

Women and Work in West Belfast

by *Madeleine Leonard*

Cet article analyse les tentatives de régénérer Belfast Ouest en créant des ouvertures pour des emplois plus lucratifs pour les femmes et les hommes de ce quartier de la ville.

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like West Belfast. Decades of discrimination and injustice exacerbated by 25 years of political and military conflict have been highlighted and sensationalized by the international media and in the process the everyday issues facing women living in such areas have been rendered banal and mundane. Yet, if real progress is to be made in Northern Ireland, if the much talked about economic regeneration is to have any meaningful impact on the lives of women, then the seemingly prosaic problems facing many women need to be seriously addressed. This article is an attempt to put some of these issues on to the agenda for future action.

While undoubtedly there exist clear major differences in the political aspirations of many of those living in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the United Kingdom, a number of additional economic, social, and cultural factors separate those living in Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom. For example, Northern Ireland has consistently endured the highest rate of long-term unemployment and the lowest per capita income in the United Kingdom. The region also has the highest birth rate (Compton and Coward), the poorest child care services (Hinds), the lowest divorce rate

(McWilliams and McKiernan), the highest church attendance and religious observance (Cairns), and the most traditional moral codes and social norms directing sexual behaviour and birth control (Sneddon and Kremer). All these issues have a direct impact on the lives of women.

Over recent years, feminists have uncovered the increasing trend towards the feminization of poverty. This involves the recognition that women bear the brunt of poverty in many societies. Male unemployment and the accompanying economic deprivation puts an enormous strain on the domestic lives of women who have to manage household resources on limited means. West Belfast suffers disproportionately from high long-term male unemployment. Around 30 per cent of the economically active male population are out of employment. In some districts, this figure can reach as high as 70 per cent (Leonard 1994). Poverty and ill-health are often associated with such high rates of unemployment. In West Belfast, 43 per cent of households do not own their own home. In some areas, 95 per cent of the population do not own their own home. Only 33 per cent of households in West Belfast are car owners. These factors indicate a significant level of deprivation. Indeed, 12 of the 16 more deprived regions in the Belfast area are located in West Belfast. Such deprivation affects the general health of the population of the area. Almost 14 per cent of the population in West Belfast suffer from long-term illness. Indeed, seven per cent of the working-age population are unemployed because of disability (Gaffikin and Morrissey). These adverse health outcomes have particular negative consequences for children. Along with North Belfast, West Belfast has the highest rate of infant mortality in Northern Ireland at 11.9 per 1,000.

Furthermore, 23.1 per cent of all children suffering from long-term illness or disability live in West Belfast (Gaffikin and Morrissey). These shocking statistics are submerged in the reporting of the political conflict which has plagued Northern Ireland for the past two and a half decades.

What consequences do these realities have for women who live in West Belfast? As primary caregivers of children, the sick, and the elderly, women disproportionately become involved in providing care for others inside and outside the household compared to their male counterparts. This in turn has a significant impact on women's employment prospects compared to men. By fulfilling stereotypical gender expectations concerning who should care for others in the household and community, women weaken their already vulnerable employment position in the labour market.

There is a widespread consensus among the British and Irish governments that access to formal employment must play a key role in the economic regeneration of Northern Ireland and in particular, disadvantaged areas such as West Belfast.

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However, a single-minded focus on formal employment opportunities as the only route to economic recovery is in danger of distorting or undermining the considerable important economic contribution that women perform outside the realm of formal employment. This is clearly seen in the area of caring for others which is often seen as an extension of the

mother-housewife role and is subsequently taken-for-granted or consistently dismissed as non-work and wrongly categorized as having no economic value. The enormous drain on the resources of the welfare system when such care has to be provided on a formal basis for those with no access to caring females graphically illustrates the fallacy of this view. In my research into the informal economic activities of males and females in one



Rita Duffy, "Two Women, Ormeau Avenue," charcoal on paper, 1200 x 900 cm, 1989.

area of high long-term unemployment in West Belfast, I uncovered a host of examples to indicate the fundamental economic role women play in maintaining the survival of low-income households (Leonard 1994). Women adopted a range of informal economic practices in order to make ends meet yet statistically these women were categorized as economically inactive. A more informed awareness of women's vital economic role within the household could potentially lead to more sensitive policies

being advocated which would reflect the needs and concerns of women in low-income households. However, as long as economic regeneration continues to be seen in terms of a return to a male model of formal (uninterrupted) employment, women's potential economic contribution may be kept off the policy agenda or relegated to a minor concern.

