

### Myths about women - how statistics can help

Generalisations about women are often used to justify treating women differently from men, and in many cases are used to support discrimination against women. The assertions made may be true of some women but frequently have not been shown to be true of all or even the majority of women. Statistical evidence, particularly from official sources such as government statistics or surveys, often available to test whether the assertions are true or merely myths.

Examples of some of the more common myths held among the general population are given, as a stimulus to readers, to continue the discussion begun at the AGM. No doubt readers will be able to add to the list or be able to think of other myths which ought to be tested. Perhaps the Rad Stats group on Women and Statistics might be interested in pursuing this. (See p.23)

Most of the myths below come from the area of employment because this is an area where despite statistical evidence to the contrary myths persist and are important in perpetuating inequality for women at work.

#### 1. Women leave work to have babies and don't come back

Although most women do leave the labour market for a time at the birth of their first child the majority return to work eventually, although not necessarily to the same job or even the same kind of work. The General Household Survey (1980) shows that 71% of women with dependent children aged 10 or over were working. This is a minimum proportion of women who have returned to work at some time since having children as some will have started work and stopped again. The GHS also shows that 30% of women with a youngest child aged under 5 were working and this proportion has risen from 25% in 1973. However longitudinal data is required to show how many women return to work after having children and how long they take to do so. The DE/OPCS survey of Women and Employment\*, which is due for publication later this year, should provide this information.

#### 2. A woman's marital status is a crucial determinant of whether or not she works

The 1980 GHS shows that 62% of married women of working age were economically active compared with 72% of non-married women. However, this difference is not in fact due to marital status itself, but because married women are more likely than non-married women to have dependent children. It is the presence of children and in particular the age of the youngest child which is the crucial determinant of whether women work. From GHS data it can be shown that when the age of the youngest child (if any) and the woman's age are held constant married women are just as likely as non-married women to be working. However, married women are more likely than non-married women to work part time rather than full time.

\* Clearly, the discussion of many of these myths can be much fuller, after this publication.

3. Women are becoming unemployed at a greater rate than men.

This is false - - as official statistics show. Because women are less likely to register as unemployed than men, it is more appropriate to look at job losses. Comparing employees in June 1982 with June 1979, the ratio is smaller for men than for women, showing that men have suffered greater job losses than women. This is because job loss has been greater in manufacturing industries, which employ a high proportion of men, than in service industries, which employ a high proportion of women.

4. Most married women don't need to work

Evidence from a number of studies is showing increasingly that the wife's earnings are an essential contribution to the family income. (Although data from the GHS and Family Expenditure Survey could show what proportion of the family's income comes from the wife's earnings, this does not tell us the importance of these earnings.) The Women and Employment Survey is expected to examine this topic in more detail.

5. Since the Equal Pay Act, women's pay is gradually catching up with men's

This was true for some time immediately following the Act - women's hourly rates of pay rose on average to 74% of men's - but progress appears to have stopped. The situation is unlikely to improve much under the present Act, because men and women so often work in different occupations which cannot be compared.

6. In times of high unemployment, women who work are taking jobs away from men

There is no evidence that this happens to any extent because men and women are generally working in different jobs. Catherine Hakim has examined occupational segregation in detail, and has shown that women workers are predominately concentrated in a small number of occupations and industries, and even within occupations men and women do different work. Women tend to be concentrated in low paid, low status work, which is generally not sought by men. Moreover, around 40% of women workers work part time, whereas few men do so (5%). However, even if women did work in the same jobs as men, we would reject this myth - since its underlying premise is that men have greater rights than women.

7. Women have equal rights with men in the state social security scheme

The Equal opportunities legislation of the 1970's did not make it illegal to discriminate against women in the social security and taxation systems. With the former, this is now changing, at least in part. During 1983 and 1984, United Kingdom must conform to an EEC Directive on equal treatment of married women in the social security system. So, women will now be able to claim unemployment benefit for adult male dependents, on the same terms that currently men can for women. Men or women in two-parent households will now be able to claim Family Income Supplement (F.I.S.), as long as they satisfy conditions about earnings, hours, etc; men or women in married or cohabiting households will be able to claim Supplementary Benefit.

Equal Rights? In theory yes, but perhaps not so in practice, primarily for two reasons. First, extension of equal rights to some of the benefits (including unemployment) depends upon women being currently in work (eg. F.I.S.), or having a substantial work record (eg. unemployment benefit).

With the recession, these might be increasingly difficult conditions for women to satisfy:

it becomes <sup>more</sup> difficult to build up the necessary number of contributions over the relevant time period; and / or when women do work, it is part-time, rather than full-time, and this frequently excludes them from claiming benefit.

Second, certain non-contributory benefits--Invalid Care Allowance (I.C.A.), and Housewives Non-Contributory Invalidity Pension (HNCIP) (notorious for their discrimination against married women in the case of the former, and against all women in the case of the latter)- are not to be covered by the EEC Directive. Or at least, that is the argument of the D.H.S.S. The reason that they give is that the EEC Directive refers to equal treatment of benefits for people in the labour market: ICA and HNCIP cover people outside the labour market.

Thus, the situation as from 1984 will be equal rights for some women for some benefits.

Edited by Denise Lievesley

Contributions from Barbara Waine  
et al.