

331.2 396.1

TRACTS for the TIMES



III

The Relation between
the Wages of
Men and Women

Issued for

Private Circulation only by

THE GARTON FOUNDATION

3B Deans Yard, Westminster

M·CM·XIX

331.4210941 REL

TRACTS for the TIMES

III

The Relation between
 the Wages of
 Men and Women

IT is a commonplace to state that the average wages of women are far lower than those of men, but it would be a hazard to make any exact comparison between them. Trustworthy information about women's wages before the war is very scanty except in the highly organized cotton industry. The voluntary wage census of 1906 is the best available source, but it covered trades employing little more than half the occupied men, and only one-third of the occupied women; and the actual return dealt with only about one-third of the workpeople in the trades investigated. Where standard rates prevail, as in most men's trades, this proportion is probably typical of the whole trade; but with women, whose wage conditions were not far removed from chaos, it is likely that employers paying the worst wages preferred not to furnish returns. We cannot, therefore, feel confident that the figures collected represent the true level of women's wages; but they are the best that we have, and it may be useful to quote some of them as showing the wages paid in several of the most important industries in 1906.

380013224X

AVERAGE WEEKLY EARNINGS
 MEN'S WAGES

NATURE OF TRADE	For full time	For less or more than full time
Textiles	28/1	27/3
Building and Wood-working	32/-	30/8
Food, Drink, Tobacco	26/4	26/5
Paper and Printing	34/4	34/2
Metals, Engineering, Ships	33/11	32/3
Public Utility Services	28/1	27/-
Railway Service	24/4	26/8

WOMEN'S WAGES

NATURE OF TRADE	For full time	For less or more than full time
Textiles	15/5	14/10
Clothing	13/6	13/-
Food, Drink, Tobacco	11/5	11/3
Paper and Printing.	12/2	11/11

These figures show that women usually brought home at the end of the week rather less than half a man's wage.

This proportion is confirmed by the rates fixed by the Trade Boards when they first came into existence shortly before the war. In all the trades the men's rate, if there was one, was fixed at 6d. per hour; the women's ranged from 2½d. to 3½d.

This does not mean that women received one-half men's pay for the same work. With a few important exceptions, such as weaving, it is broadly true to say that before the war men and women were at work on different processes. No general comparison

between the value of their products is therefore safe. Who can say how a cutter's work compares in value with that of a fine sewer, or the work of a woman burler and mender with that of a man dyer and finisher?

Competition between the sexes is not eliminated by the fact that they do not do the same work; it is only obscured. Instead of the direct clash which compels attention, it resolves itself into a series of oblique reactions, the more harmful in that they are less obvious.

But the market value of the product is only one of the many factors that determine the actual wage paid. If we examine these factors we shall readily see how it is that women's wages have been so low.

Those who first study theory and then go out and see the facts of industrial life cannot fail to be struck by the powerful influence of custom on all working conditions, and not least on wages. Women's traditional work is in the home, where it has been paid for in money only partly, as in the case of domestic servants, or not at all, as in the homes of nearly all working men. Most women worked as hard as any one in the community; but they received in return no money wages, or only quite small sums, and this had a depressing effect on the money wages of those who went out to work under conditions evolved to suit men and boys. Every one—men, women, and employers alike—by a natural though false deduction from the facts, felt women's work to have less value than men's, since the money reward of most of the work they saw them do was so much less: therefore it came to be considered right and proper that the general wage level for women should be lower than that for men. Further, it has never been felt as a disgrace that a woman or girl should be partially supported by

other members of the family, even when she is fully occupied in industry; for her sister who, it may be, does all the cooking, cleaning, and so forth for the family, makes no money contribution at all to the family income, and is apparently entirely supported by the others. This habit of mind, springing from an incomplete understanding of the facts of domestic life, has made possible the sweated and parasitic trades which are a disgrace to our country. Custom yields but with difficulty to reason; custom embedded in the substance of a century-old industrial system is doubly hard to change.

The other factors determining wages are strongly influenced by all those facts of life which distinguish woman from man. They handicap her heavily as she works under conditions arranged by men to suit their own nature and habits, and attempts to adjust her nature and habits to theirs. These distinguishing facts of life are too varied to name and too subtle to analyse; we all know some of their manifestations; they are perhaps most simply summed up by speaking of the prospect and fact of marriage and motherhood.

Consider the effect of marriage and motherhood on the other two chief factors in the wage bargain, namely the needs of the worker and the balance of power of the competitors for a share in the product. It seems a commonplace to say that a worker must be paid at least enough to enable him or her to maintain life if the industry is to continue. Yet even this apparently essential minimum is not always obtained by women. In fact, it is likely that about one-fifth of the women employed in industry before the war received less than ten shillings for a full week's work. We have seen how it is that these parasitic employments could continue to find workers.

