

**Women now see society and politics very differently from 30 years ago.  
But the labour movement is in danger of missing the boat.**

Jean Gardiner

# The Gender Trap

Over the last twenty years women have experienced dramatic changes in their lives and in their perceptions of themselves in relation to men and to society as a whole. Men's lives have been affected too, although generally not to the extent or in the ways that women have come to demand or expect. Within the labour movement the response has been at best slow and somewhat uncomprehending. To the extent that debates have taken place on the implications of gender changes in society, most of the emphasis has been placed on the need to integrate feminist demands into the policies of the Left. Important as this is it is an approach which merely scratches the surface of deeper structural problems related to the traditions and culture of political life on the Left. There are no easy solutions to these problems and what follows will not conclude with a list of proposals for action. We need first to stand back, reflect and try to comprehend.

## **Women and men: shifting relations**

On the Left some attention has been paid

to the dramatic rise in the proportion of women in the labour force from 31% in 1951 to 40% in 1981. Such a major change in the gender composition of wage earners has important implications for the industrial structure of the labour movement, and also, for that matter, for the relations between women and men outside the workplace. The composition of trade union membership has altered dramatically. Less

## **the labour movement in this country retains its traditional masculine image**

than one in five union members were women in 1951 and now nearly one in three are women. Although total trade union membership has been falling in recent years, male members have been lost at a faster rate than female members. This reflects the relatively greater loss of men's jobs.

Yet to date, this massive influx of women

into trade union membership has had, in all but a very small number of cases, virtually no impact on the structure and policies of unions or on the composition of leading committees and officers. Women have rarely become actively involved in their unions and consequently their needs have been given low priority in the course of collective bargaining. Increasing unionisation of women has, for example, done nothing to improve women's pay relative to men's.

Trade unions have learned how to recruit women (although still proportionately less than men) but are at best struggling to learn how to represent and involve them. The general failure of the labour movement to come to terms with women's increased presence in the workplace is partly a result of its inability to grasp the implications of other important and irreversible changes that have taken place in women's position in society.

Women are no longer subordinate in relation to men. This is an aspect of the general erosion of deferential attitudes that





*Childminder, Birmingham*

others have noted<sup>1</sup> but it has its own ideological and material origins as well. To understand these we must look at changes within marriage and the family on the one hand and at the impact of the women's movement on the other.

In the last fifteen to twenty years women have begun to gain control over two crucial aspects of their lives: fertility and marriage. The availability of the pill and safe abortion by the end of the 1960s opened up for women the experience of choosing whether and when to have children. This was particularly important for young single women, fewer of whom would subsequently be propelled into marriage through unintended pregnancy. Significantly marriage rates began to decline in the early 1970s for the first time since the Second World War. Cohabitation as a prelude or alternative to marriage began to become not only popularly practised but socially accepted. The proportion of women who lived with their husbands before marriage rose from 3% in the late 1960s to 20% in the late 1970s. Nine out of ten young people now feel that living together before marriage is acceptable and a majority of people aged 65 or over agree.<sup>2</sup>

Women's expectations of marriage have increased as the scope for them to opt out of an unsatisfactory marriage has widened. Women's greater financial independence, the availability of supplementary benefit for single parents and the liberalisation of divorce law by the 1969 Act have increased women's control over the terms on which marriage is acceptable to them. And increasingly this has meant women rejecting unsatisfactory marriages. One in three marriages today will probably end in divorce. Seven out of ten divorces now filed

are initiated by women.

Women no longer accept the traditional gender division between breadwinner and housekeeper. The fact that women are now breadwinners themselves is obviously an important influence in this erosion of traditional values. Women who have been out at work, even for part-time hours, and who come home to the cooking, housework, childcare and washing are much less likely to be waiting for husbands' return with slippers and tea at the ready.

### **Masculinity in question**

In researching in the West Midlands for a recent television series 'About Men' the film makers found that nearly all of the 150 men they spoke to felt uncomfortable in some way or other with the traditional image of masculinity they had grown up with. Some felt inadequate by it or unable economically to fulfil it; others were under pressure from a partner to change it. There was awareness of a contradiction between the public face of masculinity at work or among male friends and the private vulnerability that men experienced.

