

# Women's Wages in Relation to Economic Welfare

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A preceding inquiry was directed to the question what relation between the wages of men and women is most conducive to production of wealth in the narrower sense of that term.(1\*) In this sequel there is substituted for wealth a higher aim, economic welfare. Welfare is related to wealth as inward feeling to outward means. Economic welfare is distinguished from other kinds of happiness in that it depends more on external means, enters easily into relation with the measuring rod of money, as Professor Pigou defines (ante, 2).(2\*) As a property of this essential difference it seems that propositions respecting economic welfare possess one characteristic of positive science, general consent, in a greater degree than beliefs concerning higher kinds of well-being. There is more agreement about the conditions of material prosperity than about the first principles of ethics and politics.

A distinctive feature of welfare which especially concerns us here is the postulate that the satisfactions felt by different persons admit of comparison. It thus becomes possible to consider the aggregate economic welfare of a community as the sum of satisfactions enjoyed by the individual members. By the law of diminishing utility the addition of wealth to those who have already abundance tends to increase the aggregate welfare less than if the same amount of means were applied to the relief of pressing wants. Accordingly, if the wealth of a community is increased or diminished, the gain or loss of aggregate welfare depends not only on the amount of wealth added or subtracted, but also on the distribution of the benefits or privations among the members of the community. The negative case of this proposition forms the basis of a now generally accepted principle of taxation. If a given amount is to be raised by taxation, the burden should be distributed among the contributors in such wise that the aggregate sacrifice incurred may be a minimum.(3\*)

The only question is whether we should stop at the amount of revenue required for the public services, or whether taxation should be applied beyond this limit for the express purpose of equalising incomes. There are those who think that such equalisation would be theoretically per se desirable, and are deterred only by the consideration that production would be discouraged. It is as if a force tending to cause movement in a certain direction is held in check by an opposite force. Then, if the counteracting force is lessened, the ever present tendency will spring into action. Upon this principle it was forcibly argued in the year 1916 that the burden of "special taxes levied on an exceptional occasion for the purpose of financing an unprecedented war" should be distributed with less regard than usual to counteracting considerations.(4\*)

Similar statements would hold good if taxes consisted of services exacted for the benefit of the State. For the analogy between taxation and corvee is very close. Quite philosophically the taxes collected for the kings of ancient Egypt were named "labour."(5\*) So on the supposition that imposts were exacted in the form of work, as pointed out by Sir Josiah Stamp, more would

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be expected from the more powerful man.(6\*) Prima facie the principle should be applicable, beyond the sphere of public services, to the distribution of labour and remuneration in general. It would seem to follow that if one class is less capable of work than another, but equally capable of enjoyment, the former class shall do less work, but enjoy equal remuneration. But of course such an arrangement would be impracticable. The numbers of the less capable class would increase to the detriment of production. The survival of the inefficient would be encouraged. These results would not equally follow if the privileged class consisted of the weaker sex. Prima facie the case would resemble one just now instanced in that first principles spring into action, counteracting considerations being withdrawn. It would seem to be opportune to discuss and apply a problem which Mr and Mrs Webb cite as interesting.(7\*) Whereas on a certain slave plantation equal tasks were imposed on men and women, the latter accordingly, in consequence of their comparative weakness, suffering much more fatigue; supposing the employer to insist only on a certain quantity of work being done, and to leave the distribution of the burden to the philanthropist, what would be the most beneficent arrangement?(8\*) But a regime so socialistic is not here contemplated. It is supposed that the forces of competition can only be slightly modified by combination. It is not proposed to defy the ruling of competition. But, as pointed out before (ante, 10), the determinations effected by competition are often not minutely graduated. It is as if the integers of economic quantities that are in dispute were determined by the play of competition; while the fractions are left to be settled by collective bargaining and utilitarian considerations (ante, 10). Even as regards the integers, if one or two units are changed in the interest of one set of workers, no appreciable economic loss to the community is to be apprehended. For the economic equilibrium which is determined by competition may be considered as realising the maximum of advantage (attainable in the existing state of things). So by the theory of maxima a slight modification of the arrangements which secure maximum advantage will be attended with only a very slight diminution of the total advantage (ante, 8). There would not be an appreciable loss in globo, but a transference conducive to economic welfare.

