

timely. They provide a convincing and much needed reminder of the context for demands by socialist feminists for a radical re-think of the alternative economic strategy. They demonstrate that the 'working-class' is not homogenous, but is, rather, sharply differentiated by the concerns and roles allotted to sex. Whether women work full time or part time outside the home, they also spend over 35 hours a week on household tasks, compared with their husbands' 10 hours a week. There is a very direct link between their oppression as women and their exploitation as workers.

The manifestation of this in the search for local part-time work (and homework) has been rehearsed elsewhere, as has the ghettoisation of women into a narrow band of low status jobs which frequently mirror the servicing, caring roles of women in the home (nurses, typists, food processing workers etc). The current studies supplement our understanding of these aspects of women's exploitation but their importance is in their exploration of the relationship between the sexual division of labour in the home, sexism and the sexual hierarchy at work.

In their study of female unemployment, the Haringey and Lewisham Women's Employment Projects point out that the responsibilities of wife and mother also lead frequently to an experience of unemployment which is not generally recognised as such. The need to care for children during school holidays or elderly or sick relatives forces women frequently out of paid work which they want and need. For women, this constitutes unemployment which has generally been regarded as simply part of women's 'true role'. Employment strategies have, as they rightly say, so far not addressed themselves to this problem which, for many women, is a frequent and severe one.

The awareness of this 'true role' informs the views of the women at Churchman's in Anna Pollert's study. They felt they had a certain security as cheap labour — not just at work, but at home, too: 'if I was earning as much as (my husband) — he wouldn't feel he was supporting me — he'd be downgraded'.

As Anna Pollert points out, language, the visual arts, the mass media force women to see themselves as men see them — as sex objects, as wives, as mothers, as cooks. And it is this problem which women experience as workers; whether or not they actually work alongside men, their ideas about themselves as workers are dominated by what they think men think of them as workers. It is an ever present mirror which few men ever experience.

It is precisely this mirror which is evident in the operation of sexism as a controlling

force in the workforce. The women in the factory would make jokes and sexual innuendo with male chargehands and the like and derived some enjoyment from these exchanges — but it was a way of keeping them in line. By colluding with male stereotypes of women as sex objects, they landed themselves open to sexist advances and confirmed their inferior status; so too, the older women who treated the male chargehands and managers with the intimacy of wives and mothers, colluding with the role of housewife, confirming their inferior status.

'Women's work' in most factories is effeminate to men without being feminine to women. The women at Churchman's were acutely aware of this, and this in turn led them to see more clearly the dehumanisation of the processes in which they were involved. 'Sexually the label "factory girl" did not give them as high a price in men's eyes as a "nice" job like nursing or typing, or a "glamorous" job where they had to look good. And they forced themselves to accept that they were at the bottom of the labour market, both in class and in sexual terms'. It meant that they looked not just to the daily

GIRLS, WIVES, FACTORY LIVES

Anna Pollert

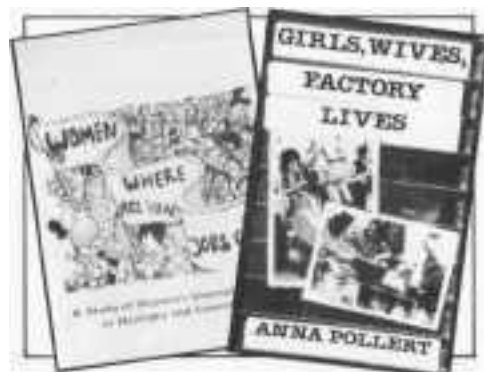
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WOMEN, WHERE ARE YOUR JOBS GOING?

Haringey and Lewisham Women's Employment Projects
Pamphlet 50p

Over the past few months there have been a number of published studies which graphically describe the lives of working women. They all, inevitably and rightly, highlighted women's 'double workload'.

'The daily routine of most women (at the Churchman's factory in Bristol) began round 5.30 to 6 am to "do a bit of work". They then had to catch the bus and often wait for half an hour in case they missed it. Work started at 7.30 am prompt, but rather than risk being late many got in at 7 am for "a cup of tea and a fag". At 9.30 am there was a fifteen minute break for a quick bite and a cup of coffee. Lunch was between 12.30 pm and 1.30 pm, during which some stayed in the canteen, but many went over to Bedminster to do some shopping. Work "finished" at 4.30 pm, but of course started again. They shopped, caught the bus, got home, had a quick cup of tea, cooked the tea and did more housework. It was quite normal to have less than an hour's "free time", perhaps to watch television, before going to bed ready to get up the next day — and start again, the same old pattern.'
These studies of women workers are



escape from work, but to a 'career' in marriage as a total alternative. But it also led to the idea that work is temporary, that one 'grafting' job is as good as another — leading to a high turnover and the inevitable marginalising of trade union organisation.

One of the problems with *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* is that we learn about the position of women workers more from Ms Pollert's sharp and perceptive commentary than from the words of the women she interviews. Their statements serve to illustrate rather than illuminate. This is clearly not intended — much store is placed on allowing 'workers to speak for themselves' — but it is perhaps inevitable given that this is a work of sociology and the writer positions herself clearly on the far left. This is a reservation rather than a rebuttal. The book should be read by everyone concerned to understand the current debates about strategies for improving the lot of women at work.

Tess Woodcraft