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A Study in Women's Wages

Author(s): Helen Bosanquet

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A STUDY IN WOMEN'S WAGES.

THERE is probably no part of the labour market which is in such confusion, from an economic point of view, as that occupied by the women workers of London. On the one hand we have a constantly increasing demand for women in skilled industries, good training easily obtainable, and fair wages offered; on the other hand, a chaotic mass of unskilled women and girls earning considerably less than a subsistence. The demand for domestic servants grows more intense, the wages higher and higher; the numbers who are willing to go into service decline. Good dress-makers and milliners seek in vain for apprentices to learn their trade; in the laundries there is always a dearth of ironers, however high the wages offered. It is easy for any girl of respectable habits to get the training which will enable her to earn from 15s. to 20s. or 30s. a week; and yet thousands are earning 5s. to 7s. a week with no prospect of anything better. It is not altogether a question of working for a time without wages; such is the demand for girls that in many trades an initial wage of 4s. to 6s. is paid during learning, often as much as will be earned in an unskilled trade. Nor is it a question of counterbalancing advantages in the badly paid trades, for the skilled trades are both less arduous, and are carried on under pleasanter and healthier conditions; and yet, though no doubt the numbers who are self-supporting does increase, we continue to find the same insuperable reluctance in women and girls to become skilled workers. The way in which the girls leaving the Board Schools drift at once into the lower walks of industry is familiar to any one who has the opportunity of watching them.

Moreover, the opening of skilled industries does not seem to improve (as by the laws of competition it should do) the position of those who do relatively unskilled work. Any adventurous jam-maker can be sure, by settling in London, of getting as many female workers as he likes for about 7s. a week—certainly

not a subsistence wage in London ; and having got them he may treat them pretty much as he likes. He may turn them off for weeks or months in slack times ; they will be there as soon as he chooses to open his doors again. He may work them day and night in busy seasons until they are broken down with fatigue and sleeplessness ; and they will agree with the law which says it is all right. He may make them work under conditions fatal to health, and they will take it as all in the day's work. The one thing which will never happen is that he should be "short of hands."

It is the same with most of the unskilled trades which are carried on by women who are earning less, sometimes far less, than a subsistence wage ; and the reason for such an unsatisfactory position ought, if possible, to be made clear.

The question resolves itself mainly into two points ; the supplementation of wages and want of skill ; and these hang together so intimately that it is difficult to know sometimes which to regard as cause and which as effect, even in particular cases. If women cannot earn enough to keep themselves, obviously they must be kept alive from other sources ; while so long as it is assumed that they will be kept alive from other sources, reluctance to spend time upon acquiring skill will continue, and want of skill will even have a market value as a qualification for external help. It is the same problem which was presented in connection with men's wages under the old Poor Law ; and it may be that the remedy lies in the same direction.

I am liable here to be met by the objection that the supplementation of women's wages is of a different nature, and that the married woman and the young girl living at home will always tend to keep wages below subsistence level by their competition in the labour market. But in London, at any rate, I do not think that this family supplementation is the most important element in the question. Up to a certain age, while a girl may be supposed to be still learning her work, or not yet come to her full powers, it is right and necessary that she should have her earnings supplemented by the family, and the fact will have no tendency to lower the wages of fully competent workers. After that age it is very customary for the older girls to leave the crowded home, especially if they are of a rougher class. Those who do stay will more often be in the position of helping than of being helped ; the quiet steady girl who is earning good money helps to bring up the younger ones, or contributes to her

parents' support. In short, the skilled workers supplement the family income; the unskilled largely shift for themselves.

There remains the competition of married women, and this no doubt is serious, especially in the less skilled trades. But it must be remembered that even the married women are not always working for mere "pocket-money"; often, and more especially in the lower classes of labour, they are working to maintain both themselves and their families, husbands included; and if their needs were any measure of their earnings, they should set a high standard. Again, if the married women are free to take a low wage, they are also free to stand out for a high one; and in the few cases I have come across where the men of the family are doing well and the wife also is working, she is working at a good trade and earning good money.

The supplementation which comes through the Poor Law and Charity is a far more serious matter, and it is this which I propose to consider.

If you send a circular round to Boards of Guardians to ask whether they are supplementing women's earnings, they will of course answer no. But if a systematic inquiry could be undertaken by some one with authority to review all the cases, it would be found that an immense amount of the relief given to women is in supplementation of wages.

I have before me a return of all the relief given during three months to women in an East London Union, where the administration may fairly be called typical of the average. That is to say, out-door relief is neither greatly restricted nor yet given recklessly. The list includes 314 women, and the relief consists in the great majority of cases of a weekly allowance varying from 2s. to 5s. 6d. The first thing to note is that a very large proportion of the recipients, 275, are over 60 years of age; 69 of them indeed are over 80. Now it may be maintained that at 60 years of age women are past earning their living, and may be considered as out of the labour market. One could wish this were true; the spectacle of these old women toiling on into extreme old age is a very sad one, but the fact remains that most of them work to the very last. Of the 275 women over 60, those who represented themselves as still earning were 246.

