

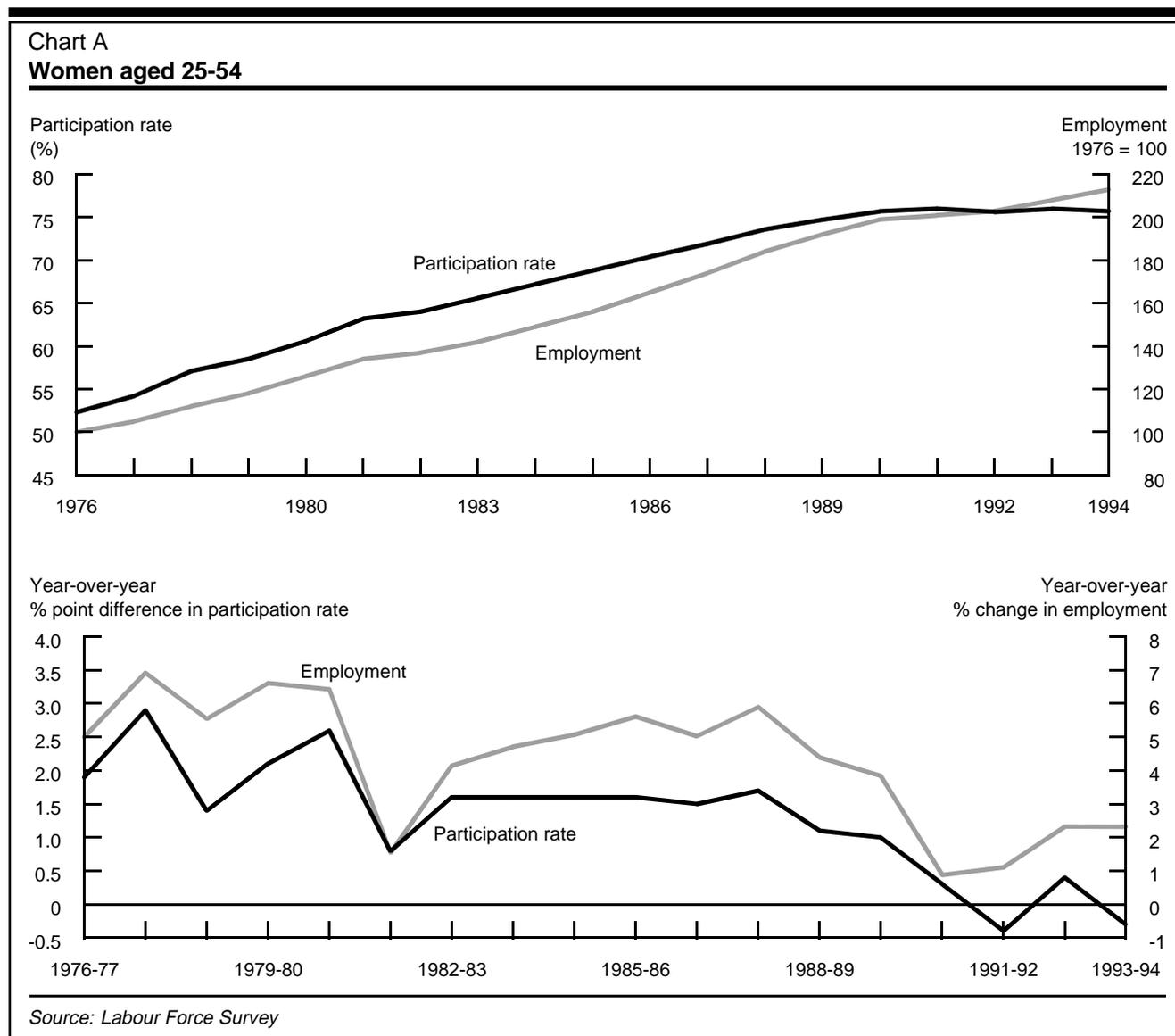
Adult women's participation rate at a standstill

George Butlin

For several decades women's labour force participation increased each year without exception, transforming the Canadian labour market in the postwar period. However, since 1991 women's participation rate has declined and shows no sign of resuming its long-standing upward trend.

