

PCL December 2015

Women and Work

*Topic: Difficulties and Opportunities at work: Career and Private Life...
Getting Ahead? Holding Back? To which equality should we aspire?*

In the past few weeks, an interview appeared in the leading U.S. newspaper chronicling a conversation between the acknowledged spokeswoman for late 20th Century U.S. feminism - Gloria Steinem - and the most outspoken liberal female member of our Supreme Court - Ruth Bader Ginsburg. No matter what kind of women's advocate you are, you could find a lot to like in this interview. Both women told stories of how they were underestimated, disrespected, and dismissed - specifically *qua* women - toward the start of their illustrious careers. They were told that they were less intelligent, that they should stay home with their children and leave the wider world to men, and that every opportunity they seized was an opportunity stolen from a man. The reader cannot help but cheer both women on, as they recount their exploits, which included defeating expectations, manifesting excellence in their chosen field, and putting women's rights firmly on the map of human rights - even as pro-life women would simultaneously and strongly lament both women's inclusion of abortion as an essential element of women's progress.

For me, the interview helped clarify the difficulties women encounter today with naming their discontent and even their suffering, particularly in the realm of work and equality with men.

By which I mean the following: in earlier days, it was fairly easy to "know who your enemy was" if you were a woman seeking recognition of your equal dignity as a worker. It was, in short, men...the men who

ran everything and who told you that women couldn't write, or manage people, or even think properly... that women had no business "taking a man's seat" in a university classroom or a corporation. It's no accident that in the 1960s and 70s, when asked to name their opponent, civil rights activists of every kind, including women's rights activists, used the shorthand expression, "the man."

Today, however, things are much more complicated when we ask the question about women's equality at work. There are so many unanswered questions about what equality even means and who or what is conspiring against it, that it has become impossible to name one "enemy" in a moment's time, or even in an hour's time ...which of course means that the cause of women is harder to advance. It's *always* easier to organize a group for common action when the enemy is specified. At the same time, however, women are *not* satisfied - nor should they be - with the current situation of women at work, despite much needed progress being made, and thus *need* to organize to improve their situation. So what is to be done?

This is, as you have already guessed, a very large question. For the remainder of my presentation, then, I can only sketch out the following points for our further discussion.

-First, why women remain dissatisfied respecting their work lives, despite advances;

-Second, the leading contenders for the CAUSES of their dissatisfaction. On its face, this list clarifies how diffuse, powerful and difficult to confront, are the foes of women's contentment at work;

-Third, a few ideas regarding how to improve women's situation

First, why women remain dissatisfied respecting their work lives, or what is objectively unsettling or unjust about women's work situation even if it is *not* voiced articulated by a visible majority of women:

One, the late 20th century movement for women's rights focused nearly exclusively upon making available to women all that men had been doing: education, work, equal pay. Women were invited in. This movement failed utterly, however, to consider how all of those persons and groups for whom women had disproportionately cared- children, the elderly, the disabled, local charities - would receive the help they still urgently needed once all the available women were gone.

And it turns out, as the decades have advanced, women *still* feel called to care for these persons and groups, but no longer have the time, the flexibility, or the financial margins, to do it. For many, this struggle permeates their life, at home and at work.

Two, carework was and remains very undervalued, *even* as women still want to do it at home and in the workplace,

Regarding home: women have a stronger interest in caring for children at home than men do according to study after study. Women also constitute the sole parent in over 90% of single parent homes (In the words of one commentator, surely a figure this large indicates "nature" not "culture"!). Yet women are consistently lectured by leading feminist NGOs that equality requires a precise 50/50 sharing between spouses of both childcare and domestic labors, even though other research clearly shows that marriages are harmed, not helped, by dogmatic adherence to a 50/50 mindset.

Employers and the state have not re-designed work in order to reflect women's predilection for caring for their families. Even today ... decades after the so-called women's revolution began

One might also say that carework is also "intrinsically" undervalued in the following sense. By definition, the care of vulnerable people - children, the elderly, etc. - is simply the most important work in the human world, given that human beings are the pinnacle of creation and the only creation that is "image of God." From the beginning, however, when they even bothered to raise the subject of carework, employers and many in the women's rights movement referred to the goal of attaining a "balance" between work and family life; or they publish study after study documenting how women's family obligations "negatively spillover" to harm women's employment. But the language of balance and the subjugating of family to work are both lies. Both fail to recognize that family life is intrinsically more important, *and* that valuable work is performed at home; both therefore set up the conversation about women, work and home on a false basis.

