Why women do it for less

Solidarity Federation

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Women are major contributors to society through work. They are also major losers in this process, because in the main, they get pitiful pay for what they do. The causes of this situation are numerous, but the solutions are a long time coming. There are good reasons for this — and why New Labour's plans will, at best, further enslave women to capitalism and, at worst, leave them still largely enslaved to male power and money.

For clarity, and because I find it easy, let us start with a definition. This article is about employment and work in the strict sense of 'formal paid economic activity'; what is commonly called a job. It is important to make this distinction as a lot of people who do not have a job are nevertheless employed in a variety of activities which are work. I should also point out that a lot of the specific statements here apply mainly to Britain, and may only have varying degrees of application to other western capitalist countries.

There are distinct differences in employment patterns between men and women in Britain. These patterns are a creation both of the *laissez faire* capitalist system in Britain and a couple of hundred years of political and cultural attempts to influence its subsequent development.

In Britain, on average, women earn a lot less than men. We have recently reached the point where roughly half the workforce is female, so why the difference in pay? It is only by looking more closely at the detail of the differences in employment patterns between men and women, and between women, that a clear picture will emerge. There are differences in the way people work (part-time, full-time, continuous, short-term, casual, etc.), the sector they work in, and their seniority within the sector, all of which affect their income.

mythical norm

Women's employment histories tend to fall into three categories. There is a smallish, slowly shrinking group of around ten percent who either never work, or who only work up to marriage/birth of their first child. Whilst this is often seen as the traditional 'family' mode, it is not particularly traditional. In modern terms, it is more or less a product of eighteenth and nineteenth century bourgeois ideology that has somehow hung on until the end of the twentieth century. It never applied to all classes, but was predominant amongst the middle class. The employment of working class women was more or less ignored. The fact that a marriage bar was placed on many 'professional' or white-collar jobs can be seen as the political manifestation of this ideological attempt to force women from the workplace and into the home. The marriage bar regulations, which forced women to leave work on marriage, existed well into the 1950s and 1960s (and even until the early 1980s for the civil service in Northern Ireland).

The role of the unions in this is worth noting. Much of the debate and demands around the 'family wage' took for granted an ideological perception of the man supporting the women and any children. Even comparatively recently, trade union leaders generally concentrated on seeking permanent secure employment for men so they could support their wives. The male-dominated trade union movement sought to organise in the male-dominated industries and jobs, and shunned what were seen as women's occupations (service industries, etc.) This patriarchal attitude indicates one reason why women's wages have remained lower than men's and why now, with the increase in employment in traditionally female work areas, union organisation is patchy to say the least.

male model

The second group, which is a bit larger and slowly growing, is of women who remain working full-time throughout their working lives, with the possible exception of the odd short maternity break, after which they quickly return to work.

This pattern is closest to the typical male pattern of employment (the vast majority of men work full-time throughout their lives — or at least would do if they could get permanent jobs). It is this full time permanent pattern of employment that is normally seen as the desirable objective — a sort of gold standard.

casual majority

The third and largest group does not fit the (mostly failed) bourgeois model of women as home-makers, nor does it tie in with the full-time alternative. The majority of women in Britain initially work full-time, but then, usually on the birth of their first child, they stop work for a variable length of time, before returning only to part-time work. Most then continue to work part-time until they reach official retirement age. It should be noted that a lot of this part-time work is not half-time work; often it may even be less than ten hours per week. Also, much of it is casualised and has been for decades. There are few permanent contracts, few benefits and the chances of a decent pension are even lower than those of full-time employees.

Even with recent legislation extending basic employment rights to part-time workers, they are still severely disadvantaged in comparison with most full-time employees. Whilst there has always been casualised, part-time work in Britain, it is in the post war years that it has expanded most — and this growth has been almost entirely amongst women. This phenomenon accounts for a large amount (some argue nearly all) the growth in employment since the 1950s. The percentage of women working full-time has risen only very slowly — and that only recently. Thus, the expansion of the proportion of women in the workforce has been made up almost entirely of part-time workers, and it does not appear to have resulted in loss of full-time employment either by men or women.

Part-time wages are generally set at below the level needed to survive. Those who work on part-time wages are usually reliant on another source of income, be it a partner working, parents, a pension, or state benefits. It is noticeable that male part-time workers are either the young, who either live with their parents or are full-time students, or they are older men who have taken early retirement from full-time work with a pension. Part-time work is marginalised, undervalued and rife with poor conditions.

Obviously, as most women workers are part-time, and as part-time work is underpaid, it is not surprising that much of the reason women workers get less is that they are in crappy part-time jobs. But to attribute all of the difference to this is to underplay the importance of the wider undervaluing of women's employment through other factors.

'women's work'

Firstly, there are noticeable differences between the sorts of work men and women normally do. Again, it may seem obvious that many occupations are considered 'male' or 'female', and there

has often been a historic difference in the 'value' placed on them as a result. This dual system of the value of work depending on how it is perceived to be gendered has been and continues to be challenged. Female-dominated workforces, such as nurses, are demanding to be taken and valued seriously.

Nor is the gender balance in occupations static. In teaching, for example, there has been a swing from male domination to now where, at primary level at least, the government now reckons there is a shortage of male teachers. It is important to note that the perceived status of teaching has fallen as this change has taken place. While cause and effect is hard to interpret, as is often the case, women have been left with justifications for poor pay and conditions that emphasise the caring nature of the work.

In other words, if you take a pride in doing work of real direct value to other human beings, you should expect low pay!! The imposed willingness to work for heavenly peanuts and the joy of service continues to be used against nurses, whereas doctors, traditionally a male occupation, are not expected to care as much and therefore require much bigger pay packets.