But where a living wage is paid, that wage is

based in the case of a man on the needs of a family, in the case of a woman on those of an individual. The answer that first suggests itself to the question why women are paid less than men is always that "men have families to keep." Although for a variety of reasons some men have no one dependent on them, and some women have heavy family responsibilities, yet it is true that the renewal of the race is paid for by the community almost entirely through the wages paid to men. Until we carry much farther the endowment of childhood which has already begun in the form of free education, school meals, municipal milk depots, extra allowances for children, and other such forms of assistance, this fact, that women are seldom the sole support of others besides themselves, while most men have a family dependent on them, will continue to hold down women's wages, and the woman who from necessity or choice becomes the family breadwinner will be the exceptional victim of an arrangement designed to meet the average case.

The prospect and fact of marriage and motherhood have a very powerful influence too on the group of factors which go to make up that balance of economic power, that perpetual tug-of-war to which the wages question of to-day seems to be reduced. The workers who are the best organized and can withhold their labour at will, those whose skill and experience is the result of years of work and who cannot be replaced at short notice, those whose adaptability enables them to change their employment to suit the needs of the hour, will always be able *ceteris paribus* to obtain the highest wages. It is easy to see how their womanhood handicaps women in all these respects. The expectation and even the hope of marriage will deter most girls from seeking, and their employer from giving them, that

training and experience which would enable them to reach the higher levels of industrial life. At any moment they may drop out of the ranks; the time and trouble spent in gaining a particular form of industrial skill may have been wasted, and perhaps valuable material and tools also. Even if the women wish to resume their old trade after a period of child-bearing, not only will they find the restraints of factory discipline irksome, but the very process in which they had acquired skill may have been superseded.

Again, a woman or girl, even when wholly employed in industry, is seldom entirely free from domestic duties. This additional strain is bound to react unfavourably in many ways on her industrial work. She is apt to be less ambitious, less alert, less adaptable than her brother. Again, she undoubtedly possesses less physical strength and appears to have less physical endurance, but how far this is due to insufficient nourishment, to unsuitable conditions of work and to the extra home duties it is impossible to say. Statistics on this subject based on absence from work are apt to be misleading, since women and girls are kept at home by the illness of other members of the family as well as by their own. Nevertheless, the fact remains that all these reasons make her of less value to her employer, both actually and potentially.

The shortness of a woman's industrial life leads to a natural disinclination to take her trade seriously and to organize in the interests of herself and her fellow-workers; thus women's trade unions have been hard to found and harder still to keep together when the first wave of enthusiasm has passed.

Here are reasons enough why women's wages are low. The action of their male fellow-workers has not improved matters. Naturally alarmed at the

prospect of finding themselves undercut in the labour market by their own sisters and daughters, they have usually adopted what seemed the direct method of protecting their just interests, and have taken steps of varying kinds and varying degrees of effectiveness to keep women out of their trades. This has had the result of lowering wages still further in the overcrowded women's trades and of creating an ever greater army of potential blacklegs, a most tempting source of docile labour to employers who can use it.

The war has effected a real improvement in the position of women wage-earners as a result of the urgent demand for their labour. Their money wages have risen considerably, but it would need careful inquiry into the increase in the cost of their living to know to what extent their real wages have improved. The minimum wage awarded them by Government Orders enables them to buy no more at increased prices than their meagre wage of previous days, while tea and bread and margarine are no longer a sufficient diet for the heavier work required of them. Yet many women have earned higher real wages than before; for they have been given training, they have had opportunities of enlarging their experience, they have won skill, they did not need to fear dismissal and unemployment, they saw the value of organization and had a little money to spare for a trade union subscription. Faced with the simple problem of women's direct competition, the men have realized how dangerous to themselves were the low wages of women, and have demanded that they should be paid by the same standard when doing the same work. Thus many influences have combined to raise the level of women's pay during war-time. Some of these are disappearing as the pressure relaxes and the demand for labour grows less intense. But though wages may go down, the changed mental attitude of all

concerned will persist. One of the most serious effects of women's low wages was that the woman herself adopted the low estimate set on her work by others. The testing time of war, in which she has proved herself worthy, has given her a self-respect and confidence which will not allow her to relapse into her former position. Public opinion has been stirred, and will no longer acquiesce in flagrant injustice; while in the franchise women have now an instrument for securing economic justice which they will hardly fail to use.