Perspectives has analyzed the 1991 decline in participation (Basset, 1994) and the failure of the previous trend to resume (Akyeampong, 1995). This note follows up the latter article. No attempt is made to explain why the historical upward trend has, at least

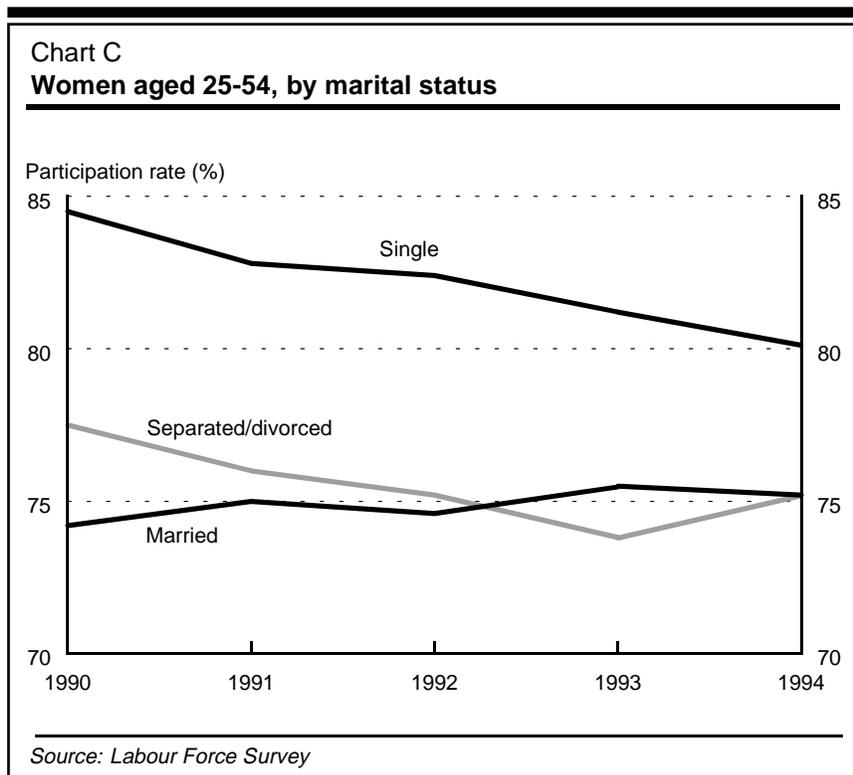
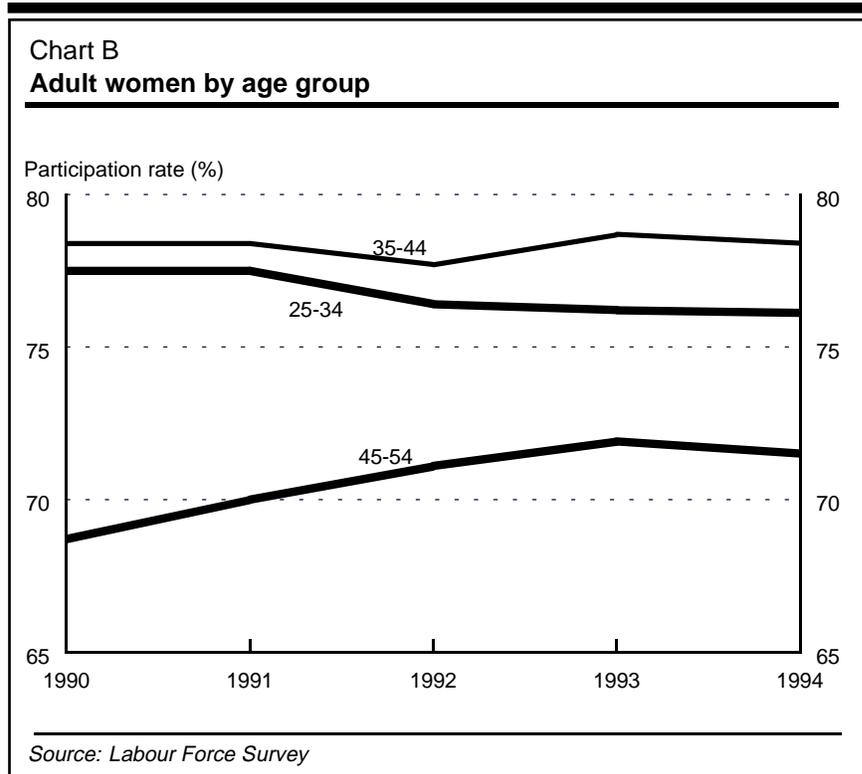
temporarily, halted. The objective is simply to determine whether there are certain groups contributing disproportionately to the "plateauing" of the rate. Their identification might suggest reasons for the decline that could be examined in future articles.



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This note looks only at women aged 25 to 54, for a number of reasons. The rates for both male and female 15 to 24 year-olds have declined for several years, presumably an issue of age rather than gender.¹ The rate for women 55 to 64 has continued to increase despite the recent overall decline. For women 65 and over, there have been few changes for many years.²

Until 1991, the postwar participation rate and employment of women aged 25 to 54 grew in tandem, regardless of economic conditions (Akyeampong, 1995). The two indicators then took diverging paths. Employment maintained a steady, upward trend, but participation fluctuated, declining for the first time in 1992, rising in 1993 and falling again in 1994 (Chart A). As a result, the group's 1994 participation rate matched that of 1990 (75.7%), while its level of employment increased by 6.8% (286,000).