Further, it is unclear *why* carework is undervalued. Is it because women have consistently performed more, and women's work is *systematically* unappreciated? Is it because the market is blind to work that does not have the possibility of producing a "profit" in the sense that the world understands it?

Regarding the valuation of employment in the nature of carework: in the marketplace, women are attracted to the "helping professions" - what is sometimes called in the U.S. "HEAL" professions (health, education, administration and literacy) versus more highly paid employment. But they are consistently lectured by leaders in the women's movement that they should be aiming for STEM positions

(Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) and other more highly paid employment. But it is unclear whether women *want* to work in the latter at the same rate they seek work in the former.

It is also unclear to everyone involved whether women are experiencing discrimination *qua* women, which results in their lower representation in certain jobs, ... or rather whether they lack interest in those types of jobs, or even prefer a career path with the kind of family flexibility that will almost certainly curtail their total lifetime earnings. We know that the latter preference plays a real role in women's employment outcomes, but how big a role?

THREE, Catholic social teaching proposes what is also apparent to each human laborer; a crucial part of the value of human work is its benefitting not only the immediate family but also the larger community... the common good. Absent this understanding, work easily becomes less meaningful and more burdensome for the worker. Especially over time as one gets older and looks for the meaning in their life. But the current configuration of work in women's lives - especially considering their predilection for caring for their children and families - attenuates or even frustrates this necessary aspect of work.

1. Because work hours are long and work is demanding, because commutes can be time-consuming, and because the needs of children and the elderly are great, women are often left with the sense that they are "doing justice" nowhere...not at home and not at work, versus building up the common good. This is especially acute today when the demands of children's education require significant parental cooperation and when the "opportunity cost" of parental absence is that children are instead formed by the wider world with its non- or anti-

Christian values – via technology bringing worldly values directly into children’s hands and minds.

2. Because the modern home is rarely a place of “production,” but is rather a place only of consumption, it is difficult for women to attain the sense that their (often very time-constrained) work at home is a contribution to the wider community. They rather have a sense that they need to get more done at faster rate of speed. Technology has contributed immensely to alleviating drudge work at home, but it has also easily supplanted the domestic work which fuels a sense of “providing” for the family and more, common welfare.
3. At work, women workers are distracted by the competing needs of home. Moreover, it is difficult to find the time or the permission in highly bureaucratized environments to spark reflection on the relationship between that workplace and the common good.
4. The wider economy – national and global -- tends toward driving a wedge between workers and a sense that their work benefits the community. There are great geographic distances between labor and consumption; individual workers might have responsibility for only the tiniest portion of a product’s overall production; much of what is produced satisfies only wants – often advertiser-created wants – and not the real needs of peoples and communities.

Second, you can see why, with so many factors conditioning women’s dis-ease with their current situation, it is more than a little difficult to know how to solve extant problems, or in short, to know which “enemies” to fight on behalf of women’s interests.

Surely, for example *materialism* is an enemy. It fuels a sense that a family needs two full-time workers in order to have the lifestyle they wish,... which increased earnings then inflate the price of commodities, ... which then fuels the sense that two full time workers are necessary, and so on, in a vicious cycle.

Surely too, *economism* is an enemy. This is the problem of a system envisioning people/labor as factors of production, so that workers' family lives are not compassed in employer or governmental policies.

Discrimination against women also remains a real problem. It remains against women *qua* women because there is still the lingering notion that they don't function identically as men - which is another way of men's saying "not as well". Or even discrimination because of lingering notions that women are not as intelligent intrinsically.

The undervaluation of carework too is an enemy, whatever it's origins, because women seem to want to do a higher amount of it than men, whether in paid employment or at home, and because of its intrinsically higher value. But no one person or group controls this, and how would its diffuse causes be opposed in any event? Even many highly placed women underpay the women who help them care for their families.

Sadly too, the "women's movement" in its most vocal form (of the late 20th and early 21st centuries) is also an enemy. Because this movement actively promoted and continues to promote positions that measurably harm women - e.g. legal abortion, and widespread and even subtly coercive government contraception programs which shape a sex, mating and marriage marketplace in which sex is cheap,

abortion is frequent, marriage is in decline, and women are rearing more and more children alone.

Add to this that the opportunity cost of the promotion of contraception and abortion as the *sine qua non* of women's freedom is a dire *lack* of attention to what women most request: public and private policies allowing them to prioritize family while also working.

