

# workforce changes

Did you know that the workforce in western Europe is changing in gender balance? It is common knowledge that the number of women entering the workforce has grown markedly over the last twenty years or so, but it is less widely known that in some European countries the number of men in the workforce is actually declining.

First a point of clarification: the workforce includes all those who are employed and all those who are 'unemployed' i.e. 'available for work'. It does not include all adults of working age. Full-time students, full time housewives, people who have taken early retirement etc. are not included. At times of low unemployment or labour shortage more people are likely to enter the workforce, whereas at times of high unemployment people drop out of the workforce.

Traditionally housewives have not been counted in as part of the workforce since they were neither in paid employment nor were they actively seeking employment outside the home. Where once their absence from the labour market was taken for granted, today fewer married women are likely to confine themselves to homemaking and childrearing. At the same time, though more slowly, it is becoming more common for men to take on the work of homemaking and childrearing. Older sex roles are breaking down.

This breakdown is to be welcomed. Traditional views that 'a woman's place is in the home' and 'a man's place is out at a job' had very inhibiting, oppressive effects in that they limited each sex in terms of life-experience. Women were discouraged from thinking of their future in terms of a career, job choices, financial independence, and indeed from envisaging any kind of



future for themselves other than that of housewife and mother. Men could not think of establishing their identity in any way other than through 'having a job', and so were rendered extra vulnerable to a loss of self-identity and self-confidence in the event of any kind of prolonged unemployment.



It is no harm to underline this point, since in some quarters women are scapegoated for causing high unemployment, allegedly taking up jobs that men would otherwise hold. Women, married or single, have as much a right to jobs as have men. Furthermore a balanced human life needs both kinds of activity - a job to go out to and the equally valuable work of homemaking, childrearing and community activity to come back to. The breakdown of the traditional sexual division of labour may help this development.

Returning to what is happening in western European labour markets, however, not all is rosy in the garden, since there is some reason to think that men are being pushed or discouraged out of the workforce, and are giving up hope of ever being employed. In the UK in 1987 male unemployment fell by 244,000, but male employment only rose by 162,000; and 1988 witnessed a drop in unemployment of 369,800, but a rise in employment of only 124,000. This means that in 1987 some 82,000 men and in 1988 some 245,800 men 'disappeared' from the labour market.

In the case of women the opposite trend was observed. In the UK in 1987, 130,000 more women gained jobs than is accounted for by the fall in female unemployment; and in 1988 female unemployment dropped by 175,000 but female employment rose by 272,000. It seems that the composition of the workforce in the UK is changing with more women entering the job market and more men leaving it. It is difficult to make a direct comparison with the Republic. We can note nevertheless the fact that between 1979 and 1986 the number of men in employment declined by 91,000 while the number of women increased by 15,000. So perhaps similar trends are at work in the Irish workforce.

A word of caution - the trend towards employing more women and fewer men has often been marked by a transition from unionised to non-unionised labour, along with a reduction in wage levels, and the expansion of part-time employment. The need to fight for fair wages and the right to unionise, and for the extension of employment protection to part-time workers, are common issues around which womens groups and trade unions could unite.