If we do adopt a recovery model based on encouraging women to become involved in formal employment, then a number of factors must be addressed which often impede the opportunities women have to participate in the formal labour market. Women living with men who are unemployed are discouraged from taking up formal employment by welfare policies which penalize the family's entitlements to welfare benefits if a woman becomes formally employed. These policies ensnare some families in poverty traps. In some cases, the woman's income, if declared, is deducted in full from the amount payable to the family and this has the effect of the woman "working for nothing." The corollary of such policies are that women are deterred from seeking formal employment or encouraged to work off-the-books where such opportunities become available. This in turn makes some women vulnerable to highly exploitative, low-paid work. The research I carried out in West Belfast (Leonard 1992) revealed that some firms, particularly contract cleaning organizations, deliberately recruit women from areas with high levels of long-term male unemployment. The women interviewed by me in 1990 worked off-the-record, during unsocial hours, in very unfavourable employment conditions, and in some cases were paid less than half the recommended minimum wage. Hence, the movement towards the creation of formal employment opportunities for women needs to be accompanied by more flexible welfare benefits regulations which move away from policies that penalize families who attempt to overcome their precarious economic situation.

Perhaps the greatest barrier preventing women from benefiting fully from an increase in formal job vacancies is the lack of formal child care services in Northern Ireland generally and the persistence of traditional attitudes concerning who does what within the household. The U.K. has been identified as one of the three countries with the lowest levels of publicly-funded child care services, the other two being Ireland and the Netherlands (Moss). Hinds points out that within the U.K., Northern Ireland has the lowest rate of formal provision making Northern Ireland one of the most disadvantaged regions of the European Union for child care facilities. This leads many women in Northern Ireland to experience discontinuous employment and downward mobility on becoming mothers. Drawing on a survey into women's working lives commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission in 1990, Turner reports that of the 253 women utilizing some form of child care provision, only eleven per cent used formal daycare and nursery groups. The majority of women, 60 per cent of the sample, relied informally on family network members. The survey further revealed that child care is by no means shared between partners. Seven per cent of fathers with children under 16 had never fed their children in the mothers' absence, 21 per cent had never got up to see to a child during the night, and 22 per cent had never washed or bathed their children. These statistics indicate that shared child care remains an elusive goal. In most households, men's role was that of helper rather than equal partner. Child care duties seemed optional for men but obligatory for women.

Early research in the United States and the U.K. predicted that the employment of women outside the household would significantly alter the sexual division of labour within the household. However, studies in the Northern Ireland context, which have focused on the domestic division of labour in the home have suggested, with few exceptions, that men

have made inconsequential inroads into domestic labour with women continuing to take primary responsibility for home and family (Montgomery and Davies; Montgomery). While there was more participation of men in housework in households where both partners were in full-time employment or were unemployed, in few households was such work equally shared. In Montgomery's overall sample, for example, 71 per cent of women stated that they carried out all or most of the housework with only a quarter stating that household duties were shared with their partners.

A survey of one in four households in one estate in West Belfast which I carried out in 1990 (Leonard 1994) backed up the dismal findings of the research reported above. The survey was concerned with examining the range of economic activities, both formal and informal, carried out within and outside the household. Only a quarter of the women interviewed worked formally or informally outside the home mainly in part-time, low-paid, traditional gender-specific occupations. In the majority of cases, the women combined their employment duties with responsibility for the home and family. Male unemployment had little impact on involvement in household duties. In households where males had experienced long-term unemployment, there was little indication of any meaningful renegotiation of the domestic division of labour. Rather, in the absence of traditional male formal employment opportunities, many men were reluctant to further dilute their perceived male status by becoming involved in domestic chores to any significant degree. Attempts to restore male employment levels may have little impact on the help given to women within the household as existing male participation is negligible. However, attempts to encourage women to become part of the formal labour force may result in women becoming over burdened with combining the visible work carried out in the formal economy with

their continued invisible responsibilities within the household.

Providing effective formal job opportunities for women necessitates challenging domestic and child care roles within the household. To ignore the division of labour in the household and the primary responsibility of women for child care is to make a mockery of attempts to equalize formal job opportunities for men and women. The lack of affordable, flexible, and accessible child care remains a major obstacle preventing women from accessing the training, education, and employment provisions that exist. Unless formal employment opportunities for women are accompanied by the provision of suitable child care arrangements, then equality of opportunity in employment for women in West Belfast will remain elusive and women will continue to have only an illusion of choice over whether to remain at home or avail themselves of the opportunities the labour market has to offer.

These issues are important because the current focus on economic regeneration tends to be concerned solely with advocating more jobs for the men and women of West Belfast while simultaneously ignoring the social and cultural conditions under which both men and women become available for work. Often, these conditions have little to do with politics but are rooted instead in the survival of traditional attitudes concerning appropriate roles for men and women in society. It is these attitudes that need to be challenged in any movement towards a new agenda for Northern Ireland. In the absence of any significant debate concerning the roles and responsibilities of men and women both within and outside the household, even the most optimistic forecast of an economic dividend for Northern Ireland will result in a shallow victory for many women.

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