Again, if this earning consisted only in semi-domestic work, such as an old woman would naturally do in her daughter's home, or among the neighbours, one might certainly hold that they were outside the labour market, and that the work they do would be done by their employers themselves if the old women

were not there to do it for a few pence. But even this is far from being the case. Most of them are engaged at work at which other women are striving to earn a full living. Here is a list of some of the occupations, putting first those which are of a more domestic nature :—minding child, nursing, errands, cleaning and charing, washing and mangling, needlework, letting rooms, hawking, tailoring, matchbox-making, shoe-making, box-making, bonnet-shape-making, cotton-winding, silk-winding, steelwork, flour-bag-making, umbrella mending, doll dressing, toy-making, weaving, tie-making, second-hand clothing, bag-making, trimmings, waterproof work, paper-flower-making, brush-drawing.

The earnings at these trades are extremely low, to put the average at 3s. is probably rather high. The relief which the women receive varies, as I have said, from 2s. to 5s. 6d., again with an average of about 3s., so that a sum of £37 a week, little short of £2,000 a year (considerably more if we add the women under 60) is spent from the rates in supplementation of earnings in this one parish. There are 30 Unions in London, 3 of which give no out-relief, while others give more freely than the one in question, so that probably something like £60,000 a year is the amount of the subsidy which the London ratepayer makes to London employers.

But the subsidy from the rates is not the only one. Looking down our list we find a considerable number of the old women acknowledging allowances from charitable sources also; 1s. a week from the church, 8s. 9d. a month from the Aged Pilgrims' Friend Society, 2s. a week from Miss G., 1s. a week from the Radical Club, and 6d. a week from the sewing-class, 2s. 6d. from the chapel, and 1s. and groceries from the church; such are some of the entries, and it is probable that unacknowledged resources are also considerable.

The number of women under 60 who are receiving relief is small in this parish, where the help given to young widows generally takes the form of taking their children into the schools. But of the 39 on the list most have trades, and 16 are actually working whilst in receipt of relief, not earning enough to support themselves of course, as that would be a disqualification for relief.

In another parish, of which I have seen the lists, out-relief is given to a large number, both of old women and of young widows. To the latter it is given in respect of their children, and this again complicates the question. It may be said that if

these women are burdened with children to support, the out-door relief cannot be said to supplement their earnings, but merely to put them in the same position as women without children, so that they compete with them on equal terms. If this were how it really worked we should expect to find these women earning at least subsistence wages. As a matter of fact they seldom earn anything that could fairly be called so. Like the old women, they work either at odds and ends of cleaning and washing, or at trades which might almost be called Poor Law trades, so largely do those engaged in them have their wages supplemented from the rates. The relief given is for the most part a mere dole, something like 2s. 6d. a week; often less, sometimes more, very seldom adequate to the maintenance of the four or five children in respect of whom it is supposed to be given. If now one asks why the women receiving this insignificant help should almost always be doing poor work, we shall find our answer in the effect of the relief upon the expectations of the women themselves. They think, and for the most part rightly, that if they were earning good wages, the parish relief would be stopped; so that it generally happens, literally, that their income is smaller with the relief than it would have been without. I have tested this sometimes—of course under careful supervision—by inducing the guardians to stop the relief, with the consequence that the woman's income was soon doubled or trebled.

Again, there is the circumstance of the woman's having to attend at the relief offices. Not only does this come as an interruption to regular work, but she meets there, and indeed has often to spend some hours in company with, women engaged in these Poor Law trades, and it is inevitable that in many cases her ambition sinks to the level of theirs.

It may be urged that even so it is better that the woman should do only occasional work, and have the time to keep home and children nice. Unfortunately this is not how it works out. Long experience teaches us that the homes of those who receive Poor Law relief are almost always more neglected than those of the independent woman, however hard the latter may have to work. Partly, no doubt, because now, as in the days of the 1834 Poor Law report, "in the pauper's habitation you will find a strained show of misery and wretchedness"; but also because these Poor Law trades are largely carried on by home work, and there is nothing which may be so fatal to the cleanliness and comfort of a home as the introduction of industrial work.

Turn now to a parish where out-relief is given freely. The

guardians here are jealous of criticism, and I have not been able to see their lists; but I have looked through the papers of the Charity Organisation Society in that district for a year, and will quote as typical a few of the many instances I came across. It must be remembered that it is exceptional for cases receiving Poor Law relief to come under the notice of the Charity Organisation Society, so that those I have seen form a very small proportion of the whole number receiving parish relief.