Women's higher expectations of men, reinforced by the feminist movement, have also created a widespread awareness amongst men about their own sexism. The will to change, or the knowledge about how to, is of course much less pervasive and rarely addressed in public. Men remain sadly inarticulate about their own experience of changes in gender relations.

What tangible evidence is there that men have responded to pressures from women to assume a greater domestic role? Back in 1973, sociologists Young and Wilmott regarded it as a breakthrough towards equality in the home that 72% of the

married men in their London survey 'helped' their wives in the home in some way other than washing up at least once a week. At the same time feminists pointed out how such evidence demonstrated the limits of changes that had taken place in the sexual division of labour in the home.

Men's relationship to children has been gradually changing but again in very limited ways. Most men are now present at the birth of their child. Men's leisure activities are probably more geared to children than they used to be. Playing or watching football or cricket has given way to family outings in the car. Men pushing pushchairs or transporting babies in baby carriers are common sights today. To men these may seem like significant changes because they represent an erosion of traditional images of masculinity. To women the changes still seem insignificant because they represent no shift in the basic responsibility for worrying about and caring for children.

The difference in the number of hours in paid employment worked by men and women continues to perpetuate the traditional division of responsibility. Increasing numbers of women have worked part-time, currently about 40% of the total female labour force. The average hours worked by men have declined slightly over the last 20 years but remain at a level that precludes them taking a major share in childcare responsibilities. Among male manual workers average hours worked declined from 47 in 1962 to 43 in 1982. Moreover men with dependent children tend to work longer hours than men without. One study found that married men under 30 with children worked four times as much paid overtime as similarly aged childless husbands.

### **The impact of unemployment**

It is likely that men feel the impact of the changes in gender relations that have been taking place to a much greater extent when they lose their jobs through unemployment or ill health and cease to have the role of primary wage earner. Although the wives of unemployed men are less likely to have paid employment than the wives of men in work, there are more and more married couples where the wife is now the sole wage earner.

Whether and how men come to terms with this change in roles will obviously vary. But there are men in this situation, including some who assume that they will never be wage earners again, who have been forced by unemployment to share some of women's experience and responsibilities as caring people. Because of unemployment

there are more men in society today looking after children and grandchildren and visiting elderly relations. And at least some of them are recognising the value of this experience and regretting an organisation of work and value system which in the past excluded them from any caring role.

Such changes in gender relations within the family resulting from unemployment may be relatively rare. Elsewhere the effect of husbands without jobs may be that the traditional model of the male breadwinner and dependent wife becomes romanticised or that the husband cannot bring himself to break with the habits of a lifetime. Conflict and physical violence in the home may even be exacerbated.

However mass unemployment has made more and more men as well as women begin to ask fundamental questions about how work is structured in relation to life and responsibilities outside the workplace. As doubt has spread about the possibility of returning to full employment as it operated in the past, questions have begun to be asked about the desirability of the traditional male model of work. And these questions have not just been asked by feminists. A working life which lasts from the age of 16 to 65, consisting of working weeks of 40+ hours, not only prevents men from sharing responsibility for children or elderly relatives but also greatly limits the scope for leisure and personal development. For most people, of course, it also limits the extent to which they are willing to get involved in politics.

The Left has as yet been unwilling to engage with these changing attitudes about work because of a fear that to accept their existence would undermine the fight for jobs. The Right on the other hand has effectively exploited the popular conviction that no return to the pact is possible. They have encouraged people to believe erroneously that nothing can be done by governments in the short term to reduce unemployment.

If the labour movement is to succeed in taking popular attitudes to unemployment in a leftward direction it must evolve an alternative strategy which recognises the need to reorganise work around caring and leisure instead of subordinating everything else to the demands of work. The discussions that have taken place around a feminist alternative strategy represent the only real attempt so far to begin to address these problems.

