

# EQUALITY AT WORK: A CONTRADICTIONARY DEMAND?

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Women activists have long demanded equality at work as an extension of the demand for political equality. Governments are no longer able to ignore these demands and are beginning to develop and implement policies that will provide equal employment opportunity for women in all sectors of the workforce (Commonwealth of Australia 1984). The implementation of these policies may have two effects that contradict the intention of the demand and reinforce social inequalities rather than eliminate them. If discrimination based on ascribed characteristics is removed, but the hierarchic structure of the labour market and the associated ideology of advancement on the basis of merit is unchallenged, those who do not advance can be labelled as inferior individuals. In addition, by opening opportunities for women in the paid workforce without changing the sexual division of labour in domestic life that is implicit in the liberal division of human activity into public and private spheres, the inequality between women and men will increase, not decrease. These contradictions challenge those engaged in the struggle for equality to work for gains that will not at the same time be revealed as defeats.

Although the specific case of equal employment opportunity for women is discussed here, similar, though not identical, cases could be made for other groups that currently suffer discrimination. I first examine the origins of these contradictions within liberalism and then take up aspects of the demands made by women. While I have no solutions for the problems of political work within liberal democratic institutions, I conclude by posing questions to further discussion among activists who are trying to develop long term strategies as well as short term tactics to deal with immediate problems.

Equality at work can be seen as a contradictory demand from several perspectives. As a demand on state and corporate employers it throws up the contradictions between the ideology of liberal capitalism and the discriminatory practices that are masked by that ideology. Liberal individualism makes the false promise of achievement based on merit to justify a segmented labour market. Low paid, dirty jobs are said to be the lot of those who cannot do any better instead of necessary tasks within the economy. The basic class divisions in the labour market are further segmented on the basis of ascribed characteristics - sex, ethnic origins, age, etc. Anti-discrimination legislation and equal employment opportunity (EEO) programmes target this second group of divisions. Obviously, a strong critique of the justifications for the current segmentation of the labour market is contained in the arguments for EEO. The value of that critique as another means to a broader critique of the capitalist labour market has yet to be fully realised by trade unionists. Too often the demands of women workers are ignored or opposed by male-dominated union structures (Burgmann 1984). In addition some unions have actively opposed certain EEO initiatives on the grounds that their adoption will

alter the career expectations of male members while refusing to address the different and disadvantaged position of their many female members (Hague 1984, O'Donnell 1984). The struggle to maintain wage relativities is an indication that the possibilities for a broader challenge to the segmented labour market have not yet been widely recognised. Male workers as well as bosses (whether male or female) still have something to gain from the sexual division of labour.

When the demand is made on women to take up equal opportunities as they are created, it raises the serious contradiction within liberal theory between the assertion of formal equality and the protection of male privilege within the family that is the result of the division of human life into public and private spheres. Within the family formal equality does not exist; the inequality has been justified variously as decreed by god, by the natures of women and men, by the needs of children and by the needs of the state. Women do a disproportionate share of the work in the private sphere; to take up equal work in the public sphere will mean added demands to the heavy burden of combining paid and unpaid work.

### LIBERAL THINKING

Liberalism developed as a part of the struggle against absolutism and the 'divine right of kings'. Liberals argued that the individual was the unit of society; property should be privately owned by individuals, and those private owners should exercise political power. Laws should be established and applied equally to all; a market economy governed by the 'laws' of supply and demand should determine the costs of labour and commodities. By the early nineteenth century liberal democracy was gaining currency; struggles to translate legal equality into political equality via the right to vote eventually succeeded in extending the franchise first to all men, then to all adults. It was this shift to political equality that revealed certain contradictions in the meaning of key liberal concepts. Equal freedom could mean the operation of the capitalist market in which individuals buy and sell labour unhindered by regulations or 'combinations' (unions), or it could mean equal freedom for all individuals to develop and use their capacities (Macpherson 1977). The demand for equal employment opportunity makes more sense in terms of the latter than the former; it follows the precedents of public education and an array of welfare services in an attempt to moderate the worst excesses of the application of the first meaning. Since it was liberal capitalists who accepted the demands for increased political democracy, it is no surprise that the broader challenges to the inequalities of industrial society were unsuccessful. To those liberal legislators and activists, as R.H. Tawney reminds us; "Rightly interpreted, equality meant, not the absence of violent contrasts of income and condition, but equal opportunities of becoming unequal" (Tawney 1964: 103).

