

WORKING NOTES

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FACTS AND ANALYSIS OF EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT

PUTTING WOMEN ON THE POLITICAL AGENDA

Most debates and discussions on "womens issues" begin in the realm of equality issues. The first steps towards the elusive goal of equality between the sexes became law in 1975 when the EC Directive on Equal Pay was passed. However to truly achieve equality an initial two steps backwards are needed to start at a more fundamental level; that of access to education and training. To really make women "equal" to men they need money and status, how to attain this is the challenge.

At a national level in Ireland bodies such as the Commission on the Status of Women is a welcome initiative as it puts womens issues on the political agenda. This is the second such Commission in the history of the Irish State, the first one having met 20 years ago. Hopefully this Commission will be more successful than its predecessor in having its proposals adopted immediately, as some of the proposals from the first Commission have taken until now to be introduced. Proposals such as the representation of women at the top level in the civil service.

WOMEN IN THE LABOUR FORCE

A cursory glance at the Irish labour force will reveal a huge absence of women in top management positions. Instead women are more likely to be concentrated in low skilled and low pay positions with few, if any, career prospects.

As unemployment continues to blacken our immediate and medium term horizons the impetus for women to train and equip themselves with marketable skills increases. Yet many are deterred by low self esteem, lack of self confidence literacy problems, the problem of childcare and low monies offered through official training schemes.

As far as unemployment is concerned women's needs are not differentiated from men's. This is

probably due to the fact that in Ireland women represent less than half of those on the live register. The INOU in it's submission to the Council for the Status of Women has proposed that all women who are eligible to sign for credits (without receiving payments) should do so, thus giving all individuals their own PRSI record.

What women need is access to information and funding to help them to help themselves through education and training to the best possible quality of life. This can be achieved both by working in local community groups and at a national level through organised channels of activity where women's issues are dealt with.

WOMEN AND 1992

Conferences, articles, television and radio programmes which deal with women's issues or questions are becoming commonplace, with the build up to 1991 it is interesting to speculate as to how the single market will effect women.

The first matter of most importance is economic and political representation which is critical if women wish to deal with men on an equal basis. At a European level women are under-represented as elected representatives.

The number of female MEP's has fallen over the years which is a worrying trend if women are to have a high level input into politics at an international level.

The European-wide move towards greater flexibility and automation in the working place along with the trend towards reduced working hours may have negative consequences for women. Trends in "flexibility" could be a user-friendly term for promoting the use of more insecure types of work which do not provide adequate coverage and protection to workers.

Realistically speaking if existing trends are to continue it is possible to envisage a three tier future work force consisting of:

(1) A core Group of well paid employees. (2) A larger group of highly paid consultants. (3) A peripheral casual workforce, badly paid with no employment protection little or no access to training or career development and no social security rights (this group will mainly consist of women).

If this is to happen then the existing social security system will have to be revamped to allow protection of all workers, not merely those in well-paid permanent employment.

In official European Commission reports dealing with the implications of 1992 the 9 sectors identified as being particularly sensitive to post 1992 changes all have a higher percentage of women working in them. Increased competition in international markets is likely to result in a reduced demand for jobs requiring few qualifications (of which women make up the majority). As we move to an information and technology based society this makes it all the more important for women to seek and attain equal education and training opportunities.

CHILDCARE

In Ireland one of the principle stumbling blocks to date in women's full participation in the labour force has been the lack of adequate childcare facilities. Adequate childcare facilities to allow a higher representation of women in the labour force has been one of the loudest rallying cries of the women's movement over the years but progress is slow. It can not be denied that childcare and social security issues are inveterate aspects of labour policy and should be seen as such.

Unemployment currently haunts all countries of the EC and in turn the future of the European economy. Therefore it is in the European community's best interest to invest and protect all of it's citizens equally. The mushrooming of womens organisations in Ireland is part of a wider process evolving throughout Europe. This is evidence that women are collaborating to effect change in systems that are not seen to be adequate for womens needs. In doing so they are seeking to ensure that they are treated as equal citizens.