### Women as a political force

Just as women have discovered new confidence and independence in relation to

men, they have also evolved their own kinds of collective organisation and solidarity rounded in their experience as women. The feminist movement of the 1970s and the many women's organisations and campaigns that originated from it show the full extent to which women have evolved their own political culture and the degree to which this diverges from the traditions of left wing politics.

### seven out of ten divorces now filed are initiated by women

Feminism emphasises the need for women to organise, to learn from and represent themselves, and to develop structures that are neither hierarchical nor bureaucratic. It is not about women fighting for an equal place in men's world, even though equal pay and equal opportunities continue to be important and unrealised demands. There has always been a recognition that equality with men is unattainable unless there is a radical change in men's relationship to work, to parenting and to other family responsibilities. Feminism has greatly increased women's confidence in themselves because it has legitimised women's own experience which differs in so many ways from men's and has shown that men have much to learn from women.

The feminist movement succeeded in politicising a whole range of issues of crucial importance to women but previously completely ignored by the Left. Male violence against women, abortion, sexual harassment are examples of this.

At the same time, feminism must be seen as a much more general movement amongst women since the late 1960s. This has been a period during which women's self-activity and organisation has begun to establish itself in the community and in the workplace.

In the community women have organised around local political issues such as childcare, play facilities, roads and schools. Support for such organisation has generally come from community workers and political parties have rarely been directly involved.

<sup>1</sup> See Stuart Hall 'The Culture Gap' *Marxism Today* January 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Study Commission on the Family, *Families in the Future*.



In the workplace women have been responsible for organising some important trade union struggles starting with the 1968 machinists' strike at Ford for equal grading which initiated the campaign for equal pay and culminating in more recent years with the small number of successful struggles against redundancies, notably Plessey-Bathgate and Lee Jeans.

Ironically it is the segregation of women at work into women-only jobs — together with the broader changes just discussed — that has forced women to organise themselves, given them the confidence to conduct their own battles and shown them what a group of women on their own can achieve.

In the 1980s new independent areas of women's politics have emerged in which feminists have succeeded in constructing alliances with a very wide range of women. The women's peace movement and especially the women of Greenham Common provide the most outstanding example of this.

**Women and the labour movement**

Many women have been politicised through their experience of organising with other women. They have looked to the labour movement for a channel through which the

self-confidence and collective solidarity they have established could have a wider impact on society as a whole. In the mid-70s many women joined the Communist Party and Trotskyist groups. In the late 70s and early 80s many turned to the Labour Party. For other women who were members of left political parties before the women's liberation movement emerged, feminism brought new confidence to bring women's politics to the forefront of left wing political life.

There are of course many more women outside the labour movement whose support and involvement the Left will have to win if it is to reverse the political decline it has suffered in recent years. In the 1983 General Election for example, there was a particularly sharp switch of women's votes from the Labour Party to the Alliance.

conveying the message that politics is not supposed to be enjoyable or attractive

The impact that women have on the labour movement from within will directly affect its appeal to women outside. At present there is no doubt that the labour movement in this country retains its tradi-

tional masculine image despite the ways in which society as a whole has been changing.

In the Labour Party as well as the Communist Party there are areas of the country, particularly some of the major cities, where it is the case that women have begun to have a significant impact. Women's sections and women's groups have been revived and politicised. There has been an increase in the proportion of women on influential committees. At a local government level women in the Labour Party working alongside women outside have begun to have an impact on policy, especially in the London area.

However the impact of women has been very uneven across the country and we are still left with an overriding impression that as a whole the political life and priorities of the Left have barely been touched. Women's issues may now be acknowledged as important in a way that previously, they were not. This is reflected in Neil Kinnock's decision to appoint Jo Richardson as the first shadow spokeswoman on women's issues. Yet women's issues go on being seen as something separate from the central political issues and priorities.

Even when there is an awareness within the labour movement of the importance of more women becoming involved, there is



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rarely an appreciation that women have much to contribute to mainstream politics and that many of them will be ground down and demoralised if not given an opportunity for their own experience to be expressed.

