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Deirdre Hogan

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Over the last 100 years, there is no doubt that women's situation in most first world countries has improved dramatically. Now that we've reached the 21st century, many would say that sexist inequality no longer really exists. However, if we take a brief look at just one aspect of our lives - work - it is clear that there is still a lot left to fight for.

Over the last ten to fifteen years there has been a particularly large increase in the number of women working outside the home. The jobs women are filling, however, tend to be low-paid and part-time work. Despite changing attitudes, the ultimate responsibility for childcare and housework generally lies with women which is the main reason why women are much more likely than men to be part-time workers. 30% of female employees work part-time compared with 6% for men¹.

As part-time work is more often low paid, women are more likely to be low paid. However, even in full time work there is

¹ Women and Poverty in Ireland, Brian Nolan and Dorothy Watson, Combat Poverty Agency, Oak Tree Press, pg 89.

a considerable wage differential between men and women and the average hourly wage for women is still 20% below that of male workers². Also, men are more likely than women to get job-related fringe benefits such as pension entitlements, health and medical insurance, and housing or mortgage benefits³. Another change that has occurred over the last 15 years is that women are now more likely than men to live below the poverty line⁴.

Ireland, where 47% of women work outside the home, is still among the countries in Europe with the lowest participation rates for women in the labour market⁵. As well as low pay, a major barrier for women seeking paid employment is the availability and cost of childcare. Too often it just does not make economic sense for women to work. When women are not in paid employment they are either entirely dependant on social welfare or else economically dependent on their partner, a factor which often affects the balance of power in the relationship. Also, because childcare and housework is unpaid work, it is generally undervalued and not seen as 'real work' and, as it is mostly women who do this work, this tends to make women in our society undervalued.

What can we do to change this situation? For a start we need to get more active in our trade unions to fight for higher pay for part-time work, longer and better paid maternity leave, crèche facilities and childcare allowances. Equally important is paid paternity leave and paid parental leave, neither of which currently exist in Ireland, and which would encourage men to

² The Irish Times, Thursday, July 1, 1999. Childcare is top concern of women workers.

³ How Unequal? Men and Women in the Irish Labour Market. T. Callen (ed). The Economic and Social Research Institute, General Research Series. Oak Tree Press. 2000, pg 45.

⁴ Women and Poverty in Ireland, Brian Nolan and Dorothy Watson, Combat Poverty Agency, Oak Tree Press. 1999, pg 18.

⁵ *ibid*, pg 83

take more responsibility for childcare. Gains such as these can be won. For example in Sweden, which has 80% union membership, as well as paid paternity and maternity leave there is a parental allowance of 450 days which is paid at 80% of earnings and can be taken any time before a child reaches the age of 8⁶.

Divisions and hierarchy within the working class is always beneficial for the bosses and the inequality that exists between men and women is no exception. It is difficult to see how sexist inequality could be completely done away with as long as capitalism exists. However there are clearly many things we can fight for now which would lessen this inequality and thus improve the lives of both women and men.

⁶ Work-Life Research Centre, Department of Psychology, Manchester Metropolitan Univeristy, http://www.workliferesearch.org/fw_stats_sw.asp