



Women in the Workplace

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An essay authored by an employee of the world's largest bank needs some explanation in the context of a theological journal. While it may not be academic fashion to describe the point of view of the author, in this situation and for this topic I believe it is important that readers know aspects of my personal biography. It will help to explain the background of my argument. A woman in the workplace writing about "women in the workplace" may be very close to her subject, or indeed guilty of special pleading. Our personal history fashions our intellectual habits and often causes us to value or discredit another's perspective. On the issue of women's employment it is evident that many people, men and women, feel a high degree of ambiguity about the subject.¹

I was raised in a middle class, professional household with the typical sex role distinction between my parents. What was perhaps atypical was that both of my parents had degrees and that my mother had worked at paid employment prior to marriage. Like many other women in the 1930s, marriage represented for her an involuntary (or voluntary) exit from the workplace. During the war years, however, she worked at cooking for a firestation and was an air raid warden. The model of women's role as married women I received as a child was standard for the post-war generation of middle class people. A married woman's role was in the home, often struggling to make ends meet, caring for children, marketing, sewing, cleaning, and supporting her husband's career. In my mother's case, her return to occasional paid employment was gradually made by turning a hobby into a skill that could be sold on a consulting basis. My mother would not have conceived of going permanently into the workplace, even during those years when four children put a major strain on the family budget. How is it then that I, having been raised with such a role model, find myself at my place of employment from 8:15 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. fifty weeks a year?

¹Daniel Yankelovich research at Public Agenda Foundation for *Working Women* magazine, as reported in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (August 29, 1983).

I never thought of myself as a wage earner, a supporter of a household, even when I was getting my first job as a professor of religion. I was driven by an ideal: to study religion, and to achieve academic heights by receiving my doctoral degree. It had been evident several years previously that the option of the ministry was not open to me as an Episcopalian (at that time), nor was that option particularly appealing. The only other choice was to teach. My drive to go into teaching theology was primarily to put into use this precious credential I had achieved after so many years. I never thought of my teaching career as "employment." The wage earning

aspects of my career were of secondary importance. After marriage, having two salaries was not a reflection of economic necessity, but the result of two professional careers. Like many other women raised in the middle class traditional homes, I had “backed into” a career. I had no clear goal in high school for thinking of myself as potentially having a lifelong career, of being able to support myself or a family. My continued teaching during my early childbearing years was partly motivated out of a fear that if I, as a woman, took time out from my career, I would lose ground to my male colleagues and would demonstrate to them that women academics were only able to be marginal. Being a token woman had its burdens. More importantly, focusing all my energies on babies and household activities was never a choice for me. At every cost, I wanted to preserve the intellectual, social, and personal contacts that the workplace provided for me. The alternative was certain depression, anxiety, and isolation. At this point the support from members of my own family for my academic career mysteriously evaporated. They seemed to be saying “why complain about problems with day care, babysitters, bundling kids into snow suits to drop them off at preschool before work, and sick children? All these problems would be solved if you didn’t work.” They seemed to assume that careers were for women who did not have the responsibility of child raising.

A major shift in my attitude to employment came when I left the full-time academic life. When we moved to San Francisco for a better lifestyle, I found I was forced to turn my teaching skills into marketable employment in the business world. There were four months after the move when I was unemployed. Never before had we experienced that one limited academic salary would be radically inadequate to support a family of four and insufficient to pay the mortgage. As I looked for employment, I experienced for the first time what men must feel all the time, as well as single parents. I thought: the security of this family depends on *my* wage earning ability; I am responsible for it. I *must* take shared fiscal responsibility. My current job may not be the complete ideal, but it enables us to maintain our standard of living. For the first time, I have a job and not a career.

This personal digression demonstrates a perception: It is very hard for those of us who work in the ministry, teaching, and counseling to comprehend the conditions of the workplace that affect men and women alike, and particularly those that affect women. These professions in the church are closer to the state of being self-employed, rather than being a wage earner, an “employee.”

