

AL/1646

Lady Astor, Ladies & Gentlemen,  
Public Opinion I must begin by congratulating  
(the Soc<sup>y</sup> of) the Cons. C<sup>ty</sup> for calling together this  
confer. on Un. ampt<sup>d</sup> Wom. for it will be a real  
benefaction to have the facts brought to the attention  
of the Public. The truth is, if I may say so in all  
respect, the Pub. has not quite succeeded in keeping pace  
with the amazingly rapid evolution in the position of  
women which has taken place in the last few years. It  
is a really extraordinary change. People of a  
studious disposition can view it in the pages of the  
new edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica.  
Women have burst in there in the most unrestrained  
manner. They have burst into other venerable places  
too, as our Pres & Vice Pres can testify, but the public  
doesn't seem quite to have taken it in. The public  
has had so many queer things to absorb in one way

& another since the War that you can't wonder  
 at their not having taken it in. In this respect our  
 M.P.s are decidedly in advance. Candidates for  
 Parliament were amongst the 1<sup>st</sup> to observe that women  
 had votes. As for the public they vaguely realise  
 that its the proper thing nowadays to let the women  
 express their opinions, but they don't seem to have realised  
 why. The reason simply is, <sup>ladies + gentle</sup> that women are sharing  
 the burden of life with men. The burden of life at  
 this period is very heavy. It is crushing. When we  
 consider it we don't want to shirk + leave our men  
 to bear it alone. In helping to increase production, in  
 helping to pay taxes, in helping to solve perplexities, + bear  
 sorrows + make the best of discomforts we are cheerfully  
 conscious that we are relieving our men of a deadweight.  
 How damping then, when they turn round + <sup>rebuke</sup> ~~scold~~ us ~~why~~  
~~we~~ ~~for~~ wanting to take their place in the Sun. We feel  
 it is hard. "But don't you see" we say "that if we don't  
 support ourselves its you who'll have to support us?"

Burden

Pay

And here we come to a peculiarity apparently inherent in human nature. Mankind abhors the thought of women working for money. For nothing they may work & be praised, for board & lodging they may slave all day & all night & no remarks will be made for good or evil; but when it comes to cash payments natural delicacy revolts, & the higher the payments the more revolting they seem.

Press

These are some of the clouds we hope this Conference will go far to dissipate - with the help of our friends in the press on whom we rely to make the very best of all our words of wisdom & to draw a veil over anything of a contrary nature that may chance to fall from our lips. That's to say I personally am relying on them for the veils <sup>for I'm sure</sup> ~~because~~ my colleagues won't need ~~anything~~ of the sort.

Permanent Problem

We are met here to day to ~~not~~ confer on the present crisis of unemployment among Women, but it is not possible to treat of the actual present day problem with any degree of reality if we do not face the great permanent problem that lies behind it. The permanent underlying problem of

women's employment arises from the fact that freedom is denied to women in the labour market. ¶

### Penny Whistles

This fact, this humiliating fact, became known to me at an early age. There was a fashion in the school room for penny whistles. But first I must tell you that the schoolroom was one in which the authorities had never discriminated on sex lines, & in which the chances of age had thrown the boys & girls together in pairs of close companions. The fashion reached almost orchestral heights & blew itself off as they do, but the result was that one brother & sister took out their savings & bought themselves clarinets - also a large book called the Clarinet Tutor. All was rapture until too soon they found that their tutor was a dud & that they craved for a real live one. Eventually it was discovered that cheap lessons were to be had at a certain Polytechnic & off they hurried together in great excitement. They were met by the information that the boy could have lessons & the girl could not. "The bandmen

wouldn't allow it, they were vaguely told". ~~You~~  
~~can imagine the indignation~~. Several of us, I  
 believe, have never <sup>quite</sup> got over that shock. As for  
 me, you behold me still in a fury & still  
 battering at the doors of that Polytechnic. It was  
 thus I learnt that in this country occupations  
 were divided into men's work & women's work.  
 When I investigated further I found that interesting  
 agreeable & well paid occupations were classified,  
 with playing on the clarinet, as men's work &  
 that uninteresting disagreeable & ill paid work was  
 classified as women's work. When I investigated  
 further still I found that in some of the men's  
 occupations there certain processes that were uninterest-  
 ing disagreeable & ill paid & that these processes were  
 classified as women's work, while similarly I found  
 that in some of the women's ~~work~~ occupations there  
 were processes that were interesting agreeable & well paid  
 & that these processes were classified as men's work.

Men's + Women's  
Work

You will say I am exaggerating. I am. But only a little tiny bit. It is true as regards by far the greater part of the work of these islands.

Men's work can only be undertaken by people who have come through a certain training & women are ~~for~~ <sup>not</sup> bidden to enter for such training.