What change has been made by the war in the relation between men's and women's wages? Roughly speaking, the position is this. August 4th, 1914, has been taken as a basic date. All work usually done at that date by men was to be paid at men's rates: all work usually done at that date by women at a lower women's rate. Every new process has had to be assigned, according to its nature, to one category or the other. It is obviously no more than an emergency device. Even during the war it has resulted in absurd anomalies, such as that of women on some processes classed as women's earning only half the wages of others who put forth no more effort but were engaged on work which happened to be men's before the war. It cannot be a permanent solution, not only because it is contingent upon the war system of controlled establishments, but even more because it rests upon a purely arbitrary basis.

Women will no longer be content to be kept out of better paid and more interesting work because superficial observation or a preconceived theory declares it to be unsuitable for them. It often is unsuitable because no attempt has been made to adjust external conditions to women's nature. Such devices as an alteration in the length of the shifts, or in the height of the bench at which

they work, the payment of a wage with which they can procure the necessary amount of food and domestic help, are sometimes all that is necessary to enable women to undertake so-called men's work without strain. Hitherto there has been very little careful scientific inquiry to discover what trades, if carried on under healthy conditions, are unsuitable to women by reason of their womanhood. Thus far special harm to women has been found only in processes involving the use of lead.

But it is not only, and indeed not least, the women working in industry who suffer from their lower standard of pay. It is a far greater danger to working men and their wives and families. Working women long ago recognized that the level of men's wages is more important to them than their own; but men and women alike have failed to see that the low level of women's wages reacts unfavourably on the earnings of men. The existence of a large reserve of willing workers accustomed to a lower standard of pay and available as an additional source of labour supply weakens the bargaining position of men, and turns the thoughts of employers to cheap labour rather than to improved methods as means of lowering the cost of production.

The demands of women workers as formulated during several recent disputes are for "equal pay for equal work." The formula requires definition. If it means equal pay for the same job, the result of enforcing the principle would be that all jobs in which men are for any reason more advantageous to an employer would tend to be closed to women, who would be relegated to other and worse-paid kinds of work. If it means equal pay for the same output, with particular reference to piece-work and piece-rates, the narrowness of its application reduces its value, and even so it is likely to work out in a sex-

division of tasks, for the reasons indicated in earlier paragraphs. The only rendering which would give women an equal chance with men, so far as the private employer is concerned, is "equal pay for the same economic value." This falls far short of equal pay for the same job, but it is a great improvement on what obtained before the war, and it has the advantage of being workable in a still competitive world. It rules out the payment of women at less than their economic value because "men have families to keep," or because "they will work for that—why give them more?" Further, it would operate against that tendency to the segregation of the sexes in industry, which is not only undesirable in itself, but which also makes it exceedingly difficult to assess the economic value of women's work in relation to men's. Where men and women are at work on entirely different products the market price of the product gives no accurate measure of the economic value of the work put into it, since it is influenced by the customary rate of wages paid to the sex employed upon it.

In attaining this objective the leaders of industrially employed women, whether in the trade unions or outside them, will have to play a principal part. They will have to insist that home conditions should be such as to enable the wife and mother to stay in charge of the home instead of being driven to supplement the family income by industrial wage-earning; they will have to create a strong public opinion against the daughters of the more comfortable classes "working for pin-money." They will have to see that women workers are given opportunities for acquiring skill and experience, are encouraged to feel a pride and pleasure in their work, are inspired with greater self-respect and self-confidence. They will have to take care that the field of women's industrial

employment is not unduly narrowed, whether by the concerted action of men workers or by ill-considered action on their own part. Above all, they will have to extend and strengthen the organization of women workers.

A heavy responsibility rests on the men's trade unions. They can do much to raise the economic standard of women without endangering their own. They will have to resist the temptation to ring-fence their own preserves or to insist on "equal pay for equal work" as a means of effecting the same end. The interest of organized labour as a whole in social and economic justice transcends the selfish and short-sighted interests of sections, and it is for men and women in their respective or common associations to work out and work for a policy directed towards the common good.

The Government can set an example by fixing scales of salaries and wages irrespective of sex, and granting allowances for dependants in its own services; it can stipulate that its own contractors shall do likewise; and it can use its influence in all cases where minimum wages are statutorily fixed to secure that the former unwarrantable disparity between men's and women's rates shall no longer obtain. Municipalities can in their own sphere keep the same ends in view.

The private employer has a direct responsibility. He will do well to respond to the new aspirations of women workers by providing conditions which will enable them to work to best advantage; and in the case of women no less than of men will most wisely seek economy in better training and improved methods rather than in low wages.

But the ultimate sanction resides in public opinion. The low wages paid to women were only possible because public opinion condoned them. A more enlightened public opinion can make them impossible.