

The idea of anti-sexism has hardly scratched the surface of the popular male imag...

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The usual view of men's anti-sexism is that it centres around men who find it personally important to challenge the pressure to conform to a 'macho' image plus a handful of politically aware men wanting to assist on what are seen as feminist issues. In fact any man giving it serious thought will come to see domestic violence, rape, care of their children and suchlike as being men's issues. However, the average man will not be drawn into men's groups by these issues, and will tend to see men's anti-sexism as a movement without a cause.

But I believe it's a movement which has remained marginal by failing to acknowledge its biggest cause. Men's groups tend to look for a personal response to the contradictions their members face - THEY are the problem, they must change. This seems to be unrelated to the impersonal world of politics and the hard realities of jobs, pay, working hours and conditions, etc. But this is exactly the area where anti-sexism could have its greatest impact. Because, in spite of the effects of massive unemployment, little has changed men's ideas about work.

The classic picture of man-as-incomplete-person that men's groups invoke - emotionally retarded, distant from his children, competitive at work and dominant at home - describes a man well moulded to the career world. The stereotypical male values closely match the qualities desirable in competitive work. Despite the 'personal politics' of a few men, the nature of work itself has not changed and continues to reinforce the same traditional male values. But there are now women working successfully in most professions - so why should male values continue to dominate? It is because of the strict division between full-time and part-time work.

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It's in full-time work in the majority of occupations that men and traditional values prevail - women in these jobs work on men's terms. Part-time work on the other hand is clearly the province of women - over 90% of part-timers in Britain is female. In fact, much of the recent increase in women's employment has been in the part-time sector. So what are the differences in these two areas of work? Full-time jobs are valued more highly, often paid a 'familywage', and require the specialisation of skills and continued commitment that would merit the title 'career' (though the principle is the same from bricklaying to brain surgery).

This continuity is very important - women (in Britain) are permitted usually only a token break for maternity and men generally none for paternity. Outside this career world, there is both unpaid domestic work, including childcare, and formal part-time work - with pay, conditons, prospects and job interest generally worse than full-time work. There are two results of this duality of working situations. Firstly, because of women's unavoidable involvement in caring for their babies, career work favours men.

Full-time work has changed little to accommodate the increasing number of women in it, who have to accept the limitations imposed by men such as avoiding children or delegating their care to the domestic/part-time sector. Secondly, the domestic and part-time workforce is not only economically inferior to the career sector but actually services its interests and sustains it. This relationship is the framework for exploitation of both capitalist and patriarchal nature. So, women having children must be free from work from late pregnancy until the baby is weaned at the very least.

As men are generally not permitted any reasonable paternity leave it is necessarily the mother who continues to look after the child at least until school age (unless the parents are willing and financially able to pay someone else to do so). If these considerations did not keep the woman out of full-time work in the first place, they are likely to do so for some years at this stage, especially since this whole situation increases the likelihood that the father will be earning more than her at this financially critical time.

While this rigid division of work exists, therefore, women wanting children will be disadvantaged in full-time work, and many women having children will have to accept the limitations of part-time work. Men, if they are able to get full-time work, will almost always take this in preference to part-time work - and when they become fathers are likely to be under financial pressure to keep their full-time job, at the expense of their involvement with their children. Some European men, notably in Belgium, have come up with ideas that could break down the rigidity of this full-time/part-time division.

They have lobbied the European Parliament for the establishment in the EEC Constitution of what they call the Flexible Work Right. This would be the legal right of anyone to choose how many hours a week to work, being paid accordingly. It would be a move against the binding domination of full-time work and the undervaluing of part-time work, which would allow a balance of working and domestic life to suit the priorities of individual men and women. In particular, parents would be free to share childcare and earning according to their own values.

A practical shift in the distribution of the tasks between the sexes would open the door to many other changes. If the responsibility for financial support was no longer borne principally by men this could undermine the damaging tendency for manhood to be measured by economic success - which is often won at the price of being a second rate parent. And for women, work on these terms would mean not only an increase in real economic power and independence, but with this a greater participation in public and political life.