In general, women's work has a weak collective basis. Casualisation and the patriarchal trade union focus on the family wage, and full-time permanent employment led to whole sectors of the economy being more or less ignored for years. Without collective action, the pay and conditions in these sectors have remained poor. Now that these sectors are making up a larger and larger part of the economy, so many of the gains made through unionisation of the traditional male industries have been lost. So, this attitude, coupled with Thatcher's ferocious attacks and the consequent impotence of reformist unions, has led to a sharp decline in pay and conditions across the British working class as a whole.

unequal opps

After discrimination by work type, comes the second issue of discrimination within work type. After taking into account differences created by women who work part-time, there remain major differences between men and women in terms of pay within the same work type. Much of this remainder is down to seniority. Men still occupy the most senior posts and get the most pay. Though this is not universally true, research has found that, in a number of occupations, especially those where there are fairly discretionary grades of pay, women receive lower pay than do their male colleagues. This is particularly noticeable in white collar 'professions', such as law and academia (though it could be that these are singled out simply because this is where most of the studies have been done).

The most common approach to confronting this particular inequality has been to seek to get women into the 'male' occupations, particularly the high prestige 'professions', and then get promoted into positions of seniority – to break through the glass ceiling. This is what the equal opportunities legislation is all about — giving women the right to participate in the hierarchical structures of capitalism on the same basis as men. The problem is that, at best, this may give a few middle class women the same power as a few middle class men. If you place your faith in this line of thought, you are suggesting that women need to get involved in the 'only game in town', whereas in fact, a new game altogether is called for. Without a far more radical approach, the vast majority of working women will always remain in crappy jobs — irrespective of 'equal opportunities' rules (as they are not designed to lead to anything like equality).

To get back to the central point, though, equality between genders is at least partially addressed with equal opportunities initiatives. At least women have the possibility of fulfilling any role within the current society. Indeed, there has and continues to be growth in childcare facilities and the like (albeit interminably slowly).

unequal choices

There is an argument, which is now gaining some ground, that women in effect have more choice than men. Women can choose to work full-time, leave the formal economic sector altogether and be supported by 'their' husband, or be economically dependant on a primary source of income (whether partner, benefit or whatever) which they supplement by their own earnings. Men, on the other hand, only have one socially acceptable choice, which is full-time employment. Whilst this is fundamentally true, it misses the point. Women are still denied access to the more prestigious occupations and the most prestigious positions within occupations.

Women who wish to 'compete' with men for these positions have to make stark choices. To work full-time and have a family means that some arrangement for the care of children must be arranged. For men, this has never really been a problem, they just didn't take care of the children. For women who, despite the rhetoric, still have the bulk of childcare responsibilities, there is a serious problem. Childcare is not cheap.

Unless a woman can afford to pay or has family and social contacts to take care of her children for 'free', she cannot work and have children. Hence, the most common solution — women work part-time earning some income, but are still dependent on another primary source of income. Any external childcare that is needed is usually sorted out through informal arrangements. This brings us back to square one; part-time work has very poor pay and conditions, thus women have been marginalised by the inflexibility of the only form of employment which offers enough pay to survive on.

let's have real casualisation!

So far, the government rhetoric has revolved around removing the barriers that prevent women from entering full-time employment. In other words, primarily, provision of affordable and available childcare. The dual problem here is the availability of the full-time decently paid jobs, and the fact that these are likely to be jealously guarded by men wherever possible. Furthermore, full time work does not appeal to all women.

A more robust solution — and we are still talking within the current system here, not a fundamentally altered society – is a change in the way work is organised. As a starting point, this means fewer hours, more flexibility, more chance to fit work with other duties such as child care, opportunities to take breaks to fit circumstances, etc.

On the face of it, this might sound like calling for casualisation — and basically, it is. The casualisation of work is only bad because it is being used by employers to undermine pay and conditions. People are forced to fight to work full-time from when they leave school to when they retire because otherwise, they will have no pension to speak of, and before they get their pension they will live in poverty, unable to have a decent standard of living. Real casualisation is decent pay for all, with flexible working hours — the 'flexibility' being decided more by the workers than

the employers, as it is now. This would make casualisation something which working people could demand, rather than fight against.

Of course, the only way to turn casualisation to our advantage is to come together and plan collective action — and the current trade unions have proved time and again they do not particularly care for women, the part-timers, or the marginalised. It will be down to independent direct democratic organisations like Solidarity Federation to act as a focal point for people to achieve this.

The bottom line is that, in theory, the basic raw capitalist doesn't care about gender; what is important is that the worker can produce in a certain time an amount of product that can be sold for more than the worker gets paid for that length of time. Capitalism is about exploitation for profit. But beyond the theory, even the most rational of capitalists carry with them cultural baggage, which affects their decision-making. Supplementing this is 200 years of political manoeuvring; the current British version of capitalism has had a tremendous amount of interference from governments of all colours, all designed to retain the dominant power system for the inevitably short period in office. Hence, capitalist theory and the economists' model of a rational economic individual remains just that, a model. Women's experience of employment stems from the long-term process of patriarchy (and to some extent the reactions against it). Patriarchy has operated through the *laissez faire* capitalist system and permeates it. Any attempt to bring real change to the employment situation of women cannot ignore the wider problem of patriarchy; indeed, it must target and destroy it. This means disabling the mechanisms of patriarchy — concentration of wealth, centralisation of power, and the entire hierarchy of oppression in society.

It is not a fine choice to be either dependent on a husband or dependent on the state's pitiful and heavily begrudged handouts. Until we start to address the problems created by a social norm which sees full-time employment as the gold standard, 'and the rest can go whistle for scraps', everyone — and women in particular — will be trapped trying to balance having a life with being able to afford to live.

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