Liberalism did not, however, take up the struggle against the 'divine right of husband/fathers'. Free and equal men competed in economic and political arenas and returned to homes where dependent women provided food, clean clothes, child care and 'a haven in a heartless world'. Definitions of the competitive public world effectively excluded the work of women from

social recognition. Long standing definitions of the 'natures' of women and men were used to justify the legal exclusion of women from public life (Okin 1979, Sachs and Wilson 1978). However, the language of liberalism which offered freedom and equality to all provided a way to articulate women's demands to be treated with dignity and respect as human beings. While the critique of female exclusion from public life gained considerable support, that support did not extent to a critique of a the division of society into two spheres. (Eisenstein 1981). John Stuart Mill, notable for his support of equal treatment for women, was nevertheless able to argue that participation in the paid workforce so handicapped a woman in the exercise of her household duties that the household would be better off without her earnings (Mill 1970: 178-179). In doing so he uncritically used the liberal concept of choice:

"Like a man when he chooses a profession, so when a woman marries, it may in general be understood that she makes choice of the management of a household, and the bringing up of a family, as the first call upon her exertions during as many years of her life as may be required for the purpose; and that she renounces, not all other objects and occupations, but all which are inconsistent with the requirements of this". (p.179)

Marriage had a different impact on the lives of women and men; activists who challenged that difference were not encouraged to voice their opinions in the struggle to win widespread support for women's suffrage. Opponents of change in the private realm might also oppose changes in the public if they thought the two were linked (Gordon 1977). The silencing of radicals was so successful that many contemporary feminists have been amazed that some campaigners wanted more than 'votes for women'.

#### EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET

It is important to remember in any consideration of contemporary EEO programmes that they are interventions in a hierarchically segmented labour market. These programmes will most often benefit educated women who want to enter professional or semi-professional sections of the workforce. Textile outworkers, for instance, especially those with little English need far more than can be provided by any EEO management plan, regardless of the amount of goodwill by the people involved. Childcare, English lessons, adequate union protection would be high on their list of demands. However, one does not need to use such an extreme example to demonstrate the different needs of different segments of the labour market. Jobs are distributed in a roughly hierarchical structure according to a variety



of criteria. Preparation for a particular job begins long before a worker submits a job application or rings to inquire about an advertisement. Trade skills or educational prerequisites often exclude people from jobs that they could do. Changes in schooling will open some possibilities here; even so that will take time and require more than simply lifting the prohibitions on girls or women entering certain courses.

In addition more is required in most jobs than is included in even the most detailed job description. The widespread incidence of sexual assault and sexual harassment, not only at work, but on public transport, in shops, and in the street makes some jobs far more emotionally taxing for women than for men. One of many examples is the increased danger of attack in car parks or at bus stops experienced by women who start or finish work at night. It is not only the opportunity to be employed that must be made equal, but the conditions of work. Women will not have equal opportunities to become unequal in the labour market until the broader social context in which the market exists is radically changed.



#### EQUAL CHANCES IN THE HETEROSEXUAL INSTITUTION

The career structures that EEO is attempting to open to women are founded in both the competitive hierarchy of capitalism and the heterosexually structured family in the private sphere. All jobs that include career structures, as well as many others, assume a couple is available to do the job - a worker and a wife. Hanna Papanek (1973) described three ways in which women assist men in a 'two-person career': they do the work of status maintenance - entertain, consume, are decorative, etc.; they offer intellectual contributions that range from patient listening to substantial research and editing - in the familiar words of acknowledgements, "and finally to my wife, without whose...", and they actually perform part of the job - the public role of wives of politicians, diplomats and clergy. Papanek comments that these contributions are required by the employer, even if not directly, since it is assumed that the induction of the wife into her husband's job increases his commitment and motivation. Janet Finch (1983) expands the notion of the two-person career beyond the professional segments of the workforce discussed by Papanek. She draws upon research that demonstrates that the wives of country policemen, self-employed trademen, prison warders, farmers and many others are also 'married to the job' as well as to the man. Finch argues that the lives of

women are structured by the demands of their husband's job with the hours of work being the most common constraint; often there are considerably more. The varied rôles of a wife suggest EEO will not necessarily create the circumstances in which women can take full advantage of the opportunities that are presented.