Also any overall reduction in average hours worked could help to reduce unemployment in the right circumstances. So how might these ideas be realised in practice? Three possibilities for change are better provision for job sharing, more flexibility of working hours (especially total hours worked) and better parental leave allowances. As far as trade unions are concerned, defending the interests (primarily financial) of those in work comes before freeing members to work less.

So small reductions in the working week, (which would probably serve mainly to increase overtime payments), take priority over genuine flexibility of hours and job-sharing provisions. Some forward-looking unions ARE seeking better paternity leave - most men take some time off whether it is officially available or not (94% in a recent Equal Opportunities Commission study). Better parental leave entitlement would go some way toward the goals of this anti-sexist men's politics, especially since the right to flexible work will surely only be won in slow stages. And here the EEC is already playing a part.

The EEC Commission has issued a directive aiming to set minimum standards for parental leave in all member countries (three months for men and women during the child's first two years, in addition to maternity leave and at no extra cost to employers). Despite agreement of all other members, and within Britain support of the House of Lords and the Equal Opportunities Commission, the British government has so far vetoed the passage of this Directive into Community law. So there's no doubt that some aspects of anti-sexist thinking are as political as they are personal.

But the anti-sexist angle on work doesn't end there. Poor working conditions and occupational safety may be sustained by ideas of what is 'manly'. The notion that men who complain of bad conditions and danger are soft is sexist and encourages mistreatment of workers - not to mention alienating and excluding women. The response to noise, pollution and heavy lifting may be headaches, ulcers, heart disease and backache; human conditions too are important - if work is a hostile or authoritarian place men may take it out in drinking or violence outside work. A humane workplace is essential for a humane world.

The goals of this 'men's politics' in fact complement those of feminism despite their separate and apparently selfish motivation. This motivation is crucial since the issue of work as a major limitation in their lives is one with which many could identify. This idea - men seeing themselves as 'work objects' - paves the way for a wider view of anti-sexism, encompassing the aspects of personal change and 'feminist' causes important to men's groups now. It would suggest too, a positive attitude of relating some of the less desirable

trappings of maleness to the situations which shaped them, rather than blaming them on maleness itself.

If men looked objectively at the unnecessary sacrifices they make on the altar of work, anti-sexism would suddenly seem relevant to many more men than the few involved at present. (C) Five Cram POSTSCRIPT The above article considers one interesting proposal for breaking down the male-dominated character of paid work. For example, as this issue went to press, a Bill introduced by the Labour MP Harry Cohen, which would introduce a statutory right to a period of parental care for parents of young children, was due to receive a second reading in the House of Commons.

Under this Bill, employees with children under two years old (five if the child is disabled or adopted) would be entitled to 13 weeks paid leave if both parents are in paid work, 26 weeks if he or she is a single parent and 4 weeks if the other parent is ineligible for parental leave, for example because of unemployment. The entitlement is not transferable between the parents. The scheme would be paid for by employers and the Government. Under this Government - and probably any currently realistic alternative - it is unlikely to become law. I think it is an important step forward, but how can we as men help it to happen?

Schemes of this sort, although less generous, already exist in ten of the twelve EEC countries - why not here? Even if employers, unions and the Government could be persuaded that this sort of parental leave provision is in their interests, there is a danger that it would divert attention away from the need to extend workplace nurseries and local authority childcare

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provision, and further privatise the provision of 'care' in our society. Another important issue is how, 'parental' schemes like this should be linked to more general ones like a Flexible Work Right.

Which should have higher priority, and what would their effects be on the level of unemployment? Finally, I doubt if such voluntary schemes would be enough to bring about major changes in the distribution of labour between the sexes. Particularly in times of high unemployment and low wage increases, when the perceived priority of maximising the 'breadwinners' earnings is greatest, many men would not willingly reduce their hours worked. Schemes involving paid leave avoid this problem, but inevitably involve smaller changes in hours worked so as not to be prohibitively expensive.

Compulsory schemes, such as legal limits on basic hours of work and overtime (to encourage men to invest more time and effort in the home) would probably also be needed, but care would be needed to avoid reducing low-paid workers' wages even further. But, to end on a positive note, it is true that there is a long-term trend towards fewer hours spent in paid employment by each male worker - the average has fallen by over one third in the last 100 years. Let's hope it continues and that employed men make good use of the growing part of their lives spent outside paid jobs.