



THE EMPLOYMENT  
OF  
MARRIED WOMEN

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# The Employment of Married Women

**D**URING the period of readjustment from war conditions and the extensive unemployment which has followed the peace, the question of the employment of married women whose husbands can support them has been raised in an acute form. The special instances in which public attention has been drawn to this matter are those of the dismissal of Dr. Miall Smith, one of the medical officers of the Metropolitan Borough Council of St. Pancras, and three women doctors in similar posts under the Glasgow Corporation. In both instances school cleaners and charwomen have been dismissed by the same authorities for the same reason, namely, that they were married women whose husbands were able to support them. The Labour Party has been asked what is its policy upon this subject, and the following report sets forth the position from their standpoint. The general policy of the Labour Party is set forth in the Bill introduced by them and carried through its third reading in the House of Commons against the Government in 1919, and in a resolution passed at the Labour Party Conference earlier in that year upon which the Bill was founded. The text of the resolution is as follows :—

That the Conference holds that the changes in the position of women during the war, in which they have rendered such good service, and the importance of securing to women, as to men, the fullest possible opportunities for individual development, make it necessary to pay special attention in the reconstruction programme to matters affecting women ; and, in particular, the Conference affirms :—

(a) With regard to industry on demobilisation—

- (1) That work or maintenance at fair rates should be provided for all women displaced from their employment to make way for men returning from service with the forces or other national work.

(2)

- (2) That full inquiry should be made into trades and processes previously held to be unhealthy or in any way unsuitable for women, but now being carried on by them, with a view to making recommendations as to the conditions of their further employment in such trades.
  - (3) That all women employed in trades formerly closed to them should only continue to be so employed at trade union rates of wages.
  - (4) That trade unions should be urged to accept women members in all trades in which they are employed.
  - (5) That the principle of "equal pay for equal work" should be everywhere adopted.
- (b) With regard to civic rights—
- (1) That all legal restrictions on the entry of women to the professions on the same conditions as men should be abrogated.
  - (2) That women should have all franchises, and be eligible for election to all public bodies (including Parliament) on the same conditions as men.
  - (3) That systematic provision should be made for the inclusion of women in committees or commissions, national or local, dealing with any subjects that are not of exclusively masculine interest.
  - (4) That the present unjust provision of the income tax law, under which the married woman is not treated as an independent human being, even in respect of her own property or earnings, must be at once repealed.

The clause in the Women's Emancipation Bill lays it down that :—

a woman shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage from holding any civil or judicial office or place of profit or trust under his Majesty, his heirs and successors, or under any authority or body corporate or unincorporate, deriving powers directly or indirectly from any Act of Parliament, Order in Council, Charter, or Franchise whatsoever.

Had this Bill been adopted instead of the far weaker measure of the Government which was used to "torpedo" it, it would not have been legal to dismiss Dr. Miall Smith or the women doctors in the employment of the Glasgow Corporation, though the position of school cleaners and charwomen is more doubtful. The resolution passed at the Third Annual Conference of London Labour Women in October, 1921, is the only expression of opinion from Labour women on this subject. It is as follows :—

(3)

That this Conference of Women, representing branches of Labour Organisations in London, strongly protests against the action of the St. Pancras Borough Council in dismissing their medical officer, Dr. Miall Smith, on her marriage, feeling that the women and children can ill spare such a gifted woman, and in either depriving her of legal marriage or preventing her from following her profession. The Conference also protests against the dismissal of married charwomen.

It may therefore be said that in principle the Labour Party has definitely declared itself against any discrimination against workers on the ground of sex or marriage.

The question which has arisen now, however, is not so much a sex as an unemployment question, and is of an economic character. The Labour Party has always advocated mothers' pensions for women with children dependent upon them, and full maintenance for unemployed workers. Because the State has not provided either of these, it often happens that certain classes of work are treated as almost a form of charity, and women with young children are employed as school or office cleaners, not in the ordinary way of business, but as a special privilege because they have children dependent upon them. Since the war the position has become more difficult because the widows of soldiers and sailors, who have pensions, have often been given preference as an act of patriotism.

The unemployment benefit for women is even smaller than for men. Unemployment has been so severe that large numbers have run out of benefit, and no public work that has been started has assisted in reducing the number of unemployed women, and no Government schemes have been opened for them except those provided in connection with the Prince of Wales's Fund and administered by the Central Committee on Women's Training and Employment.

But unemployment is so great and the economic stress is so severe that it is only natural for those who suffer from it to seek any possible way of distributing work that seems to them to redress the troubles from

which they suffer. Actuated by these feelings the cry has been raised that wherever a woman has a husband who can support her she should be dismissed and the job given to another woman. We believe that this course is a very dangerous one, both on the ground of principle and because of the hardship which may be created in individual cases.

On the ground of principle we believe it to be bad because it means:—

(1) An inquiry into the family affairs of every woman employed, into the man's wages, and usually into the relation between husband and wife as well. It would compel a woman to disclose her private affairs to her employers, and sometimes would cause great pain and difficulty because she would have to report, *e.g.*, that her husband was not living with her or supporting her properly to persons with whom she would not wish to discuss such personal matters. A few examples will show the effect of this.

- (a) Mrs. A was working for one public authority and her husband was known to be working for another. The amount of his wages was also known. Mrs. A was told that she ought to give up her job. She then had to confess that her husband had always treated her badly, and that he had never given her money on which to keep the children, for whom she had worked since the time of their birth.
- (b) A woman was dismissed on the ground that her husband was able to support her, in spite of the fact that her husband was a man of bad character with whom she refused to live. He was willing to have her come back to him, but she was not willing to go.

