

REVIEW: MAKING IT WORK

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Sue Innes, **Making It Work: Women, Change And Challenge**. London: Chatto and Windus, 1995, ISBN 0 7011 6211 2, £12.99, pb, pp xvii + 366.

Women are making it work - that is the central theme of this book by Sue Innes, which evaluates the nature and degree of change in women's lives over the last two decades. In the life of families, both in and out of poverty, in emotional lives, in employment and popular culture, the author traces the extent to which women, as a social group, and the voices of individual women identified throughout the text, have met and continue to meet challenge, head on.

There is much to commend in this latest 'state of the nation' survey, or, as the blurb puts it, a 'frontline report', on women's position in the social structure of modern Britain. First, the data through which arguments are fashioned and observations presented cover an impressive range of both primary and secondary sources. In contrast to other work one might place in this genre, such as Kate Figes' **Because of Her Sex** and Susan Faludi's tome on the American **Backlash**, **Making It Work** places heavy emphasis on primary sources and hence avoids the pitfall of re-presenting data which are already firmly placed within a particular conceptual framework.

Second, the book is unfashionably, though refreshingly, normative in spirit. The author, a journalist already well known in Scotland for her consistently trenchant critique of women's social and political position in Britain, links her own observations to those of other commentators in a forward thinking and practical way. Her observations cover familiar territory to those who are

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reflective about gender issues. Labour market participation, wages, childcare, divisions of labour, domestic violence and policy issues all get an airing, in a spirit which is often amusing and incidental, rather than authoritative. In part, this is a consequence of the incorporation throughout the text of women's own voices, recounting their stories as they link into the aforementioned themes. Whilst the inclusion of the reflections of other women focuses on the nature and degree of change, this strategy occasionally reads as though the author is holding back from saying what she really wanted to say.

The book is critical of others in this genre, which, it is claimed, are often either gloomy accounts of the absence of progress for women and the 'myth' of equality, or appeal to a version of 'power feminism' which is premised on embracing the tenets of an entrenched economic liberalism. Yet **Making It Work** is also very clearly located within such a genre. Despite the author's attempt to distance herself from such work, the territory she charts often fails to offer a clear vision of progress toward equality. This is a consequence of the systematic undermining of the welfare state and, as Hilary Land observed in a recent lecture (1995), the erosion of a basis on which kinship claims, between generations and between men and women, can be made and met. In this view of Britain, gender divisions might appear more pronounced than two decades ago.

The author, however, works hard to avoid presenting the reader with a discouraging picture, and is careful to remind us of 'hard' indicators of change, such as the increase in numbers of women who enter higher education. Furthermore, what emerges from this work is the sense of uncertainty, inequality and poverty experienced by many women, yet also vision and possibilities, which parallel many women's experiences at the end of the nineteenth century. A particular experience is the frustration which older women, who struggled and campaigned for change, have with those of us who have been socialised in a climate of formal equality.

YOUNGER WOMEN

A refrain for many generations of women has been to look back and face young women entering adulthood, and comment on their ignorance of their uncertain and unequal futures, and presumption of equality. Certainly that position is reflected in this book. Yet many older voices also comment on the apparent confidence and certainty with which young women now embark on transitions into adulthood. In particular, personal freedom and independent

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decision-making is identified by many women in the book, as a crucial signal of progress, which marks out the distance which women, as a social group, have come. Yet such confidence masks changing dependencies between generations, and obscures tensions and ambiguities in the negotiation of change.

For instance, despite confident assurance that 'our generation will change the world', a recent Demos survey of 18-34 year olds (1995) provides contrasting evidence that distrust and anxiety is a key feature of labour market participation amongst this group. Furthermore, whilst culturally it may be more acceptable for young women to be sexually assertive, and there is sufficient imagery to suggest the commercial power this has, in practice young women often still find themselves being pressured to be sexually active, and put their bodies at risk in an attempt to please their sexual partners.

WOMEN AND WORK

A major shift in the post-war era has been the entry of women with children into paid employment. Women increasingly combine paid work and motherhood in often creative and imaginative ways. This is often perceived as a signal of equality, as though buying into the feverish hours worked by men in Britain, currently an average of 46 hours per week, and the price at which they are often purchased, were something to celebrate. As Ros Coward has commented in her **Guardian** column, a feminism which focuses exclusively on women's right to claim an equal place in the world of male power has somehow lost its place.