Drawbacks  
to  
"Women's Work"

- This plan can be looked at from various points of view. Take first that of <sup>Women's</sup> Unemployment pure & simple. It is clear that the restriction of <sup>the</sup> occupations open to women must result in congestion & consequent
- (1) low pay & unemployment. Look at it next from the point of view of the Nation's Prosperity. Disregard for the moment ~~the~~ <sup>our</sup> present calamitous situation & look only at fundamentals. Work means wealth. What a prodigious store of wealth, all unsuspected by the economists was revealed in the war when our women set to work to supply England with the necessities of life & ~~the~~ <sup>to the allies</sup> in general with the necessities of death. Is that reserve of wealth to
- (2)

remain sealed while politicians haggle  
 over the cost of education & public health -  
 (3) Lastly look at it from the point of view of the  
 individual woman. Human beings are born into  
 the world with certain capacities for happiness.  
 The range is not very wide, & most of them,  
 as the world is now ordered, are doomed to  
 disaster. The happiness that comes from exercising  
 ones faculties in congenial work is one of the  
 most precious of these rare & fragile treasures.  
 It is perhaps the sturdiest. It remains to the fortunate  
 among us to console us when the others have  
 vanished. Why should the overwhelming majority  
 of girl babies in this country be deprived at their  
 birth of that sacred source of happiness? I  
 maintain that it is an iniquity. - ~~It fell to the~~  
~~lot of~~ My Society during the war ~~to~~ ~~take~~ a considerable  
 share in the replacing of men by women; among  
 other jobs it fell to our lot to select the first

women to be employed in Govt. munition  
works - the supervisors to be trained to  
train others. We were enthusiasts on  
the subject ourselves. We knew we <sup>sh.</sup> find  
women who would be quick to pick  
up the new learning. What we did find  
surprised even us - hundreds & hundreds  
of women conscious of a strong, natural bent  
towards mechanics & eager to use their ~~capacities~~  
And so in every occupation. It was a real  
revelation - not so much of unknown capacities  
as of <sup>the</sup> widespread suffering ~~amongst women~~  
which the repression of those capacities was  
causing.

This then is the permanent problem underlying  
the temporary problems of women's unemployment.

### Present position

We have gone back now to nearly where we were  
before the war. nearly but not quite. It is  
true that I am still battering at the doors



of that Polytechnic but is no longer with my  
 bare fist, I have an implement now in my  
 hand. In the comparatively short time since we  
 have had our votes we have made considerable  
 headway. Barriers are going down; the legal  
 professions have been thrown open, the higher division  
 of H.M. Civil Service will be open in 1924, in many  
 other directions we have advanced but it is not  
 until we are admitted to the skilled trades that  
 relief will be felt on an adequate scale. There  
 must be no rest till then. The unsound economic  
 position of women lies at the root of all their troubles.  
 Equally with men they must be free to enter what  
 occupations they choose; equally with men they  
 must be paid according to the work they do.  
 When these reforms have come about we shall not  
 have incompetent women being employed because  
 they are cheaper, nor incompetent men because  
 the work is labelled as a man's job. When those

reforms come about the great bone of contention between the sexes in the labour market will disappear & if they find that life with nothing to quarrel about is too dull, they will have to get themselves a new bone.

Parental  
Non Industrial  
Workers

I fear I have spent too long on this general ~~aspect~~ view of our subject. I must very briefly survey the present plight of the non-industrial worker & I will compress what there is to be said. It is clear

Trade  
depression.

that the unparalleled Depression of Trade must have devastating effect directly & indirectly on employment of every sort. The closing down of works in the factories of which former speakers have told must result in throwing out not only the industrials but ~~the~~ thousands of administrative & brain workers also. In the ~~works~~ themselves there are the secretarial staffs clerks, books keepers, Superintendents, managersess,

Direct  
effects

caterers,  
 welfare workers, nurses, canbeen staffs,  
 chemists, designers & many others.  
 Outside the factories all the hundreds of  
 firms are hit which exist for the purpose of  
 buying & selling, of supplying raw materials  
 to the factories, of exporting importing,  
 transporting; when work fails all these  
 staffs must be reduced, sometimes all are  
 dismissed & the office closed.

Indirect

~~Next comes the great army of workers~~  
 on whom The Trade depression has <sup>had</sup> ~~acted~~ an  
 effect upon another <sup>an</sup> army of workers;  
 indirectly. They are thrown out because their  
 employers can no longer afford to support them.  
 On the borderline are the staffs employed by the  
 big shops; these staffs are being reduced & reduced.  
 In some of the big London establishments all  
 are under notice of dismissal hanging on  
 from week to week never knowing whose  
 turn it will be next to go. In the class

of the Indirectly hit are the workers at luxury trades <sup>amongst</sup> ~~with~~ whom we must include the Arts & Crafts workers most adaptable of people but whose qualities avail them nothing in such a crisis as this; they are suffering grievously + so too are many women journalists. The Societies & Institutions of all sorts supported by voluntary contributions are reducing their staffs clerical, organising, investigating, ~~or~~ specialist. ~~and~~ [In this sad category I must include my own Society which ~~will~~ closes its Employment Bureau in March for want of funds] Private employers equally are unable to maintain their former dependants; many women gardeners have lost their jobs, private secretaries also & amongst others private nurses I believe have experienced a great falling off of custom. The nursing

