

A woman's place is in the...

ONE of the most fundamental divisions of labour in society is that between men and women.

According to the stylised view of the traditional family, the division of labour by sex usually has the man in the role of breadwinner and the woman in that of housekeeper.

In other words, men specialise in market work and women in household work.

Given the technologies and economic conditions of traditional, and semi-traditional societies, such arrangements were probably necessary. In particular, large families required women to spend considerable amounts of time in childbearing and childrearing activities. This prevented women's extensive participation in the labour force.

In modern societies this traditional division of labour by sex has gradually changed. The process is still continuing and appears to be universal.

In Hongkong, the labour force participation rate of women above the age of 15 rose from 37 per cent in 1961 to 44 per cent in 1976. During the same period, the labour force participation rate of



men in the same age bracket declined from 90 to 80 per cent.

These simple figures are indicative of a profound change which has taken place.

The gradual reversal of the traditional pattern of sex roles can in part be under-

stood as a result of both demand and supply forces which have altered the relative economic status of women.

On the demand side, changes in technology and the economic structure have increased the market opportunities available to women. In Hongkong, the development of manufacturing industries like textiles, garments and electronics, and the service sector in general, come easily to mind as areas where the employment of women is increasing rapidly.

On the supply side, two factors deserve special attention. The increase in educational opportunities available to women is perhaps the single most important factor which has contributed to the development of marketable skills among women.



About the author

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This is the 10th in a series of articles exploring "Working: Changes and Choices." In this article, Mr Wong Yue-chim, lecturer in economics and dean of students at the Chinese University's New Asia College, discusses division of labour by sex.

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For details about a Reader/Study Guide and article booklet, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Chinese University's Department of Extramural Studies, Courses by Newspaper, Oriental Centre, 67 Chatham Road, South, 13th Floor, Kowloon.

Similarly, the decrease in the number of children per family has significantly reduced the time spent by women in childbearing and childrearing activities, and has provided women with greater freedom to join the labour force.

As market opportunities for women continue to improve, more men will find it necessary and advantageous to reduce the extent of their participation in the labour force. Whether this process will eventually eliminate the traditional division of labour by sex is of major concern, and has important implications for many social and economic issues.

Presently, there seems to be no compelling reason why economic growth and advancing technology will eventually inhibit the absorption of more women into the labour force. On the contrary, history seems to suggest that economic growth creates new industries, new markets, new technologies, and new institutional systems which facilitate women's entry into the labour force.

This, of course, does not preclude the possibility that employers may discriminate against women; but then, they do so only at a cost to themselves. Even if sex discrimination persists, its most likely effect will be on occupational segregation and vertical mobility rather than on labour force participation per se.

On the other hand, given that the relative educational attainment of men and women has equalised consid-

erably, further increases in educational opportunities available to women, both quantitatively and qualitatively, are likely to have only marginal effects on encouraging more women to join the labour force.

Another more serious limiting factor is that most women expect to be married and to have children some time in the future. For most women this means an interruption of their work experience, which could seriously hamper career development and job prospects. Consequently, it acts as an inhibiting factor on women's market behaviour and contributes to occupational segregation by sex and the lack of vertical mobility of women.

Some of the adverse effects of childbearing and childrearing activities on the economic status of women can partly be alleviated through the adoption of substitute measures, like test-tube babies and the greater provision of quality child care services at lower prices.

How rapidly these substitute measures can become available depends not only on technological and economic considerations alone, but also on ethical and social attitudes.

What emerges from this discussion is that, aside from employer's discriminatory practices, demand side forces are not likely to place any serious limitation on the increased absorption of women into the labour force. However, supply side constraints will probably continue to operate as an important fac-

tor that prevents women from assuming an even expanding role in the labour force.

Although more women are entering the labour force, they are mostly concentrated in low-pay and high-turnover jobs, which afford few opportunities for vertical mobility and employment security.

Some social scientists have argued that men and women are segmented into different labour markets, and that inter-market movements either horizontally or vertically are infrequent, if not impossible.

In particular, many jobs for women often require and encourage a "serving mentality," that is, an orientation toward providing services to other people and especially to men. Consequently, the subordinate role which women have traditionally assumed has merely been shifted from the family to the market-place.

It is worth stressing that one of the major reasons for such segmentation of the labour market results from the time spent by women in childbearing and childrearing. Many women withdraw from the labour force in order to attend to such activities. Time spent outside the labour force not only affects career development and job prospects, but also contributes to the depreciation of acquired job skills.

Thus, when a married woman decides to re-enter the labour force after her maternity years, her market opportunities are likely to be poor.

In Hongkong, the average hourly wage rates of married women are substantially lower than those of men with the same age and years of schooling. However, those of single men and women with the same education in the same age bracket are not significantly different.

This suggests that the major reason for low wages among women is maternity behaviour, not sex discrimination by employers.

Over the past few centuries, the economic status of women has been improving. As a result, the traditional sharp division of labour into market and household work according to sex gradually disappears, and is replaced by a new division of labour in terms of sex-segmented labour markets.

We have argued that the transformation of the family, particularly the decrease in its size, has been a major cause of this development. If the evolution of the family in this direction is allowed to continue, then there appears to be very little reason why the economic status of women will not continue to improve.

But genuine constraints will not be easily removed, at least in the foreseeable future.

NEXT WEEK: Mr John Fukuda, lecturer at the University of Hongkong, discusses the transfer of Japanese management practices.