Very often the place of work for church professionals is located in or near the home. Academics and ministers often have studies at home where they prepare sermons and lectures, do research, and conduct counseling. Most critically a

large portion of the day is self-scheduled, and there is no direct supervision for professional people. For Christians the motivation to enter the professional ministry or teaching comes from a sense of vocation, or service to others, of love for God and the belief that one can contribute to the spiritual, educational, and emotional growth of others. The poor pay is justified in terms of the other values that the profession contributes to individual fulfillment.

The “workplace” is something completely different from the world of the clergy or the counseling and teaching professions. The “workplace” may be some distance from the home and involve a commute in urban areas. Since increasing numbers of people are moving into an urban environment, the pattern of rural communities where home and work have been one, or at least close to one another, is an experience shared by a decreasing percentage of America’s people.

The “workplace” is a reflection of the industrial revolution, when local cottage industry was centralized into efficient, standardized manufacturing operations. After this revolution, men—and some women—left the home at dawn and joined other millhands to labor intensely for 12 to 14 hours six days a week. Our modern concept of work, of having a job, for the majority of employees—men and women, blue and white collar—is based on this image of the “workplace.” This separation of the domestic, private arena from the workplace of paid employment is scarcely two hundred years old. As many studies have shown, prior to the industrial revolution both men and women were engaged in activity that contributed to the economic health of the household. Men and women were equally involved in domestic tasks as were children. It is only since the enormous industrial growth in the cities and the prevailing nineteenth century ideals inherited from Europe that a sharp separation of the home and workplace has occurred. This change has dramatically affected the view of women’s appropriate work during the past century. In a study entitled *Women Have Always Worked*, Alice Kessler-Harris has examined the pattern of women’s work since the Colonies, both paid and unpaid.² Several significant points emerge: As the meaning of “work” changed during the industrial revolution, women’s labor was associated more exclusively with the domestic arena. Men’s paid employment was considered “work” while women were encouraged to emulate the middle class ideal of creating a haven of domestic tranquility for the husband and family. Of course, poor women and immigrant women always worked and aspired to reach the level of economic security where they would no longer have to “work.” As the result of restricting the meaning of work to “paid employment,” women have continued to undervalue their economic contribution to society in their family responsibilities as well as in their contributions to the physical, emotional and spiritual health of society. Our society similarly undervalues their domestic work. It only becomes “work” when someone else is paid to do it. Many women experience guilt for employing other women to do their cleaning and support their childcare so that they can go out to the “workplace.”

A more usual scenario is that women will do two jobs. Studies have shown that when women take employment men do not (in this country or in the Soviet

²Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked* (Old Westbury: Feminist, 1981).

Union) significantly increase their domestic work to share the burden of the domestic responsibilities.

Our Christian views of vocation and Luther’s view of the vocation of marriage were not built upon a modern industrial view of career or post-industrial marriage. By describing marriage as a vocation it may have been easy for later generations of Christians to interpret this according to societal notions of appropriate sex roles for men and women. To call marriage a vocation for men and women alike did not mean that women should stay home and that men should go to work in the workplace as the last two centuries have idealized. Luther himself demonstrated an understanding that one can have a multiplicity of roles, or “offices” and “stations,” which may include one’s occupation and other social relationships.³

I work in an organization of 63,000 employees. Of those employees 74% are women, and their average age is 35. The statistics reveal an important fact: the enormous growth of women in the world of employment, particularly in white collar jobs, and the increase in the numbers of working mothers. In the last decade working mothers of children under 6 increased from 31 to 46

percent. A large number of these women are single heads of families; indeed the percentage of women in the workplace generally continues to rise. By 1972 the typical middle class family had two wage earners to compete with rising inflation. Only a small percent of households in this country fit the ideal of the nuclear family—a husband supporting a non-earning wife with children at home.

Most of the jobs that women do are not properly described as “careers” with opportunities for growth, but fit into the dominant women’s job ghettos: the domestic, the clerical service industry, nursing, and teaching types of jobs. The gap between men’s salaries and women’s salaries for similar positions continues to widen each year. This is the result of continued sex segregation of women into low paying jobs. In my organization women fill most of the “prime time” positions. They are employed for six hours a day while the bank is open to customers. The flexibility of schedule enables women to send their children off to school before coming to work and to be at home as they return. The very flexibility women prize costs them dearly in terms of benefits, long term career promotability, and opportunity for professional growth. The woman’s job is used to supplement the family income and to fit in with the husband and family’s schedule, but not to provide another career path for the wife during the childbearing years.