But the gain to the women-workers would not always involve an equal loss to the men. For many of the concessions demanded would consist of increased facilities for work; and so would result in an increase of the wealth to be distributed (ante, 19). The war has shown that there is much room for improvement in this direction. We read of "processes which by some reorganisation, or the introduction of labour-saving appliances, could be made suitable for them" (women). The difficulty of employing women on heavy work may often be got over by mechanical means -- "lifting tackle, trolleys, runways for bogies, lighter tools and trucks," and so on. "There would appear to be a fairly large new field of possible activity for women."(9\*) Arrangements to suit those who cannot work many hours may be foreseen. The removal of hindrances to the entrance of employments and to the training required for their exercise has already been claimed as conducive to wealth (ante, 9). On the ground of economic welfare it is now further demanded that women-workers should at least have the benefit of any doubt that may arise with regard to the apportionment of industries between the sexes (ante, 12). If in effect, however masked by the wording of awards and agreements, there comes in an element of chance in determinations about work and wages-as Dido

apportioned the labour of her workpeople not simply by just partition, but also by drawing lots(10\*) -- let us weight the chances somewhat in favour of the weaker sex.

These concessions may be demanded and granted without indulging the fantastic sentiments of Don Quixote, without accepting Michelet's old-fashioned objection to the employment of women in industry: "L'ouvriere mot impie et sordide!"(11\*) There would be demanded only a little more than Francis Walker claims in his eminently sane observations upon women's wages.(12\*) Impressed with the advantages of free competition he demands "mobility" for women-workers, free access to the labour market to which they have been driven by the changed conditions of production.

Walker enforces this claim by appealing to the well-known chivalry of American men. And certainly if chivalry in the general sense of knightly virtue has been shown by another great economist to be compatible with modern industry,(13\*) why would not this be true also of chivalry in that special sense which was the crown and glory of the knightly character? Yet here appeal is not made to so refined a motive. For economic welfare is considered as depending on characteristics of human nature that are very general, almost as universal -- and so nearly as amenable to scientific treatment -- as the motives commonly ascribed to the "economic man." It is hardly consistent with this definition to include a sentiment which is far from universal, not common to the Eastern or the ancient civilisations. To secure the validity of our conclusions there is not postulated any particular code of manners and customs. It is not necessary to dispute the views of Mr Belfort Bax, who in his unpleasant book, *Frauds of Feminism*, complains that "women are iniquitously privileged at the expense of men" denounces the rule of the sea, that the women should have priority of exit from a sinking ship, as "an abominable piece of sex favouritism," which "cries aloud in its irrational injustice." Nor, on the other hand, need we accept the Comtist doctrine that female relatives have a claim to be supported by the men of their household on the analogy of priests and magistrates "maintained by those for whom their lives are devoted."(14\*) The premises of our argument are more general, containing more of the quod semper, quod ubique; such as the laws of diminishing utility and increasing fatigue, the fact of unequal capacities -- differences in the relation between work done and fatigue felt.

Nevertheless it is not irrelevant to the argument that its practical conclusions are in harmony with the manners of Christendom. If most Englishmen and many other men regard as detestable opinions of the kind professed by Belfort Bax, this is a fact favourable to the application of our reasoning. Consider the opinion of a late Lord Chancellor which Mr Bax quotes with disapprobation, the dictum that "our laws taken as a whole are more merciful to women than to men, and are more mercifully administered." If this discrimination is generally approved, there may be presumed a predisposition to admit a similar discrimination with respect to the laws of political economy. But the tendency is held in check by the supposed rigidity of those laws, by the conception of competition as necessary and beneficent. It is, therefore, not without consequence to point out that some discrimination of the slight yet appreciable degree which is admitted in the sphere of law is possible in the sphere of industry. The supposed predisposition would secure a response to Walker's appeal for the removal of obstructions. It would secure attention to the subtler arguments which are based on the

"elasticity of the demand for labour" and the nature of economic equilibrium (ante, 19 and 8). There would at least be rendered more gentle that jostle of competition from which Frederic Harrison apprehended that "the great majority of men and women would sink into the relative position of big and little boys at school."(15\*) Why should not the relation be, rather, like that of the young men and maidens at our Universities who compete in work tested by examinations without being related as fag and bully? May not Competition in industry, tempered by Combination (ante, 10) work equally smoothly? Altogether, under the favourable conditions supposed -- the action of reason quickened by a predisposing sentiment -- the pursuit of economic welfare may avert the reproach conveyed in Burke's tremendous words: "The age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever."(16\*) Rather, the economists, if aiming at economic welfare, the sophisters and calculators, if so named because, in accordance with the utilitarian philosophy, they seek to calculate the course that is conducive to the greatest quantity of happiness, will cultivate a certain species of chivalry, wanting, it may be, the glory of the older virtue, but still a precious element of civilisation. It might not be so dearly prized as its romantic prototype by those who form its object, in benefiting whom consists its virtue ; but the benefit would be more widely diffused, less confined to aristocratic circles.

The concessions now advised on the ground of economic welfare, unlike those before admitted (ante, 16 et seq.), are not based on the incidents of family life. The fresh considerations, however, do not contravene those admissions; the concessions advocated, not being on such a scale as seriously to alter the balance between the wage of spinsters and that of married men to the detriment of families.

