

Women and the Co-operative MovementWomen in Co-operative EmploymentIN GENERAL AND IN RETAILING

by

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The circumstances that surround women and employment, the vast changes in social patterns and the legislation as it affects women and work have dramatically changed the role of women in the present century.

Background

Women now enjoy a longer life expectancy, more are marrying younger with smaller consciously planned families where fertility is compressed into a narrow band of years - these facts have resulted in major changes in the life of women as wives, mothers, and workers. These underlying changes are reflected in changes in the character of the female labour force and the availability of women for employment which in turn is affected by changes in the pattern of family formation.

A married woman born in 1940 would typically have married between the ages of 20 and 25, had two children within five years and would therefore be classified as 'married with no children under five' in her early thirties and would largely have concluded her maternal role by the age of 40 years.

Another important factor is the life expectancy of women and the effect this has on the potential length of her working life. At the turn of the century a woman's expectation of life was 52 years, by 1973 this had

increased to 75 years and a decade later is still 75.2 years. The prospect of a woman being continuously available for employment over a period of twenty to thirty years is now the normal pattern.

The number of married women who work had increased dramatically. In 1931 just under a million women were working. In 1981 this increased to 10.4 million, of whom more than 65% were married women. It is now quite normal for a married woman to work, withdraw from the labour market for a while, possibly bear children and then return as her circumstances allow.

The type of work women pursue is compressed into quite narrow industrial bands. Irrespective of the Equal Opportunities Act which legally eliminated so-called 'sex-barriers' to certain types of work most women are employed in a small number of industries and occupations, chiefly the distributive trades, professional and scientific services (including teaching and nursing) and miscellaneous services such as catering, laundries etc. Nearly three-quarters of the female work force comes under the heading of clerical, services, sports and recreational workers. Men are more evenly spread over some twenty-odd occupational groups whilst women are compressed into mainly three.

It has been contended that the extra recruitment of women has depressed the overall status of the female labour force. There have however been some significant advances of women into male domains in recent years, particularly in public services and the professions but progress in craft and manual jobs has been slower.

Likewise females working part-time are a major source of labour and they too are mainly employed in services and distribution. Young females entering employment seldom gain apprenticeships unless they be for hairdressing or some similar type of occupation. There is no such strong body of craft industries for females to enter and take up apprenticeships as there is for boys.

To sum up, vast changes have taken place in the present century in the pattern of women as wives, mothers and workers and although there is a vast increase in the female labour force there is not a marked change in the range of work they undertake.

Employers' Behaviour and Attitudes

Two major pieces of legislation affecting women and employment were introduced in the 1970's. The Equal Pay Act of 1970 was intended to eliminate discrimination between men and women on pay and other contractual conditions of employment - basically the legislation sought to ensure that a woman had the right to equal treatment with a man for equal work and circumstances. In 1975 the Sex Discrimination Act became law and made it unlawful to discriminate between the sexes (including married women) on employment, training and related matters, education and the provision of goods, facilities and services. The Act gave an individual the right to direct access to the civil courts and industrial tribunals for legal remedies for unlawful discrimination.

Employers' behaviour and attitudes as far as women and work are concerned have undergone

major change and they are conscious that discriminatory attitudes can bring penalties. They are also conscious of the value of women to the labour force.

Womens' Behaviour and Attitudes

The limited aspirations of women from childhood onwards have been reflected in the job and career choices of women and girls - most women prefer to seek work within the conventional areas, and to some extent this can be dictated by domestic responsibilities and the need to seek a job compatible with a woman's domestic role. Traditional attitudes established over many years can play a large part in the choice made by an employer and woman in the working environment. Ability often is submerged by the necessity to secure work which is compatible with circumstances rather than career.

Perhaps a good example of the ability of women to change out of necessity can be illustrated by their role in the Second World War when women were employed in a range of jobs normally associated with men - for instance the engineering industry. Men were fighting the war, women were recruited to undertake their jobs, and a woman's ability to train for and perform their tasks was proven beyond doubt. After the war normal family patterns of living and attitudes re-asserted themselves.

In the home most of the responsibility for caring for children and elderly relatives and indeed for general household duties is 'woman's work'. Many girls enter employment

below their potential and disregard the fact that they may well work for at least 20 to 30 years, or more. Attitudes and behaviour change slowly but there is a growing awareness in women that they can combine their traditional role of wife, mother and worker with interesting careers if they can break out of the mould that society and they have allocated.