This strand of the women's movement has also harmed women by associating women's rights with the destruction of vulnerable human life, with hostility toward men, and with hostility toward motherhood and the family. None of these are attractive stances.

Finally, one might say that *women's own uncertainty is also our "enemy"*, though I might more accurately use the work *impediment* here. In our own minds and hearts we are confused as to *where virtue lies* respecting decisions about home and work. We are uncertain what is from nature and what is from culture. We are uncertain whether our predilections respecting work and home are a function of pressures from a male-organized society or our own nature? And of course we struggle with our own attractions to materialism, pride and economism.

You can see, therefore, why today, it's not so easy to get a rapid consensus on how to overcome what troubles women about their current relationship with work. In this environment of many moving parts, and many genuinely overwhelming and diffuse "enemies" of women's wellbeing, **what might be done? I will set out only a few concepts for our discussion.**

First, I think women need to specify carefully the lights and shadows of their current situation as I have begun to do here. This will help avoid descending into simplistic or politicized accounts, as our difficulties do not fall easily on one side or another of the liberal/conservative line. We need to say what we think we know for sure, and what we remain uncertain about. At the very least, we can say for sure respecting the project of “women’s equality at work” that the workplace and the state, to this very moment, has never sufficiently accounted for the greater importance of care of persons/the family. It has rather, encouraged the view that the family has to accommodate and serve what the *market* wants to do.

We need to insist that very few, very elite, and almost always pro-abortion women cannot be permitted to speak for all women. Women’s free choices over the last 5 decades indicate that the small group upon which the media and the UN – to name just a few high-profile bodies- rely for all of their “information” about “what women want” are not representative. A 50-year natural experiment has been conducted regarding women’s choices and they are different from what this tiny, elite group of women is articulating.

Women leaders need to commission on a steady and highly credible basis, excellent research about what women want at work and at home and what benefits them over the long run. A good deal has already been conducted in my country and perhaps in yours, but it is clearly not sufficient. This research will provide a credible foundation for cultural and legal demands.

We must not forget the important role of appealing communications as part of the strategy of achieving equality that respects women’s nature and free choices. Nor the role of public demonstration. We see the

attention this gets for a variety of important causes in all our countries. It worked for some of the problematic causes of misguided late 20th century feminism. I think it still has potential. Sometimes, communications plus public action are the ONLY tools that effectively speak to large corporations, to governments and to the public about the diffuse problems I named above.

As a word of caution, I would add that allying women with one political party only tethers us to their inevitable problems and failures. We need to work across party lines.

We need religious institutions leading the way. The Catholic Church with its path-breaking language and efforts for women at places like the United Nations, and with the language especially of our Popes of the last half-century, is a natural place to model the positions we are speaking about. So are groups like Focolare with its Economy of Communion projects, and other smaller Christian communities and movements.

We need to take on our own disordered attractions to materialism and economism, so that we can, one by one, and small community by small community, model the lives we preach.

We need to empower a great number of women to speak for themselves, without caring who gets credit for being “in leadership,” on women’s issues. Having so many elements, and directed to so many adversaries, a modern women’s movement really doesn’t have much choice regarding style of organization. We need voices and models rising up in diverse places with messages tailored to their experiences and local conditions.

In the United States -- almost “accidentally” as a byproduct of organizing 30 women to speak out against the government’s claiming that religion oppressed women when religious institutions did not provide them free contraceptive and abortifacient drugs – a group of now 45,000 has grown up to speak back to their local governments, media and other institutions. I provide them information about the harms women are suffering under current and misguided feminisms. They speak back locally – with public writing, by lobbying representatives, by mounting demonstrations, and with educational programs at their schools and parishes. This is good, but not as good, not as big, not as loud as it needs to be. But I believe it is a possible model at LEAST to let the society know that our situation is not satisfactory, and that while our adversaries are many and diffuse...we have to start somewhere. The group is call Women Speak for Themselves, and our motto is Empowering. Local. Intelligence. The group is the soul of subsidiarity, and the mind and heart of women, empowered by their faith, to keep reaching for a true equality at work, but one that always puts the needs of the vulnerable first.

Selected Bibliography:

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Jennifer Reid Keene & John Reynolds, *The Job Costs of Family Demands: Gender Differences in Negative Family-to-Work Spillover*, 26 J. of Fam. Issues 275 (2005) (family demands “negatively” affect work performance; more prevalent among women; a mechanism underlying gender inequality at work).

