

Getting women into the workforce encourages replacement not growth

Lucy Powell, the woman who advocates universal free childcare, has been made Shadow Minister for Childcare and Early Yearsⁱ. This could be not just bad news for children and families. Increases in female employment could have a detrimental impact on the economy as well as women and men.

Since 2011 almost 200,000 women in two-parent families with dependent children have re-entered the workplace. While this has indeed contributed to an increase in the employment rate of women a look at the Labour Force Survey shows this has been matched by an increase in rates of inactivity by menⁱⁱ.

An illusion of growth

This pattern is not new. Ever since women started entering the workforce in significant numbers increases in female employment are not accompanied by growth or even stability in rates of male employment. Rather, as rates of female employment go up the rate of male employment goes down. And whilst female rates of inactivity decrease, male inactivity is on the rise. What this means is that far from the scenario of growth which the advocates of female employment would have us believe what we really have is a pattern of replacement. A regular zero-sum game.

	Employment			Unemployment			Inactivity		
	Women	Men	Average	Women	Men	Average	Women	Men	Average
1971	53	91	72	5	4	5	45	5	25
1976	55	89	72	6	5	6	41	6	24
1981	56	82	69	9	10	10	39	9	24
1986	58	78	68	11	12	12	35	12	24
1991	63	79	71	8	10	9	33	12	23
1996	64	77	71	6	9	8	32	15	24
2001	66	79	73	4	6	5	31	16	24
2006	67	79	73	5	6	6	30	16	23
2011	66	76	71	7	9	8	29	17	23

Labour Force Survey A02 Rates of Employment, unemployment, inactivity rates UK population aged 16-64.

As a result rates of employment have remained stable rather than increased – and there may be other costs incurred. Although male part-time employment has been increasing, women’s rate of part-time employment remains significantly higher than men’sⁱⁱⁱ. This invokes the possibility that rather than maintaining the hours of work done per head of population we could be talking about a contraction - with a shift away from male full-time employment to females who prefer to work part-time.

Then there are the costs of family friendly employment strategies, which, hidden behind a fug of gender equality nobody has ever dared to count. Job share, part-time and flexible employment can be particularly challenging for small and medium sized enterprises which have less ‘fat’ to cover the costs. Despite this the government now want to extend the right to request flexible employment across the whole workforce, and make this statutory. The academic research on this is great at showing increases in productivity. But the studies have no evidence on Return On Investment – they can’t because they haven’t even counted the costs^{iv}. And while flexible employment might increase

the productivity of mothers it seems less likely to have this effect when extended through the population at large.

Counting the costs

The costs are not just economic. That long hours of institutionalised childcare has a damaging impact on very young children (unless they are from deprived backgrounds) is well known. What is less acknowledged is that high rates of female employment are also having a negative impact on women and men.

The holy grail of work life balance is no closer to being achieved. It's not just full-time employed mothers who often appear unhappy - with high stress levels, mental health problems and guilt - but other women in the workplace who have to pick up the slack^v. From being a means of fulfilling one's potential, entering the workplace has become a way to pay the bills.^{vi}

As a result, far from supporting gender equality pushing women into the workforce leads to increased gender segregation and pay differentials. This is because the women who work are no longer those who prioritise their careers, but all of us. And as work isn't as important to the majority of women as our home life we choose less demanding jobs, or go part-time^{vii}. So gender differences increase in the workforce and attempts to achieve equality are seriously undermined^{viii}.

Increases in unemployment and inactivity have a particularly detrimental impact on men. Unemployed women have an alternative to turn to – mothering – and appear to highly value this role^{ix}. While men too, may be great at caring and nurturing, access to their children is de facto mediated by the mothers. And with the welfare state they have better alternatives to turn to particularly when 'their' men are unemployed. With no-one to need them men swell ranks of the homeless or those in prison. They also have significantly higher rates of suicide.

All the evidence suggests that these patterns are going to become more firmly embedded.

At all levels of the education system men are lagging firmly behind. Although there are 65,000 more young men aged 18-20 than girls, in 2011 there were 40,000 more female A level applicants than male, and the statistics have only been getting worse. Female school leavers are more likely to apply to university. Once at university men more likely to drop out and women are more likely to get a degree^x. Women bag the apprenticeships, especially those at the higher levels^{xi}. However from the point of view of the Department of Education "It could be argued that the widening gender gap...does not matter if this advantage either disappears by the time the girl enters the labour market or if it helps ensure greater equality for women in the labour market"^{xii}. Change is not going to happen with thinking like that.

The public sector is 67% female and provides work for a full 23% of those who are employed^{xiii}. It is bound by rigorous legislation with an emphasis on positive action to ensure equal opportunities at work. The penalties for failing in this area are high and have a significant impact on funding. It seems quite likely that this results in the favouring of women to avoid the penalties which inadvertent, unintentional discrimination could incur.

At all levels, and in all areas where women can be persuaded to go, there is a drive to increase female employment. This top down political strategy seems redundant as female employment in

nearly all areas is inexorably on the rise^{xiv}. At the male and less skilled ends of the labour market, where a dependency culture has replaced the working class, this is likely to be demotivating, demoralizing and will ultimately contribute towards the unemployment of men.