Making It Work does not make this mistake. Whilst there is a clear charting of this territory, and some of the processes at work, there is also a critical edge which hints at the fallibility of buying into male careerism and competition, open only to an ever diminishing socio-economic group. The work of Catherine Hakim (1993), for instance, illuminates the problems for debate and solution in this area. She argues that counting the gendered heads of employees presents a distorted picture of labour force participation. For instance, full time employment rates for men have been identified as a particularly problematic issue in late modernity, and one which has fuelled much public angst over the crisis in masculinity which this has produced. Hakim, however, notes that shifting the observation to hours spent in economic activity, rather than the relative balance of full and part time

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employment, reveals a decrease in the proportion of time women with children spend in paid employment. Furthermore, Swedish data reveals a redistribution between men and women as men are shunted out of employment and women drawn in.

Such data clearly has implications for debates about family life, an issue at the heart of **Making It Work**. Clearly the allocation of time spent in labour market participation is an important issue to get right in public debate and policy. Yet this is perhaps the key issue in which change and challenge is occurring, and one which best illuminates the paradox and contradictions which women experience, as we struggle to combine paid work and caring responsibilities. As this book suggests, the part-time work in which women with children are so often located, whilst often articulated as a personal choice (because it fits so well with the school timetable, for instance), has not expanded in response to women's demands, but, rather, to wider contingencies.

Nor does part-time provide the flexibility, to negotiate and combine various demands, which many women seek. And as the book details, the possibility of combining full-time work and childcare is more likely, and more possible, for better educated women. The personal cost for such women may often be high, including delayed child-bearing, and issues of infertility which such delaying sometimes brings, as well as decisions to avoid child-bearing altogether. Clearly women should have choice in fertility regulation and timing, and whether to have children at all. But this choice often seems structured through the loss of immediate benefits offered by paid employment. This hardly seems a choice at all, and raises questions about the way in which choice is structured in relation to decision-making in intimate areas of life. If nothing else, this particular phenomenon marks a clear connection between the public world of civil society and the private world of the family. Fertility regulation is not solely a private matter. It is crucially structured around opportunities for labour participation and household contingencies.

CHILDCARE

It is hard to separate, and the book does not try, the issue of women's paid work from the issue of childcare provision. Social care for children has increasingly been sequestered as a private concern, which individuals, usually women, must arrange themselves. In addition, the monetary rewards

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associated with such care are often - mostly - paltry, often providing a form of low-wage, low-status employment for young women with poor education qualifications. Herein lies a major difficulty for women, especially those women who bought into the idea of potential autonomy, freedom and independence offered by second wave feminism.

Socialised in the 1970s and politicised in the 1980s in the wake of Equal Opportunities legislation, I grew up, like some of the younger women in this book, presuming a world framed by formal equality. I entered a world of low paid, public sector, feminised employment, followed by late entry into higher education and delayed child-bearing. Reading this book, in snatches between my own full-time paid employment and child-caring responsibilities (and joys), I had a sense of my own biographical trajectory being mapped out. The contradictions and tensions to which the book refers, and the deeply placed ambivalence, shared by many women, are also mine.

And in a sense, this is perhaps the book's greatest disappointment. Stitching together, or weaving women's voices into the journalistic account which the author provides, has all the strengths of grounding the argument. However, as the introduction points out, many of these women were chosen because they were likely to be reflective about change. Yet the voices which I most wanted to hear were those women living the changes which the book addresses. Nevertheless, an upbeat conclusion points to the imaginative and creative spirit in which women are trying to balance work, children, community and relationships. Young women determined to move confidently into adulthood, despite the absence of a wage which would provide the basis for independent living; middle class mothers taking part-time secretarial work, as a necessary contribution to the household economy, rushing home to make lunch or cook dinner; older women moving into higher education and embracing a second chance to learn: these new social identities, fostered in the wake of second wave feminism's struggle for formal equality, all signal creative ways in which women are 'making it work'.

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