Women suffer a disadvantage from the very start of a career - no wife! In addition, the unequal relations of women and men within the home mean that the public and private aspects of their life are combined differently for women and men. Typically, men go home to relax and find relief from work while women go home to another job. The 'double day' of women in all sections of the workforce is well documented in the feminist literature. For many women workforce participation is predicated on the continued smooth operation of the household. While no liberal writer would argue today that married women should avoid paid work, few challenge the definition of the job of wife that includes both emotional availability and responsibility for housework. That definition provides a strong constraint on the lives of women. Game and Pringle (1983) report that married women working their way up bank management structures carefully avoid taking work home. Women going away for a few days to a professional conference or training school often prepare food for their husbands and children to eat in their absence. Many married women students report that they are expected to avoid studying in the evening when their husbands are at home, even if the men are absorbed in television. Certainly few men interpret the emotional component of their relationship with a woman as one of constant availability. According to Game and Pringle (1983), single women find the combination of work and private life equally problematic since male co-workers may use their knowledge of the woman's sexual or social activities in their evaluation of her as a worker.

Children add further to a woman's burden of unpaid work. The working man's absence from child rearing is still relatively unproblematic, but a woman who wants what most men can have as a matter of course, a time consuming paid job and children, finds herself negotiating a series of different and often painful contradictions. Child care centres will go only part of the way to resolving them as long as women are regarded as the primary care - giving parent. Organised child care is still inadequate. In 1980 only 20 per cent of children under 12 years with both parents or a sole parent in full time employment were in formal child care, 66 per cent were cared for with informal arrangements (relatives, friends, neighbours or others), and 13 per cent were cared for by their parent/s (Brennan 1983:10). Even when reliable care is available for healthy children, parents, usually mothers, are expected to care for sick or injured children, mediate the child's experience with doctors, social workers, speech therapists and the like, and spend time listening to the child. Again, it is the emotional support work that is most demanding and cannot be purchased in the market economy. Equally demanding, though in a different way, is shared parenting. Women have to give up a socially recognised area of authority over children when two or more people share the responsibility for their physical and emotional well being. Since paid work is widely viewed as secondary to a woman's identity and motherhood as primary, the 'working mother' who shares parenting

is thus engaged in two activities with ambiguous social recognition. Men who take on shared parenting also find themselves in an ambiguous position. They find that their identity as a paid worker must undergo significant changes when they fully share domestic responsibility, not just 'help out' (Ehrensaft 1980).

It seems that this relationship of men to paid work has been ignored by EEO programmes. EEO offers little more than a chance for women to enter the same work structures that exist for men. Social and political conservatives ask about the fate of children and men if women have careers, because they know how peripheral domestic emotional and physical support work is to career men. Many, if not most, career men rely on the support system supplied by a woman who conscientiously avoids putting her needs or interests first. Career men do this, not because they are personally exploitative, though some are, but because their careers demand it. Their careers are situated within the public half of the public/private split. The private half is also structured by institutional heterosexuality which has as one of its main tenets 'men first' (to put it rather crassly). Heterosexual power relations are not confined to family life and also include elements of competitive liberal capitalism in the institutional structure. This means, among other things, that men not only have to be first, but they have to win first place from women and children.



The 'rules of the game' are incorporated into the broad structure of society. For example the domestic sphere and emotional support work receives less social value according to several forms of measurement. Then discrimination and the sexual division of labour further help to 'fix the race' by making sure one category of competitors has more chances of doing work with greater social value. Once in the structure individuals also act to reinforce the institution of heterosexuality: men assert themselves in mixed gender situations in a variety of ways that have been exhaustively catalogued by feminists; women efface themselves in correspondingly numerous ways.<sup>1</sup> The two person career is but one structural aspect of the institution.

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1. Anthologies from the early 1970s provide a good introduction to the literature: Allen, Sanders and Wallis, eds., Conditions of Illusion from England, Gornick and Moran, eds., Woman in Sexist Society or Morgan ed., Sisterhood is Powerful from the USA and Mercer, ed., The Other Half from Australia. The experiences of the 1960s and 1970s are reported in Sargent, Lydia (1981), "New Left Women and Men: The Honeymoon is Over", in L. Sargent, ed., Woman and Revolution, South End Press, Boston. More developed feminist analyses of almost any aspect of society can be found in the subject catalogue of any library or the Women's Studies section of most book stores. New books appear in nearly every publishers list.

EEO has the potential to challenge it; if women are equal then men cannot be first. For the challenge to be fulfilled both work and domestic structures will have to change.

It may be that the contradictions raised by EEO, especially the increased burden on women who take up a competitive market job and continue to provide domestic support services, will lead to further struggles against institutional heterosexuality (Eisenstein 1981). On the other hand, women may be so exhausted by doing three quarters of the work necessary to sustain human life (to say nothing of the political work to prevent its obliteration) that most will cease to struggle and succumb to a restructured institution, having exchanged the vision of equality that requires change for both women and men for a few minor amendments to the rules of the old familiar game.