- 13,647, age 69, fur-finisher, earns 8*s.* to 13*s.*, and for the last 2 years has had parish relief in slack seasons from Christmas to Easter, and at other times when out of work.
- 13,612, age 32, widow, washing and cleaning, earns 3*s.* 6*d.*, out-relief 3*s.*, 2 children, 7 and 4, rent 2*s.* 6*d.*, 4 weeks due.
- 13,650, age 68, widow, chair-caning 2*s.*, parish 3*s.*, single son at home in work, daughter in same house, does chair-caning and washing, parish 6*s.*, 3 children.
- 13,580, age 26, married (husband in prison for drunken assault, can earn 5*s.* 10*d.* a day), washing 4*s.*, out-relief 5*s.*, has had it before when husband in prison for same reason, 4 children.
- 13,558, age 34, machinist, 5*s.*, cleaning for mission 3*s.*, parish 4*s.* 6*d.*, 4 children.
- 13,522, age ?, needlework 3*s.*, parish 3*s.*
- 13,518, age 76, button-holing 3*s.*, parish 3*s.* 6*d.*
- 13,653, mother and daughter, age 43 and 18, fur-workers, earn for about 3 months in the year 8*s.* to 12*s.* between them, then have out-relief 4*s.* 6*d.*
- 16,686, age 61, machinist, earns 9*s.* to 16*s.* in the season; in slack times has out-relief 3*s.*
- 13,380, age 35, deserted by husband, 2 children, earns about 3*s.* by washing, parish 5*s.*
- 13,368, age 34, married, 4 children, bootmaking 5*s.* to 6*s.*, parish 6*s.*
- 13,286, age 63, canvas bag maker, "earns enough to keep herself when coals and rent are paid," parish 3*s.*
- 13,223, age 62, fur-puller 3*s.* 6*d.* to 6*s.* 6*d.*, parish 4*s.*
- 13,208, age 52, mangling 1*s.*, son earns 14*s.*, daughter 6*s.*, parish 3*s.*, 2 children.
- 13,200, age 33, pickle factory 9*s.*, in slack times parish 3*s.*, 1 child.
- 13,171, age 42, widow, charing and washing 2*s.* 6*d.*, parish 5*s.*, 2 children, free dinners twice a week.
- 13,188, mother and daughter, age 42 and 19, both out of work, parish 7*s.*, refuse offer of good work.
- 13,064, age 39, married, sack and sail maker 12*s.*, parish 5*s.* when out of work.

One point which comes out very clearly from these cases is the extent to which the parish supports season trades, by giving relief in slack seasons. A true subsistence wage would, of course, cover the fluctuation of work all the year round; but in many of the women's industries in London the wage barely supports the

worker during busy times, and for several months she subsists on Poor Law relief and charity. There can, I think, be no doubt, that we have here certainly an aggravating cause of irregularity of employment. But for this supplementation in slack times the women and girls would be forced to turn to better work, or the employers would have to arrange their work so as to keep their workers all the year round.

The old women of course cannot turn to other work; but it may be seriously asked whether a system which encourages their working at all is not in itself a cruel one. Certainly their influence in the labour market seems to be all to the bad, in so far as they enable employers to carry on with irregular and badly paid labour.

There is indeed one industry which might fairly have been considered theirs, but which has been largely taken out of their hands by the fashionable philanthropic movement which takes the form of "Needlework Guilds." These Guilds are patronised by very distinguished personages; and the qualification for membership consists in the contribution of so many garments a year. It is an immensely popular form of charity, easy and cheap; and the poorer districts of London are literally flooded with clothing turned out by them. The "bit of sewing for the children" which might have been done by the old lady in the back room and paid for, is done instead by the young lady in Park Lane or the country house, and not paid for.

There are other philanthropic institutions which assist in ruining this particular industry, besides encouraging a lamentably low standard of living for the workers. I have before me a sensational appeal from one of these in which it is stated that £2 will keep one poor widow at work for six winter months.

"Our object is not to pauperise, but to help those honestly bearing up under the difficulties of their position by supplying work. The women are employed three hours per day on three days of the week; for each hour's work they are paid 2*d.* and a meal is supplied, so that they earn what they receive. . . The garments made are sold, and the women have the option of purchasing at reduced rates." In another part of the circular is this further appeal: "In the progress of this work, cloth, calico, print, shirting, and flannellette is used largely, also tea and sugar. Will friends remember us when they have such gifts for disposal? We can also make good use of all oddments." It seems to me that there must be considerable profit somewhere on this busi-

ness, in which charity supplies wages and raw material, and the finished product is sold at "almost cost price"; but it certainly does not go to the workers, who are earning at the rate of 1s. 6*d.* a week during the six winter months. This particular institution only turned out 1,500 garments during the season; but it is only one amongst many which, in the name of charity, are exploiting women's work and ruining what should be a good industry.

HELEN BOSANQUET