LSWS

profession has many difficulties of its own; while the war has left a number of able nurses without outlet for their powers of organisation there is a serious shortage of young women probationers at the bottom of the ladder. [We must expect, I suppose, at the end of a war to find ourselves with a plethora of General Officers; certainly many women of high organising ability are now left high & dry]

We come next to another group of workers. The biggest employer of women's labour in the country is His Majesty the King, we will only say of his servants (as someone ~~must~~ I suppose has said already) that ~~after~~ having suffered from the operations of a comb they are suffering now from the shadow of an axe. With them we must

associate the non-industrial women who work for municipal authorities; these include, among others such as clerks matrons + librarians, the great class of teachers + the comparatively small but important class of health workers. I cannot say that the axe has yet fallen here but its shadow is making itself unpleasantly felt in several ways - in a marked tendency towards a reduction of salaries, in the omission to fill posts that become vacant + in the omission to make fresh appointments where increased work appears to demand them. All this means that fewer people will be doing more work at a lower salary. You can say if you like that it is not causing unemployment, as you can

it of the iniquitous overtime systematically forced year in & year out upon the women in the Savings Bank Dept of the P. O. In reality it is blocking up a channel of employment at the expense ~~of~~ <sup>to</sup> the public not only of the health of the workers but of ~~hard~~ <sup>actual</sup> cash also as overtime ~~workers~~ <sup>must be</sup> paid at a higher rate.

### Anti Woman

In addition to the unemployment due to Trade depression some women ~~are~~ a large number I think are unable to get work on account of the opposition of men rivals in trade. I am not speaking of those who have been denied admission to a Trade by the rules of a Trade Union but of those who like the women ~~taxi~~ <sup>motor</sup> drivers suffer from the pressure of male public opinion. Women taxi drivers have been chivied off the streets & in some parts of the

country

Professional women drivers do not dare to face the very dangerous opposition of the men. This is an aftermath of the war. The actual dismissals of women to make way for men seem now to be over, but in some occupations (notably book-keeping & accountancy) ~~the~~<sup>a</sup> woman who loses her job has small prospect of getting another however good her qualifications may be because the vacancies are all being reserved for men.

I fear Madam Chairman that I have inflicted a dreary discourse upon you. I have finished now, all but one ~~part~~. There is a matter on which the experience of our Employment Bureau may be of interest. The women who



come to us are non-industrial workers of every class from highest to lowest. They all come for work, or failing work for advice. No financial help is given. We work on a fairly large scale. We have now nearly 50,000 women on our Register, about 2000 on our live register & we <sup>are</sup> interviewing ~~between~~ 50 + 60 every working day. I cannot sit down without saying one word about these women as human beings.

It is one thing to read in a list of statistics that so many hundreds thousand women are out of work & another thing to be face to face with a pale girl who tells you "you see I must get a job because my mother has nothing but what I earn".

It is one thing to read in the paper that the depression in employment shows no improvement & another thing to come into contact week after week with the sufferers. To see them as they come first fresh from a job, bright healthy, nicely dressed & full of hope & then to watch the decline as time goes on & they fail to get work. They lose their health, they lose their looks, they lose their spirits, their clothes get shabbier & shabbier their persons get more & more neglected. Those who work in the Bureau have a hard task to keep up a sufficient stock of courage & cheerfulness to meet the demand. What supports them is their profound admiration of the qualities displayed by the women themselves.

In this all are agreed. - I do not say that all these women are angels - I don't even say that all can be relied on to act in strict accordance with the accepted conventions of business life but I do say they are brave - I do say they are unselfish - I do say they somehow manage to maintain a calm objective vision, an unbiassed judgment even on matters most vital to their self interest. I recently came across the case of a girl of 17 who on hearing that a fellow worker had been dismissed to reduce staff, went quietly to her employer & told him that as that particular girl had a mother to support & she had not

she thought it would be advisable to dismiss herself & keep the other. The employer did as she told him. And in this case the two women were not friends. It was a piece of mere abstract justice.

And who that saw it can forget the spirit in which the women stepped aside for the men who came back from the war. "They had to do it" you may say, yes, but there are more ways ~~of~~ than one of doing things & this thing was perfectly done.

There was an alacrity, a grace, <sup>the gesture</sup> ~~it~~ <sup>with a smile</sup> ~~to oblige~~, they ~~were~~ throwing away a half smoked cigarette, & I verily believe that half the nation was

deceived into believing that they  
 were really delighted to be giving  
 up their places. I am tempted  
 to make a remark upon the  
<sup>response</sup>~~reaction~~ they <sup>met with</sup> got but I must try  
 + live up to their standard +  
 curb my baser passions. I will  
 only say that with the coming  
 of these women into the public  
 life of the nation is coming a  
 breath of fresh air, a disinterested  
 generous spirit which we may  
 surely take as a token of hope  
 in this supremely anxious  
 moment of our history.