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IV.

The Dangers of Unequal Payment.

1. THE RISE OF UNEQUAL PAYMENT.

The general employment of women in industry dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the demand for labour in the mills gave women an immediate industrial contact, and established for them an economic position in family and national life. No labour organisations existed then, and trade competition forced wages to their lowest level. Women's labour proved the cheapest supply on the market, for women were driven to work to supplement the meagre wages of the household as an alternative to starvation for themselves and their families. As a result, lower rates were paid to them, and the system of unequal payment became customary.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, women began to fill the lower and poorly-paid posts in commerce, and, in 1871, the Civil Service opened its doors to them.

In the twentieth century, and particularly since the war, women can claim to have secured a well-defined status in business, in the professions and in industry, but their traditional under-payment still continues. The increase in their employment is obvious in the commercial world, the distributive trades, the Civil Service and the Teaching Profession; that is, in those services where there is no call for great display of muscular strength. The woman often finds it easier to-day to get work in such occupations as these, the chief contributory factor being unequal rates of payment. Women have become compulsory black-legs.

2. THE EFFECTS OF UNEQUAL PAYMENT.

The adverse effects of unequal payment are felt in ever-widening circles, touching not only women but men, and finally having disastrous repercussions upon the general wage standards of the community.

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(a) On Women.

Unequal pay has seriously affected the whole position of women in society. It has been directly responsible for strengthening the idea that women are the inferior sex; firstly, by thrusting a lower standard of life upon them, and secondly, by ensuring that subservience which becomes automatic in all lower-paid sections of the community. Wage standards to-day are not only social standards, but are regarded as standards of general worth and efficiency; and, where the sexes are concerned, the rate paid to the man is the generally accepted criterion of the worth of the particular job. Woman's traditional humility, and her seemingly innate inferiority complex, are often the direct results of servility and timidity, bred in her through national insistence on her lower worth due to years of under-payment.

This leaves its mark upon her physically as well as psychologically. Economic poverty lies at the root of the supposedly fewer needs of women. Lower wages force upon them a lower standard of life. Statistics prove that under-nourishment is much more prevalent among women than among men, and ill-health and a feeling of insecurity are responsible for a good many cases of break-down.

A third serious effect of unequal pay is the restrictions it has placed upon women's work. In the early nineteenth century women came to be reckoned as non-adult, and were classed with children and young persons. Nearly all legislation on their behalf has since been coloured by this discrimination. The fear of women's competition, a direct result of unequal payment, was partly responsible for the rise of restrictive legislation, which produced a serious curtailment of their employment in many directions.

Such effects not only apply to women as individuals, but have their repercussions in national expenditure on questions concerning women. The affairs of women are of small importance in Government budgeting. Lower contributions to State Insurance are expected of them, and lower grants are made to them, while state expenditure on such vital questions as Infant Welfare and Maternity are correspondingly low. In refusing to pay a similar basic wage to men and women whose work is similar, the Government sets an example widely and willingly copied by private employers, and its attitude towards women's wages is reflected in its methods of dealing with all questions concerning women.

(b) On Men.

That the position of men is being jeopardised by this growing body of underpaid women workers is now being generally recognised. The employment of women at cheaper rates is making it increasingly difficult for men to obtain jobs in those services where the sexes meet on a level. Scientific equipment is rapidly becoming general in the lighter trades, and here women's manual dexterity gives them an advantage. Many husbands to-day, are forced into unemployment, while their wives are taken on at lower wages, and this creates bitterness among men, besides forcing women to be unwilling black-legs in the labour market.

(c) On General Wage Standards.

Finally, the establishment of differing rates of payment for men and women leads inevitably to the depression of the standard of remuneration for the whole group; and this, perhaps, is its most disastrous effect. Such under-cutting has its roots far back in history. A large supply of cheap labour jeopardises the position of every worker, and reacts adversely upon wage standards, for where such a supply is available, employers tend to give it preference; the wage standard is thus set for the community in general, and any attempt to secure improvement is defeated at the outset.

3. CONCLUSION.

Josephine Butler said that economics lie at the very root of practical morality. Old habits are strong ones, but enlightened public opinion to-day, which does not believe in low wages, must be made to see that increasing competition between the sexes based on two standards of payment postulates a condition of life which is contrary to the well-being of the whole community.

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