Women have increased their participation in the labour force and trade unions. Yet the workplace issues which women feel to be crucial for them, for example low pay, access to training, flexible and shorter hours, are still peripheral to labour movement industrial strategies.

The politics of life outside the workplace continues to have very low priority on the Left, despite the obvious fact that paid employment is not the most important thing in life for the vast majority of the population, especially women. The vast experience that women have in this area has barely begun to be tapped by the Left, although it could provide an important key to reversing the political marginalisation that the Left has experienced in recent years.

**Cultural traditions of labour movement**

Many of the cultural traditions of the labour movement are alien to most women as well as many men. There is a culture associated with political meetings ranging from seating arrangements to styles of



*Homeworker, South London*

debate which appears old fashioned, stifling and inappropriate to almost anyone who has not grown up with it.

In the area of trade union education it has now been generally accepted that most women as well as most men function a lot more effectively in small groups. Discussion is much richer and participation much wider. Yet elsewhere in the labour movement there is still much resistance to small group methods. Perhaps this is because people see the role of meetings largely in terms of taking decisions and deciding policy rather than in terms of

coming to grips with the problems which so often prevent those decisions from being carried out.

The traditional style of debate on the Left assumes and fosters a clash of ideas: putting motions, speakers for and against. Men, especially men from an industrial trade union background, often judge the success of a meeting by the sharpness of disagreement expressed. Women are skilled at developing and expanding discussion in ways that are conciliatory and open ended and often find the antagonism that is fostered in political debate un-

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helpful and unnecessary.

The labour movement continues to be steeped in traditional male working class culture. Outside the workplace it still follows the pattern of what used to be the norm for working class men's leisure activities. For most men leisure-time was spent outside the home, in all male company, in pubs or club's. Labour movement organisations rooted themselves in these venues because they were familiar and attractive to the men who formed them and to those they set out to involve. Women traditionally were excluded from pubs and clubs and even today rarely venture into them except in the safety of numbers or in the company of a man. Yet in many areas of the country, labour movement politics is still conducted in pubs or adjourned to them. And working men's clubs, which still have close links with the labour movement in some areas, have not yet accepted women as full members.

It is interesting to compare the distinct cultural traditions that women bring with them which publicly only surface generally at women's events. An all-day event organised by women will invariably be interspersed by a good cheap lunch provided on the premises, collectively eaten

over informal conversation rather than a trip to the pub.

It is of course not just women that left wing political culture is often out of touch with. Male leisure activities have altered and diversified a great deal since the formative years of the labour movement. Homes are generally more comfortable than they used to be and, with television and video, entertainment has become more home-centred and less sexually segregated.

### the politics of life outside the workplace continues to have a very, low priority on the left

Yet labour movement organisations still often meet in cold meeting halls with hard chairs, conveying the message that politics is not supposed to be enjoyable or attractive. In this respect the cultural events organised in recent years on the Left — such as the Communist Party open-air festivals — providing entertainment for all ages, women, men, and children represent an important breakthrough. Unfortunately they have left mainstream political life largely unaffected.

The relationship between women and

men in society as a whole has changed irreversibly. Women have discovered a collective solidarity and independent women's politics which as yet has found little scope for expression within the mainstream of labour movement politics. Many women who became involved in the Left in recent years have since withdrawn. The existence of an autonomous women's politics outside the labour movement offers women an alternative to the traditional left definition of what politics is about and of how political life is to be lived. Coming to terms with what the Left has to learn from women's experience must be an essential ingredient of any serious attempt to tackle the problems facing the left today.

A central feature of the labour movement's crisis is a *crisis of representivity* — its ability to represent in a full sense the sections it aspires to speak on behalf of. Women are central to this — they are now far more active subjects of society and politics than was the case 30 years ago. There can be no serious coming to terms with the labour movement's decline without a new relationship between it and women. That is partly about policies and programmes — it is equally about culture, priorities and day-to-day practices at all levels.

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