European level) in order to press for reforms at the national level. In this perspective, these governmental bodies, as activists within the state apparatus, are well aware of the possibilities implied in what Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have labelled the "boomerang effect"⁴² – using the supranational level as a resource to promote change at the national level.

This strategy was already key to the *Comité du travail féminin*, and notably unfolded by means of key members of the Committee who belonged or had belonged to international organizations. The two most significant examples are Marguerite Thibert, who had been appointed to a unit in charge of women's issues at the International labour organization in 1928 by minister of Labour Albert Thomas⁴³, and Jeanne Chaton, a well-known pacifist, who was the French representative at the UN Commission on the status of women from 1965 to 1975.

To give but one example of the way the supranational level was mobilized as a resource for Committee members, one can refer to the way the debate took place when the Committee first discussed the issue of equal pay in one of its first meetings: the members immediately

³⁹ This assertion is based upon a historical study of the activities of the governmental bodies that have been in charge of women's rights in France since 1965, which is part of my PhD research. In 1988, Martine Lévy also identified equal employment as "the main vector of state feminism, its hard pit"(p.25 in Lévy, "Le féminisme d'Etat en France - 1965-1985: 20 ans de prise en charge institutionnelle de l'égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes".)

⁴⁰ , "Loi n°83-635 du 13 juillet 1983 portant modification du code du travail et du code pénal en ce qui concerne l'égalité professionnelle entre les femmes et les hommes," in *Journal Officiel* (1983).

⁴¹ This is also Martine Lévy's analysis : see Title 2, chapter 1 in Lévy, "Le féminisme d'Etat en France - 1965-1985: 20 ans de prise en charge institutionnelle de l'égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes".

⁴² Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY, 1998).

⁴³ Maryse Gaudier, "La question des femmes à l'OIT et son évolution 1919-1994 (document de travail)," (1996).

referred to the Rome Treaty and the ILO's definitions of equal pay, and discussed their respective pros and cons⁴⁴.

Explaining the continuities?

How were these effects possible? This remains to be explored, but two aspects can be suggested here.

First, after the Committee was dissolved, several of its members and employees went on to work for the staff or cabinet of governmental bodies in charge of women's rights, or at least kept contacts with them. This favored some form of continuity in the way women's issues were defined.

Second, the Committee produced a lot of paper. The expertise it developed was exposed in its thick reports, which were carefully kept at the Committee's library, whose collection was then transferred to Roudy's ministry for women's rights, and kept in the administration that grew out of the latter. This favored the transmission of expertise from one administration to the other – a transfer that may also have been facilitated by the fact that the Committee's main librarian went on to work in Roudy's administrative staff and was in charge of the new library that was then created.

Conclusion

The activities of the CTF provide us with an interesting case of state feminism, especially in view of its belonging to a broader “mainstream” ministry, the Department of Labour. Initiated and run by activist women who did not hesitate to question existing labour policies, it had to find an operating mode with its head ministry. This study shows that while attached to its autonomy, the Committee did not evade the Department's control either, since control often went along with increased interest for the CTF's work on the part of the minister, and could favour its impact on policy-making.

⁴⁴ Comité du travail féminin, meeting minutes, June, 17th, 1966, p.6-7.

Although the Committee asserted its commitment to the Department of Labour and fought against its integration within new women's policy machineries, its experience also sheds light on some key aspects of French state feminism as it later unfolded.

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