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Women's rights

The implications of gender equality at work on female workers from 1968 to the 1980s in France

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This paper was presented at the Historical Materialism Conference in London, 10 November 2013, in the panel on “A comparative analysis of socialist/class struggle feminism in France and Britain in the 1970s and 1980s”.

Introduction

This contribution is based on a part of my PhD on female workers in France, from 1968 to near past. In 1968, in France -I will focus only on France- there was a TV show entitled “Women as well” [Les femmes aussi] about gender equality at work. This documentary had an important impact in factories according to the CGT trade-union and this question began to become important in the 1968's- called after the milestone of 1968, year of the “workers insubordination” and spread of feminist movement. As a result, the president Valery Giscard D'Estaing decided to create a state secretary on the female condition and this question started to become important in the trade-union, the bosses, and the government discourses. The topics of qualification, work value, job statues and pay became what is called gender equality at work in the 1980's.

The female worker was a kind of archetype in the 1968's. That's why, I want to explain what is the implication of gender equality at work on female workers from 1968 to the 1980's. For this reason, I have divided my talk into five parts which are:

- the claim of equal work and equal pay;
- from “Reorganising job statues” to gender equality at work;
- Moulinex factory and the program of gender equality at work;
- the trade unions and gender equality at work;
- the implication of this program on female workers.

Equal work and equal pay

I want to show why this claim has got limited effect. The principle has been around on the international level since 1951 or 1957 on the European level. In France, there was a new law in 1972 which stipulated that for the same job or a job of similar value, the employers had to offer women the same pay as men. In reality, the impact of this law is limited and the question which is raised is: what is a job with equal value?

For example, a boss of china manufacture was saying that physical effort is part of the assessment of the jobs and physical strength has more value than dexterity. How can we define an objective assessment grading between different professional skills?

The measure of equal value is a dead end and it's important to think about the allocation of workers in the different kinds of sectors of production to evolve on this question.

So we can say that the claim for equal work and equal pay had a limited impact. Let's now move on to part 2:

From “Reorganising job statuses” to the gender equality at work

Female workers work in light production sector which pay less than heavy production sector where men work. As we can see in the film *Made in Dagenham*, the qualification of female workers isn't highly considered because it would be natural for women to have dexterity. This is the gender division at work between sectors. The French female work comity [Le comité du travail féminin], which is a government organisation, proposed to reorganise job statuses to gain gender equality at work and consider qualification.

However, there is also inequality in the same company: female workers work on the lowest level where they are working in the same factories as men. It's a kind of indirect discrimination because the trade-unionists too had said that there was no comparison possible between the men's work and the women's work. The French female work comity had therefore proposed promotion and training to try to limit the effects of gender division at work.

Ok, let's have a look at the Moulinex factory in France and their program of gender equality at work:

Moulinex and the program of gender equality at work

After the election of President Francois Mitterrand, there was a minister of women right which elaborated a law about gender equality at work in 1983. This law is called the “Roudy law” after the name of the minister. This law is not only on the right but also on positive action for women at work. The law defines the “equal value”, establishes a “report on comparative situation between men and women in the company” and proposes to implement an “equality program” to solve inequalities in companies. Finally, there is a special comity of gender equality at work was also created.

Moulinex is a leading French company, manufacturing and selling electrical appliances. The company image of Moulinex is that it allows liberating women with their products. At the beginning of the 1980's, there were 13 factories in France in Basse Normandie region which employed a total of approximately 10000 people including 60% of women who were manual workers (83% were OS (manual workers) and 8% were OP (professional workers)).

In order to establish equality at work, the Roudy law proposed to look at “recruitment, training, promotion, work organisation and working conditions”. The first companies, which signed the equality program, received some financial help from the state. To make his image about women last longer, Moulinex was the first company to sign this equality program in October 1983 with the participation of all the trade-unions. This equality program implemented training for 100 female workers to get a diploma in order to have a promotion. And the “equality program” said that recruitment needs to balance existing inequalities.

But, in reality a boss of Moulinex said: “In the coming years, with the considerable program of automatisisation of production, we will have difficulties, if we don't do anything, to use our human potential correctly” Therefore, there is

also an objective of modernising company with this program. Another boss said: “there was a concrete problem of personnel management. We are the biggest employer of the region, there was no possibility of recruitment, and we needed to make the existing staff efficient and qualified. Such was the background of the equality program. Let’s be clear about it, the objective of this program is not only to a social need [...] but to serve the development of the company. And, there is also the objective of reducing absenteeism of women who would be more committed to their work if they are trained.”

Let’s now turn to part 4:

Trade unions and gender equality at work

The trade union considered the law of 1972 as a stepping-stone but they thought that it had limited effect. I will speak about CGT and CFDT trade-unions because in these years, they were the main trade-unions. In the seventies, the CFDT was a trade union in favour of self-managed companies and really open to all kinds of movements. The CGT trade-union however was close to the communist party and more into class movement. But the two trade-unions were together in favour of the government “common program” before its break up. Globally, the female workers did not use this law much, even if the CGT trade union was enticing them to use this “legal tool” which could work in favour of industrial action. But, in reality this kind of action wasn’t a priority to the CGT trade union even if there were tensions about this like with female workers of the Essilor company in Chalons-sur-Marne in 1979.

Concerning “equality programs” there are different policies between the CGT trade-union and the CFDT trade union since most of the time CGT trade-union doesn’t accept the “equality programs” whereas CFDT trade union commits itself more toward the implementation of the programs. This is the result of the new direction of CFDT which puts negotiation first. Therefore the CFDT trade-union participates in the elaboration of the Roudy law. The CGT trade-union, on the contrary, organise movement against the flexibility and night work, for the law not to be used against its own purpose. In Moulinex, the opposition between the two trade unions was clear because the CGT considered the “equality program” as a “inequality program that was detrimental to men.”

Let’s now finish with our last part:

The implication of this program on female workers

I met a female worker who did this “equality program”. Her name is Solange Duparc. She has got a good memory of the programme but she told me that she met difficulties not only during the training but also when she got back into the work.

The first thing was that there were tests to be selected for the program and they were very academic whereas the work does not require academic skills. And the men are never selected on their academic abilities.

When Solange Duparc –who was in her thirties- was selected, she needed to go to school with children, which was embarrassing. She probably considered this training as a kind of discredit because her professional expertise was not taken into account.

The third thing was that to validate the training, female workers needed the support of their family because they had a lot of home work and they couldn't look after the children and do the housework.

The fourth thing which was difficult for Solange Duparc was getting back to work because of the reaction of men when she had a promotion. The last thing was that she needed to work shifts and she couldn't stay at work for the evening shift because of her responsibility as a mother. She had a special authorisation to leave the work two hours before the men (with a pay cut).

Finally, only female workers who didn't have a family could really make the most of this program.

So, as a conclusion, we can raise the question:

Conclusion: gender equality at work and male dominated societies: are they compatible?

After the claim for "equal work and equal pay", it's the gender equality at work which is being debated with the question of promotions, qualifications, equal value of work etc. But, it's not enough, because of the male dominated societies which prevents women from reaching total equality. Nowadays, new politics toward equality at work are undertaken, but concern less and less the popular classes.