A better way forward

Isn't it time we started questioning the rounds of regulations, policies and promotional activities aimed at accommodating the employment of women, and thought about the consequences of all this for children, families and the economy as well as women and the less educated, disadvantaged men?

If male rates of employment increased this could have a number of benefits. Whilst various strategies have been contemplated to reduce rates of single parenthood – none of them would be necessary if we had more marriageable i.e. employed and hardworking men. This, along with a Marriage Tax Allowance set at a realistic rate could help solve the missing piece of the jigsaw here. In fact the evidence shows that male employment is good not just for couple formation. It has been found to be more beneficial than female employment for marriage maintenance, satisfaction of all parties with household income, and paternal involvement in childrearing as well^{xv}

And the benefits are not just social. Being in a relationship encourages male employment whilst being married and having children increases men's earning and the hours they spend at work. Having an employed male partner has been found to facilitate economic participation amongst women as well^{xvi}.

Feminism has been great at getting women into the workplace and has brought a great many other benefits in its wake. However it is time we started to acknowledge the costs – and question the value of endless rounds of policies promoting the position of women – before it's too late.

Belinda Brown 10/10/2013

ⁱ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/02/childcare-economy>

ⁱⁱ Labour Force Survey A03: Summary of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity for men aged from 16 to 64 and women aged from 16 to 59. Date of Publication: 11 September 2013

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilson, R.A. and Homenidou, K. 2012, *Working Futures 2010-2020*, Institute of Employment Research, University of Warwick, p.172. <http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/evidence-report-41-working-futures-2010-2020.pdf>

^{iv} Kelly, E., Kossek, E., Hammer, L., Durham, M., Bray, J. Chermack, K., Murphy, L. and Kaskubar, D., 2008, "Getting There from Here: Research on the Effects of Work-Family Initiatives on Work-Family Conflict and Business Outcomes". *Acad Manag Ann.* 2008 August ; 2: 305–349.

^v See for example - Freeman, D., and Freeman, J. 2013 *The Stressed Sex: Uncovering the truth about men women and mental health*, Oxford University Press. Also Maber, S, 2013, "Generation Juggle", *Red Magazine*, September Issue.

^{vi} Alakeson, V. 2012, *The Price of Motherhood: Women and Part-time Work*, Resolution Foundation.

^{vii} Dench, G., 2011, *What Women Want: Evidence from British Social Attitudes*, Transaction Publishers, p.33.

^{viii} Hakim, C. 2011, *Feminist Myths and Magic medicine: the Flawed Thinking Behind Calls for Further Equality Legislation*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2011. <http://www.cps.org.uk/files/reports/original/111026184004-FeministMythsandMagicMedicine.pdf> last accessed 21/08/2013

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- ^x <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/files/41Maleandfemaleparticipation.pdf>
- ^{xi} <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmbis/342/342.pdf> p.17 (last accessed 10/10/2013)
- ^{xii} DfES (2007b), "Gender and Education: The Evidence on Pupils in England", from Thompson, J., Bekhradnia, 2009 "Male and Female Participation and Progression in Higher Education", June, Higher Education Policy Institute.
- ^{xiii} Labour Force Survey, *Employment levels for people aged 16 years and over, by sector and then by age and region April till June 2012, not seasonally adjusted*.
- ^{xiv} Labour Force Survey EMP08 *All in employment by occupation*.
- ^{xv} Jalovaara, M. 2013, "Socioeconomic resources and the dissolutions of cohabitations and marriages", *European Journal of Population*, 29, pp.167-193.
- ^{xv} Kanji, S. and Schober, P., 2012, "Can couples survive when the mother is the main or an equal earner? Unpublished working paper. Basle: Department of Sociology, pp.17-18. Quoted in Wolf, A. *op cit.* p.363
- ^{xv} Sayer, L.C., England, P., Allison P., and Kangas, N., 2010, "She Left, He Left: How Employment and Satisfaction Affect Men's and Women's Decisions to Leave Marriages" *American Journal of Sociology* Vol;116, No;6
- ^{xv} Harknett, K. and Kuperberg, 2011 "Education, Labour Market and the Retreat from Marriage" *Social Forces*, Vol: 90, No; 1, pp. 41-63, OUP.
- ^{xv} R. B. Mincy, S. Grossbard, C.C. Huang., 2005, "An Economic Analysis of Co-parenting Choices: Single Parent, Visiting Father, Cohabitation, Marriage" <http://ideas.repec.org/p/wpa/wuwpla/0505004.html> (last accessed 27/08/2013)
- ^{xv} De Henau, J and Himmelweit, S. 2013 "Unpacking within-household gender differences in Partners' subjective benefits from household income", *Journal of Marriage and the Family* vol. 75 pp. 611-624.
- ^{xvi} http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/06/fatherhood_s_physical_and_social_changes_but_dads_have_to_live_with_kids.html (last accessed 16/08/2013)
- Dench, G., 2011, *What Women Want: Evidence from British Social Attitudes*, Transaction Publishers, p.47.