Performance of Women

The preceeding paragraph illustrates that most women have the ability to adapt to industrial activity and their performance in the working environment is generally good. Surveys have proven that girls and women on average perform better than boys and men on verbal, clerical, and administrative tasks whilst boys and men are better on spatial, mechanical and visual tasks. The degree of overlap however is so large it may well be that the difference lies in the experience of the individual rather than in ability.

Women are increasingly becoming part of the work force and there is an ever-increasing number of women working part-time - all of them constitute a relatively stable element of the labour force. Women, whether single or married, full or part-time are a large and expanding source of labour and their role both to the economy and the work force of the country is strong and irreversible.

Women and Co-operative Employment

Within the Co-operative Movement women have been a major force, not only as shoppers and members but as workers. If I take as my example the working population in my own Society, the North Eastern, I do not think it will be untypical of the Movement as a whole.

At January 1983 our staff complement was 5475 of whom 1424 were males and 4051 females - equal to 74% of the labour force in the Society. Of the 4051 females 1889 were full-time and 2162 part-time - 53% with a very high proportion of the part-time females married ladies.

This is a total reversal of the position after World War II when men predominated in Co-operative Societies as employees and held, almost without exception the positions of authority. Who holds those positions of authority today? Well - irrespective of a diminishing male work force and a predominantly female labour force, men still hold the positions of authority and power and women continue their 'traditional' role in the fields of sales, clerical, possibly to the level of section head, supervisor, even branch manageress. Very few, however, achieve (or aspire) to authority or power. Within the Co-operative Movement as a whole (and I am indebted to the National Association of Co-operative Officials for this information) there is a total membership of NACO of 5201 persons of whom 321 are female (6.17%). The 321 female members engaged in the retail sector of the Co-operative Movement and accepted by NACO as having the status of 'officials' are in fashions, personnel, and accountancy, with two females engaged in funeral services. Within the Co-operative Wholesale Society the pattern is not, I believe, unsimilar with women reaching the status within laboratory work, buying, accountancy and personnel.

In Authority in N.E.C.S.?

Within my own Society out of a total of 188 NACO members nine are women and the work they are engaged upon is broadly similar to the general pattern in the retail Co-operative movement:-

At Executive level only one female out of seven - operates in the personnel function.

At senior Management level one occupies the position of Group Funeral Services Manager - out of 30 NACO senior jobs.

At middle management level seven out of 151 hold positions of responsibility - mainly buying.

This is not because there is prejudice against women. The opportunities are available but too few women really want the responsibility the work demands - and indeed if they are combining a career as wife and mother then the demands upon her time are considerable. It is still a man's world as far as positions of responsibility are concerned - a woman has to be as good if not better than the man she is competing with, it is tough-going and woman needs to prepare, be tenacious, and have the ability and staying power not only to achieve her goal but to stay there and move further up the ladder of responsibility. One of the major problems is that women are so conditioned to their 'role' in life that too few recognise their own potential, know and use the facilities available to develop their abilities and reap the rewards that are there for the working.

Training and Developing a Career

The Co-operative Movement has led the way in equal opportunity for women. Training programmes as well as conditions of employment - especially since legislation - have been available to either sexes. Where training has been compulsory - especially internal society training - then women have joined with men and utilised the training. Where the opportunity for advance has been open the response is disappointing, whether it relies on self-motivation or the Society's development programme.

We have a unique establishment in the Management Centre at the Co-operative College. Traditionally over the years it has offered men and women the opportunity to study and especially helped the more mature students to obtain qualifications with experience to fit them for responsibility within the national and international Co-operative Movement, and yet few women have seized such opportunity. Those that have can testify to immense help with their careers.

Opportunities abound for women in the working environment, whether it be within the Co-operative Movement at large, or within other industrial groups. Unfortunately women 'settle' too easily for positions which suit their circumstances but are well below their true potential. Preparation for a career is best made not when a woman comes back into the work force, say, after marriage and child-bearing: it should start with her school career, subsequent studies and achievements. A sound back-ground in early life and girlhood will be the basis upon which she can

embark upon her career - many women will enter, in future, a second and third career in response both to their domestic economy and the country's.

Women in the future will increasingly occupy positions demanding not only skill but managerial qualities and the opportunity to prepare for such change is already programmed in school curriculums and other development agencies. Employers of labour are increasingly developing conditions of work that take into account the needs of women with flexibility of hours, rewards, training, development, opportunity. If women want to advance their careers then their initiative must match their aspirations.

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