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Equality for some women?

Aileen O'Carroll

1992

LAST SEPTEMBER the Bank of Ireland was, according to the 'Irish Times', 'basking in an unadulterated glow of approval' from the Employment Equality Agency, the Council of Status for Women and the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Womens Rights among others. What the Bank of Ireland had so progressively managed to do was to provide one creche which will cater for up to 45 children.

The Bank of Ireland employs 11,600 people. However, at £55 a week the centre is obviously aimed at helping only a very small section of the workforce. As Bertie Ahern said, it did not make sense having highly and expensively qualified women leaving the workforce because of lack of childcare facilities. However, it does make sense, to industry, to employ over 50% of the entire workforce having either low pay or no security of employment (or both).

It isn't sexism that holds us in the worse paid jobs but rather the economic reality of the capitalism system. To survive in the market place any company has to be competitive, to maximise profits. With wages accounting for 80% of the outgoings in most business, employing the cheapest labour makes good

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sense. In today's society, creches and child-care are a luxury that the profit motive can rarely afford. To women who accept this system, the provision of expensive inadequate child care is a victory, while the plight of ordinary women workers isn't worth mentioning.

But there is a general feeling that we are now living in a post-feminist world. Women may not be quite equal to men, but the principle of equality has been widely accepted and liberation is only a matter of waiting. We are allowed to vote, to drink in pubs and to work outside marriage. Our right to an equal education system and an equal workplace is enshrined in law. We have a women president.

In Ireland there is now a wide acceptance that women have the right to participate in society on an equal basis with men. However, despite this change in hearts and minds, life on the ground for most women today, is quite similar to those of forty years ago. Though we may not, in general, have the same sexist morality to put up with; economically we are still second class citizens.

For the majority of us, our right to choose the way of life we wish to lead is as limited as it has always been. Rather than being liberated, we are still tied, by virtue of our poor wage earning abilities, to the home and family. A study recently published in Fortune magazine indicated that the leading occupations for women in 1990 weren't so different from the top jobs for 1940 (see table). The average hourly earnings of woman are still 68% of those of men. In hard cash terms, men earn on average, £1.83 more per hour than women do.

So, what are the problems facing women in the workforce? The answer you'll get to that question, will depend very much on who you are talking to. For the last six years, Social and Community Planning Research, a non-profit making institute, has been surveying British social attitudes to everything from should revolutionaries be allowed to have public meetings (only 48% said yes) to should the tax system be changed.

Looking at the recently published 1991 survey, it becomes obvious that the key factor preventing women from working is children; i.e. lack of nursery places, lack of creches at work and “guilt at leaving the care of children to others”.

It noted that while 51% of those surveyed would have thought a work-place nursery suitable for the care of their children, none of the sample surveyed had access to such a service. Overwhelmingly, children were cared for by a close relative.

On the other hand, the Financial Times, in a major article on women managers cited the main problems for women going into business as confidence, training and expertise, credibility and networks. For women at these higher levels, childcare provision is not a key problem, as they can afford to hire other women to stay at home so they are freed to go out and work. So when women managers seek to overcome sexism, provision of free 24 hour childcare is not a priority. Women may not be equal to men in today’s society, but undoubtedly some women are more equal than others.

It is certainly true that there are very few women managers, however this is just a symptom of the general situation of women as a whole, not a cause. The installation of women at the top of a profession won’t change the basic ground rules by which society is run. Those women at the top may suffer sexism from their colleagues. They may be ostracised from the old boys network and may find it more difficult to succeed.

However, they also have an interest in seeing the system continue. Their high incomes, standard of living and position in society is dependant on them being on the top of the pile. So while they may lobby on ‘safe’ issues that affect most women, such as rape and domestic violence, when it comes to issues that question the way society is run and thus threaten their position, sisterhood quickly breaks down.

How many of the Irish women TD’s, who support abortion information are willing to publicly say so? On the one hand

they may be members of the womens movement while on the other protecting their seat is more important. Mary Robinson may be a women, but she didn't show much sisterhood or solidarity when she signed into law the new social welfare regulations on cohabiting couples. This provision limits couples to 80% of the benefit that two single people receive Normally the women is the partner who receives the lower income.

Women will remain as second class citizens as long as they are relegated to an inferior position in the work force. They are now in that position because to the bosses they are an unstable workforce, likely to want pregnancy leave, likely to come in late if a child is sick, likely to require a creche or want to work part time. It is because men in society are seen as the breadwinner that they have more secure, more dependable jobs.

It's a vicious circle, because men are in reality better paid, it makes more sense within the family to assign the role of main earner to the male and housework to the female. The only way to permanently get out of the circle is to change the system. In a society run for profit women loose out, in a society run for need, womens fertility is no longer a limiting factor.

Women can of course win gains at the moment. In Ireland women are no longer forced to stop working on marriage, though lack of child care can make it impossible to continue. Attitudes have changed considerably in the last thirty years. Most importantly, the position of women is now an issue.

Where as before it was only addressed by the few socialist or womens groups, now it's taken up by the mainstream media, by chat shows and newspaper articles. However, any of our new freedoms are very much dependant on the economic conditions of the day. So, while in the affluent 1960's British women won limited access to abortion (used by thousands of Irish women), now in recession those rights are being pushed back inch by inch.

When you come down to basics equal education and job opportunities and equal pay amount to little without free 24

hour nurseries and free contraception and abortion on demand. While a small minority of women can buy control of their own fertility, for the majority, family and child care is still as it has always been the largest problem faced by women workers.

And as a small finishing thought, under capitalism most managers are paid a hell of a lot more than most workers. That's a situation women mangers won't want to change. After all, Margaret Thatcher was the ultimate woman manager, wasn't she?

1990	1940
1. Secretary	1. Servant
2. Cashier	2. Secretary
3. Bookkeeper	3. Teacher
4. Nurse	4. Clerical worker
5. Nursing aide	5. Sales worker
6. Teacher	6. Factory worker
7. Waitress	7. Bookkeeper
8. Sales Worker	8. Waitress
9. Child care	9. Housekeeper
10. Cook	10. Nurse

Fortune Magazine Table