

The failure of the movement for women's equality

Ann Oakley points out that progress remains tantalisingly slow or negative. Utopia is a long way off.

The re-emergence of a women's movement in many capitalist countries in the late 1960s has been followed by specific reforms in the position of women over the last ten years. Many now consider that women have never been better off, and that any remaining gaps between the social roles of the sexes are due to women's failure to take advantage of their opportunities. But how much has the position of women actually changed? And has the underlying model of the type of change needed been relevant to the inequality that exists?

When we examine the extent of change, recent reforms have clearly only scratched the surface of women's unequal treatment. The reason for such slow progress seems to be an incorrect interpretation of how relations between men and women in capitalist industrial societies are unfavourable to the latter. The cure has failed to work simply because the disease has been wrongly diagnosed.

The philosophy behind the sex equality legislation of the last ten years has been one of achieving equality by raising and equalising women's participation in the world outside the home to the level of men's. Legal equality, employment participation, political activity and control over reproduction, have therefore been the main areas tackled. What progress has been made in these areas?

The main "equality package" in Britain consists of the Equal Pay Act, 1970, enforceable in 1975; the Employment Protection and Social Security Pensions Acts, 1975; and the Sex Discrimination Act, 1975.

The exemptions

The Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts focus on gender discrimination in employment with regard to entry, pay, conditions, promotion and firing. However, they exempt (1) national insurance and social security; (2) existing "protective" labour legislation governing female employees; (3) work where a "material difference" from male jobs can be demonstrated; and (4) "special treatment" of women connected with their reproductive role.

Coverage of educational discrimination is limited by the provision that single-sex schools are allowable, and the requirement that complaints against local education authority maintained schools must be referred first to the Secretary of State for Education. The DES exacted this price for the inclusion of education within the terms of the act. Both the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts are limited by muddled thinking on "objective" differences between the sexes; by the absence of any guide to the legality of, or necessity for, positive discrimination in favour of women; and

by the fact that initiatives in proving discrimination lie with the individual discriminated against.

Reproduction is covered by the Employment Protection Act, which contains the first statutory entitlement that women in Britain have had to maternity leave. It establishes the principle that dismissal on grounds of pregnancy is unfair, and requires employers to give mothers their jobs back within 29 weeks of childbirth. But its provisions are not otherwise generous, since it exempts part-time workers, only applies to women who have had the same job for two years, and provides for a meagre six weeks' pay at 90 per cent of the basic rate. Since paternity is omitted, the Employment Protection Act, strictly speaking, comes under the heading of the old bogey of "protective," rather than sex equality, legislation.

The remaining piece of legislation, the Social Security Pensions Act, abolishes some of the more blatant pieces of discrimination against married women. Those are the lower rates of sickness and unemployment pay to which they have been entitled, and the iniquitous "half test" rule whereby married women paying full contributions are only entitled to a pension in their own right if they pay contributions for at least half the years between marriage and retirement.

Women out of employment because of "home responsibilities" will have their pension rights covered. But employed women are still not able to claim benefit for their children in the event of unemployment or sickness. (The Labour government responded to a EEC directive on this by deferring reform until 1984; Margaret Thatcher's government has promised to remedy it in 1980—one positive effect of having a female Prime Minister?)

The legal package, taken as a whole, has had a relatively small impact on all measures of women's status. Women's pay moved from 65.4 per cent of men's in 1970 to 73.9 per cent in 1978, an unimpressive figure. A minority of women have received large pay increases, or obtained jobs they would otherwise probably not have done. The major gain may well have been in greater public awareness of the injustices of open discrimination.

The establishment and activity of the Equal Opportunities Commission has undoubtedly had much less impact than feminists hoped. Its slowness to get down to work and its provincial location have been construed as rearguard actions by those opposed to sex equality legislation, and its overall image is, as the *Guardian* recently put it, that of a "rather wet lady-like body too concerned with holding its skirts down against the rude winds to have

a go at entrenched masculine strongholds."

A major target of the equality legislation has been employment. The extent of change here has been described as "glacial." The biggest postwar change, the employment of married women, continues to rise—from 42 per cent of them out at work in 1971 to 50 per cent in 1978. It is widely regarded as an important index of something—though nobody seems quite sure what. The most marked growth sectors, so far as women's employment is concerned, are part-time work, the service industries, other traditionally female occupations, and—paradoxically—unemployment.

The proportion of women working part-time rose from 34 per cent in 1971 (the figure for men was 4 per cent) to 40 per cent in 1976 (5 per cent for men). 61 per cent of employed women work in only ten occupations, most of them low paid and low status. 17 per cent are clerks or cashiers, 10 per cent are maids or cleaners, 9 per cent shop assistants, 9 per cent secretaries, and 5 per cent are nurses.