Findings

Women aged 25 to 34 were the only group studied to record a decline between 1990 and 1994, from 77.5% to 76.1% (Chart B). Among 35 to 44 year-olds there was little change, while the rate actually increased for the 45 to 54 age group (from 68.7% to 71.5%).

Among married women the participation rate increased slightly from 1990 to 1994. However, there was a decline in the rate for single (never-married) and divorced or separated women (Chart C), especially among 25 to 34 year-olds. For never-married women in this age group the rate fell by 5.6 percentage points, and for divorced or separated women it dropped 7.4 points.³

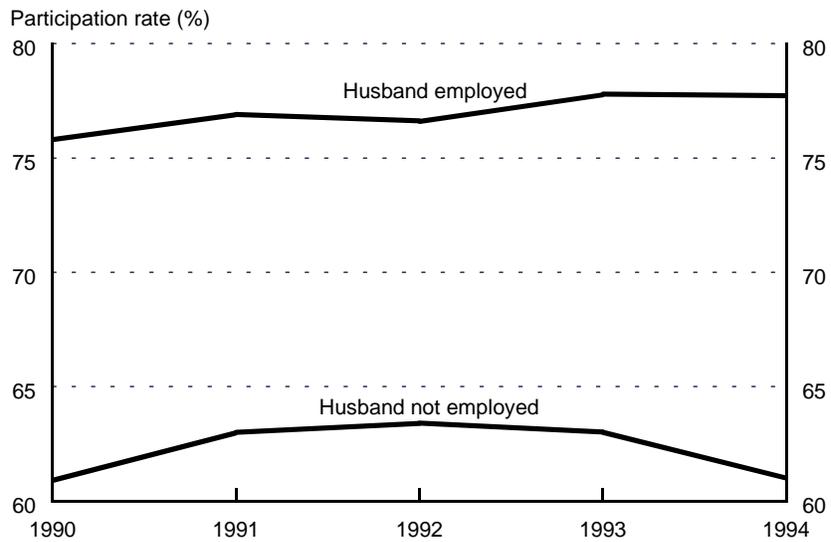
The participation rate for women with husbands not employed fluctuated over the period, with the 1994 rate returning to the 1990

level (Chart D). Women with employed husbands experienced an increase, from 75.8% to 77.7%.

There was a slight increase in the participation rate among married women with or without children under 16. However, the rate among female lone parents with pre-school children declined from 57.4% in 1990 to 53.5% in 1994; those with children aged 6 to 15 experienced a drop from 75.0% to 72.5% (Chart E).

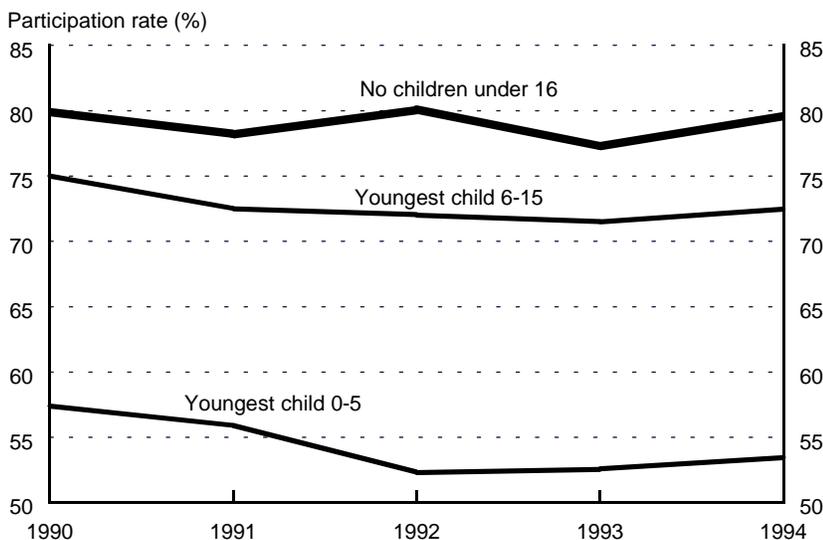
Women in Ontario showed the largest decline in participation rates across regions, especially in 1992. Their rate dropped from 78.9% in 1990 to 77.7% in 1994 (Chart F), which significantly affected the national rate. Quebec, with the second largest population, maintained a steady rate, at around 71.7%. The rate declined slightly in the Atlantic provinces overall, and increased in the Prairies. British

Chart D
Married women aged 25-54, by employment status of husband



Source: Labour Force Survey

Chart E
Female lone parents aged 25-54, by presence and age of children



Source: Labour Force Survey

Columbia, which maintained employment growth for this period, saw women's participation rate increase from 75.9% in 1990 to 77.0% in 1994.