These unhappy affairs all became a subject of discussion for strangers. Such an inquisition into private personal affairs is not the business of an employer, and we deprecate very strongly making it the ground of employment.

(2) Such a system would be a bar against the employment of married women and reduce employment to the level of relief work. It would certainly tend to prevent the best person for the job being selected, and this is especially clear in the case of women doctors. No one

would deny that a married woman is apt to be more successful in maternity and child welfare work than a single woman. This is not altogether because of her greater experience, but largely because a mother will more easily have confidence and talk freely to a married woman.

(3) Even if the inquisitorial system is accepted, the uncertainty of the husband's employment makes the principle work badly. This is especially so in the case of such workers as school and office cleaners. A woman may be dismissed one week because her husband is in work, and a woman whose husband is unemployed be appointed in her place. By the end of the week the first husband may be out of work and the second be employed. In an inquiry made by Miss Susan Lawrence from married women employed by the L.C.C. as school cleaners, the following cases make this point clear:—

- (a) Mrs. P. "My husband has been out of work since August 9, 1920, so it leaves me the main support of my husband and three children and myself. Mr. P is always out of work."
- (b) Mrs. E. "My husband has been in and out of work for years, and I have three little ones to support."
- (c) Mrs. I. "My husband was unemployed for seven months, and at the present time is very uncertain where he is owing to the present state of affairs."
- (d) Mrs. D. "I am more than sorry to hear that the Council are thinking of putting off married women, especially mothers with young children, as I know no other work more fitted, as we have the middle day to care for our little ones. I was granted this work in April, 1912, on account of my husband being a casual dock worker."

The L.C.C. proposed to dismiss married women on all grades of employment, making an exception only of those whose husbands were totally or permanently incapacitated from supporting them. A periodical investigation was to be made into their position. The proposal was defeated chiefly as the result of this investigation made by Miss Susan Lawrence with regard to school cleaners. Her cases proved that, as one woman put it, "nobody is a school cleaner for fun," and all of them worked at that employment for family reasons which were perfectly valid. The following classes of

women at that time employed by the L.C.C. were exempted from dismissal because of marriage—school cleaners, helpers, bathing women attendants, and other women employed under the school cleaners' scheme, charwomen, ambulance attendants at special schools, supervisors of dining centres, domestic staff at lodging houses, and other grades of women staff with small duties who are employed in a non-resident capacity.

(4) The St. Pancras Borough Council showed the absurdity of this proposal from the other side when they dismissed Dr. Miall Smith because she had a husband who could support her. They stated that married applicants for the job would be considered if they had husbands who were dependent upon them, and further, that a single woman who applied for the post must agree to resign on marriage unless she married a man who was incapable of undertaking her support.

(5) It is impossible to apply the principle justly, for it cannot be extended to those who are their own employers, *e.g.*, dressmakers, washerwomen, &c. Nor could it be applied to artists. If two artists are husband and wife, neither can be prevented from receiving payment for their pictures, fees for concerts, or salaries as stage-players.

The experience of the Pensions Ministry (Issue Office) Substitution Committee shows the extreme hardship which must be suffered by married women who are to be retained in work. All are efficient clerks, and the trade union concerned reports to us that only thirty-eight married women have been passed for retention. Separated and deserted wives are treated as single women, and some of these have for the present been kept in employment, though they may be discharged in the future. In the thirty-eight cases in which the women are retained the husbands are all invalids or permanently disabled and unemployed. The only exceptions are ones who are earning small wages on account of some disablement. Here are a few typical instances. (a) Invalid husband of sixty, mother, son,

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and daughter to keep. (b) Epileptic husband, fits worsening, and will soon be totally dependent upon her. (c) Crippled husband and delicate son to keep. (d) Husband an ex-service man in an asylum as a result of war. (e) Blind husband to keep, also son who enlisted at seventeen and has been out of work two and a-half years since discharge. We would point out that in all these cases the woman is doing her own work and caring for her home, usually with an invalid, or more than one invalid, in that home. It can easily be imagined that if such hardships as these must be proved before the women are selected for retention, many must be discharged to fight a very severe battle with poverty.

The question is fundamentally an economic and not a sex one. The difficulties that have arisen to-day are due to widespread unemployment and failure to protect its victims. They can only be properly met by a scheme of widows' and mothers' pensions for all women who have dependent children and no breadwinner, by invalidity pensions, and by the prevention of unemployment, or failing that the maintenance of the unemployed.

[This report was prepared by the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations at the request of the Executive Committee of the Labour Party. It has been accepted by the organisations represented upon the committee with the exception of the Union of Post Office Workers, the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries, and the National Union of Clerks, who make certain qualifications. The Union of Post Office Workers state that "they have adopted as a policy for the Union that married women should not be retained in the Post Office service." They are therefore "unable to lend their support for such a policy for other organisations or industries, under the present social system, which in their opinion would merely increase the number of people on the labour market at the mercy of capitalist employers." The Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries, while they are in accordance with the general principles of the report, desire to state that, granted equal efficiency, women solely dependent on their earnings, whether married or not, should have preference for employment during times of excessive depression. The National Union of Clerks are in general agreement with the principles set forth, but add that a large proportion of their membership would, they believe, at the present time take the same view as the St. Pancras Borough Council in dismissing their Medical Officer of Health.]

W. T.