In this part of the subject not only is the present sequel in keeping with, but it also lends support to, the preceding argument. It will be remembered that the presumption in favour of equal pay to men and women encountered the objection that the bulk of men are subject to a charge from which the bulk of women are exempt, the support of families (ante, 16-18). This circumstance much weakens the force of appeals to the justice which is inherent in laissez-faire, the "system of natural liberty."(17\*) The case for equal pay is not so strong as it has been represented by ardent champions of woman's rights, Olive Schreiner for example in passages like the following: "The fact that for equal work equally well performed by a man and a woman it is ordained that the woman on the ground of her sex alone shall receive a less recompense is the nearest approach to a wilful and unqualified 'wrong' in the whole relations of women to Society to-day.... That males of enlightenment and equity can for an hour tolerate the existence of this inequality has seemed to me always incomprehensible."(18\*) There is certainly a "wrong" of the kind which consists in the infraction of laissez-faire. But it is not "unqualified" in so far as it is calculated to correct another sort of wrong. If with equal pay for equal work one of the parties is to be subject to unequal deductions from his pay; it seems not unreasonable that the said party should have some advantage in the Labour Market (ante, 18 par 1). Moreover, those barriers against the entrance of women workers into certain occupations which are the main cause of different remuneration for the same effort appear to subserve the purpose of preventing the debacle, ultimately ruinous alike to wealth and family life,

which the hasty substitution of low-paid female operatives for well-paid men threatens to bring about (ante, 5). Accordingly the case for unrestricted competition, without any provision for the endowment of families, is not so strong as it has been represented by advocates of equal pay. Even with such provision as recommended in the preceding article the case is not so strong but that it may be strengthened by the considerations adduced in the sequel. The man who is hesitating between the older policy of exclusion and greater freedom of competition (safe-guarded by subsidy to families) is exhorted to give the benefit of the doubt to the course which makes for the higher remuneration and larger independence of the woman worker. To thwart her wishes and degrade her status would not be consistent with economic chivalry.

Altogether these considerations are calculated to strengthen the reasons before given for some sort of subsidy to mothers of families, whether on the part of the State or of unmarried fellow-workmen (ante, 21). Such are the institution of family allocations which, as described in the publications of the Family Endowment Council, are coming into vogue in France and other countries; and the kindred German arrangements which are described by Dr Heimann in this issue of the ECONOMIC JOURNAL.(19\*) If there could be a doubt whether, in case of a money subsidy being granted, it should be paid into the hands of the mother, the preceding considerations would be decisive in her favour.

But while the arguments in favour of family endowment are strengthened, the objections to its injudicious use are nowise weakened. The reader is requested to consider carefully the long list of disadvantages and dangers enumerated in the preceding paper (ante, 20). It is true that all those objections would not attend all schemes of State support. In particular the evil effects on the future of population are not to be attributed to all such schemes. Thus Professor Pearson in his original and outspoken Ethic of Free Thought, while recommending the support of mothers by the State or Commune, seems only to guarantee that support in case of births sanctioned by the authorities.(20\*) Mr H.G. Wells, too, accompanies his drastic provisions for the State support of mothers with State regulation of births.(21\*) But it may be doubted whether this platonic regulation will in practice be embodied in schemes for the endowment of motherhood. Consideration for the quantity and quality of population cannot be counted on. Nor, even if it could be, would it secure the wealth and welfare of a people dependent on the State for the support of families. It is a fearfully rash assumption that, because each man now generally works hard for the sake of his own wife and children, all men will work equally hard for all wives and children collectively.

The danger of this assumption is by no means confined to the common Socialist intent upon material gains. The main facts of life are even more easily forgotten by the idealist. The Swedish sentimentalist, Ellen Key, for instance, expects that when a "profounder culture" becomes prevalent "it will seem as natural for society to maintain its women as it was natural to maintain its army and navy." They will receive a "subsidy from the community for the bringing up of children," "the economic appreciation of her (their) domestic work." They will thus be free to cultivate a "soulful sensuousness or sensuous soulfulness." In accordance with "a new morality."(22\*) Naturally conditions of wealth and economic welfare are not considered by reformers intent upon some object of a higher or at least a

different order. The greatest of such innovators has characterised his proposal in terms which may be cited as quaintly expressing the spirit in which the economist at least should not approach such matters. Milton, when, galled by the yoke of an ill-assorted marriage, he proposed as a remedy for marital troubles freedom of divorce, thus reflected complacently on that proposal; "I doubt not but with one gentle stroking to wipe away ten thousand tears out of the life of man."<sup>(23\*)</sup> But the economist, remembering how often the appearance of easy remedies for human ills, in his sphere at least, has proved deceptive, will not expect much from a stroke, gentle or violent, intended to revolutionise established institutions which have worked well for the production of wealth and economic welfare. The only reforms of such institutions which the economist can approve are tentative and gradual.