### CHANGING THE INSTITUTION

Like the activists who won the vote, progressive women are a part of a movement that demands more than the economic and political system can incorporate, but in which the more radical demands are absent from the public agenda for change. Challenges to the structures of the institution of heterosexuality are being silenced. The left has too often resisted serious consideration of critiques of a social structure based on marriage and nuclear families. It is true that most workers live in families formed by a married couple and their children for a part of their lives, but the fact that most of those same workers are employed by profit making firms or a capitalist state has not prevented the development of a serious critique of capitalism. The contemporary silencing may not be as great as the cover-up of past radical women's politics, but we have yet to see how today will be turned into 'history' for those living in 2050. Women may need to 'rediscover' us in the same way that we must learn about our foremothers.

One form of silencing is the need to work within the constraints of various public institutions in order to achieve any change. The need to make the first step seem unthreatening means that private life implications of public life reforms remain unstated. Tactically this may be useful, but the case for the omission must be argued not assumed. Without a clear understanding of the larger strategy, the silence may be a failure to meet the challenge that the proposed change presents and thus function as a denial of the contradiction rather than a tactical deferral. For example, in the New South Wales Affirmative Action Handbook indirect discrimination is illustrated by a variety of work conditions that disadvantage women because of their greater family and child rearing responsibilities (NSW 1980). The observation that women shoulder a greater proportion of the domestic responsibility is made without any question of the justice of the situation and so serves to silence rather than open the question of the social arrangements of child care and family support. Opponents of equal opportunities for women understand that changes will have to be made to domestic arrangements if discrimination is to end; they use that awareness in their polemics against legislation like the federal sex discrimination bill. When radicals remain silent about changes in family life; individuals are forced to work

out private solutions without political support. While private solutions may be the best one can hope for today, they are never enough to solve social problems.

Debate is also silenced in an attempt to provide support for women in the difficult, if not impossible, EEO jobs. The difficulties of the job are often not seriously discussed, yet the women involved ask for uncritical and automatic agreement with all they do. (Lynch 1984). Will criticism of a document, speech, programme or personal style reduce the effectiveness of a woman that one wants to support without offering complete agreement? Certainly a public blast serves to put weapons in the hands of opponents, but what is a safe forum for such discussions? Is the demand for support that includes an implicit demand for agreement actually an illegitimate demand, one that closes discussion and thus the possibility of moving beyond the current political agenda because no new demands for change are allowed? Is the demand also illegitimate because it demands of women, in the name of 'sisterhood' the sort of total love and care that is more frequently demanded by men for their wives and lovers? 'No challenges, please, I'm an important and busy person, when I'm with you I want to rest, be listened to, cossetted, generally reinvigorated for my particular battles'.

The same argument could be made about teachers of women's studies, workers in women's services, union delegates, politicians, etc., and about radicals in public institutions more generally (men are not exempt). There are more questions than answers here, but I think that some answers are more likely to appear if the implications of demands are discussed than if the silence is maintained.

Rather than wait and see what the consequences of the current policies will be, I think women must take an active role in challenging the institution of heterosexuality. This does not mean that every woman will become a lesbian by sexual preference, tempting as the separatist vision is as a shock tactic. It does mean, however, that women must be ready to deal with lesbian-baiting without defensively hiding in the closet or displaying a male lover. Men who support women's struggles must also challenge lesbian-baiting and other uses of sexual power that denigrate women, both in themselves and in other men. A number of feminists have suggested that the language of liberalism can be used to gain redress for the subordination of women (c.f. Eisenstein 1984). I would suggest that the language of equality, freedom and choice can also be used successfully to maintain male privilege.

Used critically with feminist definitions, the familiar terms can play a role in sharpening the contradictions already implicit in demands for equal opportunity. Activists can point to the need for equality of circumstances that will allow women to take advantage of opportunities that appear. That will require, among other things, equal participation in domestic life by men. Activists can discuss, in public, the difficulties of change for individuals and explore, in public, the possible consequences for society at large. The task is enormous; it took more than fifty years to gain the vote for women, and another fifty to gain widespread recognition that the vote was not enough. Even during the current struggles it is important to remember that EEO is not enough either. I, for one, still "long for a women's revolution like a lover" (Morgan 1972); I do not know what the later stages of the process of that revolution will be like, but I do know they will be different from what anyone today can imagine.

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