Few women in top jobs

There is only a tiny proportion of women among managerial and professional workers. For example, women total under 1 per cent of bank managers, 2 per cent of chartered accountants and university professors, and 5 per cent of architects. Sex segregation in jobs seems to be intensifying, not diminishing—most of the remaining earnings gap between the sexes comes from sex segregation, so it is unlikely to be closed further. While male unemployment increased by 9 per cent between January 1976 and January 1978, female unemployment rose by 53 per cent. This increase is partly due to the change in national insurance regulations which entitle married women to unemployment benefit. It is also a result of the tremendous amount of hidden unemployment among women, who continue to play the role of a reserve labour force.

The jobs women do reflect their education and training, though there is less of a direct link here than in the case of men, since women's domestic responsibilities affect the jobs they can take. The division in type and amount of education and subjects studied parallels the job division of labour between the sexes, given the function of education in a capitalist society. What change has occurred in the 1970s is largely restricted to the proportion of men and women in education, rather than to their subject specialisations. By 1975-76, women made up 35 per cent of all first-degree graduates, compared to 30 per cent in 1969-70. In part-time day release courses, the rise in 1966-76 was from 14 to 18 per cent.

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When we examine the extent of change, the reforms have clearly only scratched the surface of women's unequal treatment. The reason for such slow progress seems to be an incorrect interpretation of how relations between men and women in capitalist societies are unfavourable to the women. The cure has failed to work simply because the disease has been wrongly diagnosed.

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Photo: Michael Anne Mullen

According to the 1976 DES Survey of Curricular Differences, subject specialisation by sex is evident in schools from the age of seven on. Here relatively little seems to have happened: for example, 35 per cent of those taking O level maths in 1969 were girls as against 37 per cent in 1976.

The third public area traditionally regarded as offering some clue to women's status is that of political power. The British figures suggest that women's status here is still extremely low. In August 1978, 5 per cent of members of the House of Commons and 6 per cent holding ministerial office were female. Female membership of House of Commons Select Committee varies from 0 per cent (science and technology, trade and industry subcommittee) to 6 per cent (expenditure) and, not surprisingly, 22 per cent (social services and employment subcommittee).

A similar pattern is to be found in the membership of Royal Commissions (Law Commission, 0 per cent, Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, 6 per cent). The boards of nationalised industries are, apart from one woman on the British Airways Board, entirely male. In the judiciary there are no female Lords of Appeal or Lord Justices of Appeal. Since 1976, there seems to have been a slight increase in the percentage of women members of some professional institutes (like the Institute of Chartered Accountants). Female trade union membership stood at 22 per cent in 1966, compared with 29 per cent in 1976—a figure about 10 per cent lower than the proportion of working women.

This picture of women's progress in the public world is not impressive. Moreover, there are signs that it is getting less so: for example, women's pay, 73.9 per cent of men's in 1978, had declined from 75.5 per cent in 1977. If women are not becoming more equal in these ways, one cause, at least, is obvious. As Hannah Mitchell, a working class suffragette, wrote in her autobiography *The Hard Way Up*, "No cause can be won between dinner and tea, and most of us who were married had to work with one hand tied behind us, so to speak." The problem in the 1970s is the same. The double burden on women is not resolved by legislative directives about equal pay, equal employment opportunity, sex discrimination in education, and so on, since these do not alter the responsibilities women have for domestic work and childrearing.

Unequal partners

Men and women cannot be equal partners outside the home if they are not equal inside it. I know of no good evidence that women's share of domestic responsibilities has fallen in recent years. Moreover, both housework and childcare are areas in which women are investing more time and emotional energy. Housework hours have increased this century, despite more domestic technology, because standards have risen. Although having children occupies "Women's traditional activities have low status" both in the home . . .

ss of a woman's life, rearing children has become a much more complex and demanding exercise.

Sex discrimination legislation has been modelled on legislation against race discrimination. However, the two forms of discrimination are not equivalent because women shoulder a domestic oppression, disguised as romantic sexual love. They are led to men through their "private relationships." This is an area which sex equality legislation specifically defines as morally beyond its scope, despite the fact that all the evidence shows that this area has the greatest and most influential injustices.

A more fundamental question is why the encouragement of women's participation in the masculine public world was chosen as the correct way of promoting sex equality. One reason why women should become like men is that if men become like women (by doing more domestic work, for instance), men's status is threatened rather than women's raised: men will be "contaminated" by feminine inferiority. Women's traditional activities have low status—but to whom?