#### NOTES:

1. See article on "Equal Pay to Men and Women for Equal Work" in the *Economic Journal*, December, 1922.

2. The reference of this type are to the previous article in this *Economic Journal*, December, 1922.

3. Cp. Cannan: "Minimum aggregate sacrifice in the long run is the principle which all good ministers of finance and Parliament endeavour to the best of their abilities (often poor) to adopt. Under its ample folds equity, ability, benefit, and all other good things drop into their proper places." -- *Economic Journal*, 1921, p. 350.

4. Pigou, *Economy and Finance of the War*, referred to in the *Economic Journal*, 1916, p. 227.

5. Brested, *History of Ancient Egypt*.

6. *Fundamental Principles of Taxation*, 1919, p. 8.

7. *Industrial Democracy*, p. 505, ed. 1902.

8. Let  $X$  be the amount of work to be done by the average man, and  $x$  the corresponding task of the woman; where  $X + x$  is given, the numbers of the sexes being supposed equal. Let  $F(X)$  represent the disutility experienced by the average man doing the amount of work denoted by  $X$ ; where  $F'(X)$  and  $F''(X)$  are both continually positive. And let  $f(x)$  likewise represent the analogous subjective quantity for the woman. Then the sum-total of disutility,  $F(X) + f(x)$  is to be a minimum; subject to the condition that  $X + x = \text{constant}$ . Whence  $F'(X) = f'(x)$ . Now let it be granted that for any quantity  $z$  (of the order of the quantities  $X$  and  $x$  with which we have to do),  $f(z) > F(z)$ , and also  $(f(z) - F(z))$  continually increasing)  $f'(z) > F'(z)$ . Then when  $F'(X) = f'(x)$ ,  $X$  must be greater than  $x$ .

To adapt this reasoning to the distribution of work and produce in an ideal community regulated according to utilitarian (or as some may prefer to say, socialistic) principles; let  $X$  denote the amount of goods produced by the average man -- amount measured in money or some even more appropriate index; and let  $X_i$  be the portion of goods assigned for his consumption. Let the corresponding quantities for women be  $x$  and  $x_i$ . Then, if  $N$  is the number of the men,  $n$  of the women,  $NX + nx = N(X_i) + n(x_i)$ . Let

$F(X)$  be the disutility accruing to the man from the production of  $X$ ; and let  $f(x)$  be the corresponding expression for the woman worker. Also let  $\Psi(X_i)$  be the satisfaction accruing to the average man from the consumption of goods amounting to  $X_i$  ( $\Psi' > 0$ ,  $\Psi'' < 0$ ) and let the corresponding expression for the women be  $\psi(x_i)$ . There is then to be maximised the sum-total of welfare  $N(\Psi(X_i) - F(X)) + n(\psi(x_i) - f(x))$ ; subject to the condition  $N(X_i) + n(x_i) = NX + nx$ . Whence  $F'(X) = f'(x) = \Psi'(X_i) = \psi'(x_i)$ . Now let it be granted that, as before, for any quantity  $z$  (of the order of the quantities with which we have to do)  $f(x) > F'(x)$ ; while there is no corresponding datum with respect to the quantities and functions designated by the Greek symbols. Then it follows, as before, that  $X$  shall be greater than  $x$ . It does not follow that  $X_i$  (the man's portion of goods) should be greater than (the woman's)  $x_i$ : it being understood that there is not deducted from  $X_i$  any special charge for the support of families (or other public purpose).

9. Memorandum on Substitution of Women in Non-Munitions Factories. Home Office, 1916.

10. "Operumque laborem  
Partibus aequabat justis, aut sorte trahebat."  
Aeneid, I, 507-8.

11, La Femme, ch. 2

12. The Wage Question, p. 361 and context.

13. Marshall, "The Social Possibilities of Economic Chivalry"  
Economic Journal, vol. XVII (1907).

14. Cp. Frederic Harrison, Realities and Ideals.

15. Op. Cit.

16. Reflections on the French Revolution.

17. Wealth of Nations, book iv.

18. Introduction, p. 24.

19. p. 509, below. Cp. Douglas on "The Project of Child Endowment in Australia" Quarterly Journal of Economics, August, 1923. See also Revue de Travail, Belgium, May, 1923.

20. Op. cit., p. 443 et seq., ed. 1.

21. Socialism and the Family.

22. Love and Ethics, p. 54. Love and Marriage, p. 20, ch. xi. Cp. The Woman Worker, ch. vi.

23. Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, second edition.



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