Women are still socialized to believe that the domestic arrangements are their primary responsibility. They tend to assume that the problem of coordinating family and work responsibilities is their own individual problem, and they seek private solutions for it. The stress of our current domestic and work arrangements on employed women is well described in psychological and sociological literature. Industries have not provided adequate child care facilities. Hours of work largely follow the inflexible traditional patterns. Women are trying hard to demonstrate their value to the male world of the professions by

³Marc Kolden, “Luther on Vocation,” *Word & World* 3 (1983) 386.

denying the need for any special favors. However, the structure of the modern home and family is based on the assumption that one domestic partner is at home to send the children to school, receive delivery of goods, services, and repairs, be available to nurse sick children, take children to the doctor and be at home for school vacations. For 15 to 20 years of life the workplace and its demands conflict with needs of the raising of the family. In its isolation the modern family struggles to juggle sick babies, school in-service days, and trips to the doctor. In the world of employment each of these activities is seen as an erosion of an employee’s full value to the company. Every time a woman asks her supervisor for time off to attend to family responsibilities, her lack of commitment to her work is noted. Full commitment of time and energy to company goals is the mark of career oriented individuals. But family oriented men and women often find radical conflict in dedicating such total loyalty in order to be successful.

In spite of the ambiguity of the role and the pressures women face in juggling careers, job, and family, the workplace offers continuing appeal for women for economic and other reasons. The workplace has become for us the purveyor of worth or value. We ask people “what do you do?” in America; this is a quite unusual question in other societies. If we don’t “do” anything we feel bad, lacking in appropriate value. This is the cause of the loss of identity for women without paid employment. What I “do” is what I am paid for. Wages are a conveyor of society’s worth and self-identity for the individual.

The Christian church may resist these values and preach service for love and not money, and yet money has become a symbol for being valued in the eyes of society. Women's quest for equality in wages is part of the need for the recognition of self-worth. Likewise any profession such as the ministry that is seriously underpaid in comparison to its secular counterparts causes its members continual need for self-apology and rationalization of unequal status.

Another major reason that women stay in the workplace, in spite of its conflicts with domestic arrangements, is that there is no better mechanism for social interchange and for personal growth and development. The social interactions—the sense of belonging to an organization with complex purposes beyond oneself as an individual, and the interaction with technology—provide the possibility for growth that individual women desire. Our domestic arena—focused on home, school, church, and volunteer activities as an exclusive role—cannot match the opportunity for individual recognition and growth offered by the workplace.

The challenge for the church is major. It should not assume that a woman's vocation is to make an exclusive identification with the role of mother. In each of our roles there is opportunity for sin by making it the center of our lives to the exclusion of the needs of others. A self-sacrificial role can become sinful if it reflects a fundamental lack of self-love and a desire to be seen as righteous. Similarly the exclusive identification with career to the exclusion of the needs of self or family is sin, for it puts work first. Women in the workplace may currently have too high a desire to prove themselves in the world of employment and not be sufficiently critical of its imposed values.

The church can support women and men in their quest for wholeness and a human social arrangement for work and domestic life. By supporting families through providing care in communities for the children of working parents, and by enhancing parent's coping abilities, particularly during early child-bearing years, churches can help women and men build a network of support. In a time of change in employment patterns, the church needs to understand the world of work and its conditions. Industry and corporations have been driven primarily by economic considerations. The church can play a major role in the continuing need to shape the "world of work" to a more flexible and humane environment supportive of raising the next generation and caring for our aging. Unfortunately, lacking first hand understanding of the realities of the "workplace," the church's theology of work remains romantic. As women move into the workplace in greater numbers, the weakness of our present social system becomes clear. The struggle women face to play the dual roles illustrates the inherent conflict between our domestic and public institutions. Many men today find they too can no longer fit the model of the man who puts his career first, and then they suffer loss of social prestige and income when they take on more of the parenting role. The fundamental question for the church is how we can allow the many roles we have in life to co-exist—in such away that they support each other—so that they can become the opportunity for grace for women as well as men.

RESOURCES

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