The important point is that men and women have separate positive valuations of their own spheres of activity. As a consequence, women believe that their own labour and resources (both productive and reproductive) have high social value, whereas male resources and labour (for example, masculine ceremonial rituals) are relatively unimportant. Men believe the opposite. But because both ideological and behavioural differentiation exist, there is likely to be a balance of power. Men may think women are disadvantaged, but women think men are; and both are right.

On the other hand, when men and women believe that they are basically the same kinds of people, the balance of power is disturbed and women, given the prod of a feminist awareness, will tend to see themselves as discriminated against.

This tends to arise when industrialisation changes the economic power-base of the sexual division of labour. Although women may gain in power initially, because men lose control of their traditional economic resources, men's position in the public world outside the home puts them back on top. Male dominance then ensures that the standards of humanity and social participation to which women aspire during periods of feminist rebellion are those of men.

Since female activities, resources and values are ignored in this ideological transformation, nothing very much is likely to happen. A few women will gain access to male positions, but the situation of most will remain unaffected.

It is a question of how women see themselves. Are having and rearing children, and a sense of emotional connection with, and responsibility for, others, capacities that women must be liberated from in order to become human—that is, to become equal to men? (I am not talking about the hygiene aspect of housework here, but about the emotional commitment women have traditionally had to the mental welfare of



... and at work

others.) Why do we talk about the "underachievement" of women in public life outside the home, rather than about the "underachievement" of men in the home, with children and also in personal relationships?

In *Towards a New Psychology of Women*, Jean Baker Miller points out that women under capitalism have been put in charge not only of humanity's lowest needs, but also of its highest necessities. This is not recognised by male-dominated culture (by men or women). Women's work, because it doesn't enhance self-development, is seen as inferior. Hence women's chronic low self-esteem; their proneness to depression, and the problem of "underachievement."

Feminist science fiction

It is difficult to reverse these dominant values. Nevertheless it is essential, if we are to see what is unworkable about the prevailing model of sex equality. A female utopia—a world in which women know they are doing good—cannot occur within the prevailing value system. This is why, in the 1970s, feminists are turning increasingly to science fiction as a way of making the point that feminism requires more than the assimilation of women to the male world.

The American feminist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, wrote the prototype in 1915: *Herland*, a description of an all-female society, where women give birth unaided to daughters and for 2,000 years have built a civilisation 1,000 times more civilised than that of men (no wars, poverty, illness, crime, aristocrats or dogs; government by

cooperation, mutual goodwill and sisterly affection). The book was republished in Britain this June by the Women's Press.

Herland is discovered during a scientific expedition by three chauvinistic males—a playboy, a doctor and a sociologist. For some time they persist in believing that men are behind it somewhere. They fantasise a separate dwelling place for the men, annual visits to impregnate the women, and so on—the hidden rule of male dominance, exactly as they know it in their own society. When they eventually realise that men simply do not exist, they are unable fully to grasp the idea that, for the women of Herland, civilisation is an entirely female concept.

This kind of all-female world is a necessary vision because it is the only strategy which allows women to become the model for humanity. The full range of what women are and do is a desirable goal—instead of the more limited range of what men consider men should spend their time doing.

Feminist science fiction, significantly, speculates about a whole area of human (traditionally female) experience that conventional fiction does not—family structures, childrearing and childbearing, sexual relations and relations between the sexes (two very different matters). Lessons in the cultural acquisition of gender can be made with extreme forcefulness—as, for instance, in Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, where the four "heroines" from four different time-continua with four different characters and social functions turn out to be genetically identical.

Russ once said there were no men in her feminist utopia because a truly equal two-sexed society is unimaginable. We in Britain are certainly nowhere near it now. This doesn't mean that agitation for women's legal, employment and political equality with men is not a logical historical progression—or that the total elimination of men is a solution. Rather, I am arguing for a reappraisal of our ideas of what sex equality is and how to best arrive at it.

Take one familiar index, the employment of married women. It is clear that this is, for the most part, a red herring. It has diminished, not added to, women's freedom from the constraints of their gender. The second job is often an imitation of the first; the strain of doing two jobs is enormous. But the strain of *not* going out to work is considerable and recent work on women's mental health has shown how confinement to the home can make depression more likely.

Women can't win. They can't win because they are forced to choose between two destinies—one feminine and one masculine. No legislation for equality can be effective if it fails to tackle the question of the relationship between "natural" sex differences and the social and domestic roles of the two genders. Having and bringing up children are only burdens in a society that makes them so. Publicly validated power in a male world is limited power. It is not guaranteed to increase the control women have over their lives.