Women with a university degree maintained their rate of participation from 1990 to 1994 (Chart G). In contrast, the rate declined from 49.7% to 46.2% for those with less than nine years of schooling, and dropped from 65.3% to 61.0% for those with some secondary schooling but no diploma.

Summary

The brief analysis of the demographic and geographic groups considered here does not point to any single source responsible for the levelling of participation rates among 25 to 54 year-old women.

However, there is evidence of a downward trend on the part of several groups: specifically, among

those aged 25 to 34, those not currently married, and those with limited education.

1995 update

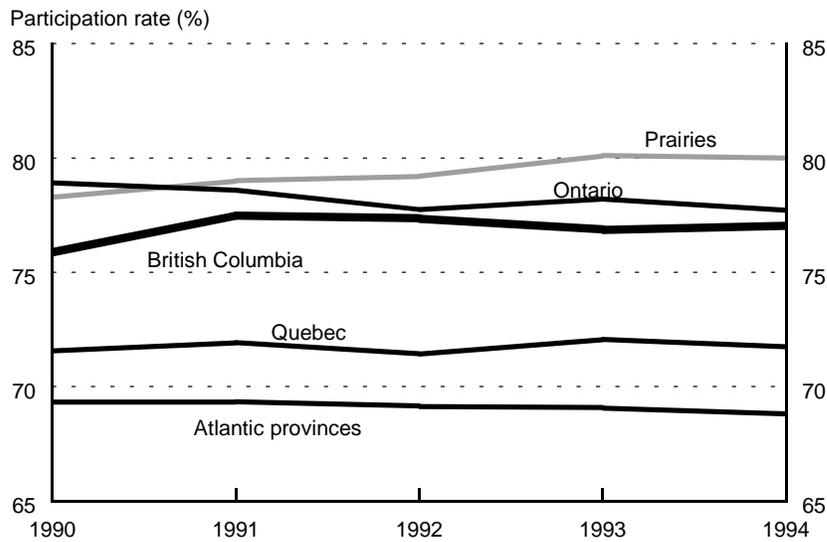
In the context of a stagnating labour market (see Sheridan in this issue), seasonally adjusted participation rates of adult women aged 25-54 fluctuated around 76.1% in the first half of 1995.



Notes

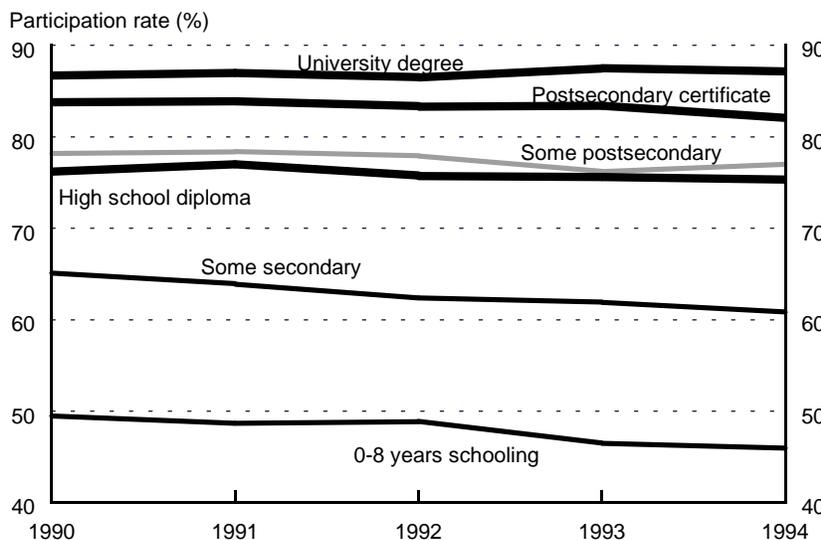
1 The difficult labour market conditions of the early 1990s may have restricted the number of entry-level positions available, thereby inducing many youths to stay in or return to school (Basset, 1994; Sunter, 1994). As a result, the labour force participation of both male and female youths has been falling steadily since 1989. During the period under study, the participation rate for women aged 15 to 24 declined from 67.0% in 1990 to 60.6% in 1994.

Chart F
Women aged 25-54, by region



Source: Labour Force Survey

Chart G
Women aged 25-54, by level of education



Source: Labour Force Survey

2 From 1990 to 1994, the participation rate for women aged 55 to 64 showed a constant increase, from 35.5% to 37.4%, while the rate for those aged 65 and over fluctuated around 4%.

3 Widowed women were not included in this study since they represent only around 1% of the female population aged 25 to 54.

References

Akyeampong, E.B. "The labour market: Year-end review." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E) 7, no.1 (Spring 1995): supplement.

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Sheridan, M. "The labour market: Mid-year review." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E) 7, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): supplement.

Sunter, D. "Youths – waiting it out." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E) 6, no.1 (Spring 1994): 31-36.