

# WORKING NOTES

NUMBER 16  
January 1992



FACTS AND ANALYSIS OF EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT

## PUTTING WOMEN ON THE POLITICAL AGENDA

Most debates and discussions on "womens issues" begin in the realm of equality issues. The first steps towards the elusive goal of equality between the sexes became law in 1975 when the EC Directive on Equal Pay was passed. However to truly achieve equality an initial two steps backwards are needed to start at a more fundamental level; that of access to education and training. To really make women "equal" to men they need money and status, how to attain this is the challenge.

At a national level in Ireland bodies such as the Commission on the Status of Women is a welcome initiative as it puts womens issues on the political agenda. This is the second such Commission in the history of the Irish State, the first one having met 20 years ago. Hopefully this Commission will be more successful than its predecessor in having its proposals adopted immediately, as some of the proposals from the first Commission have taken until now to be introduced. Proposals such as the representation of women at the top level in the civil service.

### WOMEN IN THE LABOUR FORCE

A cursory glance at the Irish labour force will reveal a huge absence of women in top management positions. Instead women are more likely to be concentrated in low skilled and low pay positions with few, if any, career prospects.

As unemployment continues to blacken our immediate and medium term horizons the impetus for women to train and equip themselves with marketable skills increases. Yet many are deterred by low self esteem, lack of self confidence literacy problems, the problem of childcare and low monies offered through official training schemes.

As far as unemployment is concerned women's needs are not differentiated from men's. This is

probably due to the fact that in Ireland women represent less than half of those on the live register. The INOU in it's submission to the Council for the Status of Women has proposed that all women who are eligible to sign for credits (without receiving payments) should do so, thus giving all individuals their own PRSI record.

What women need is access to information and funding to help them to help themselves through education and training to the best possible quality of life. This can be achieved both by working in local community groups and at a national level through organised channels of activity where women's issues are dealt with.

### WOMEN AND 1992

Conferences, articles, television and radio programmes which deal with women's issues or questions are becoming commonplace, with the build up to 1991 it is interesting to speculate as to how the single market will effect women.

The first matter of most importance is economic and political representation which is critical if women wish to deal with men on an equal basis. At a European level women are under-represented as elected representatives.

The number of female MEP's has fallen over the years which is a worrying trend if women are to have a high level input into politics at an international level.

The European-wide move towards greater flexibility and automation in the working place along with the trend towards reduced working hours may have negative consequences for women. Trends in "flexibility" could be a user-friendly term for promoting the use of more insecure types of work which do not provide adequate coverage and protection to workers.



Realistically speaking if existing trends are to continue it is possible to envisage a three tier future work force consisting of:

(1) A core Group of well paid employees. (2) A larger group of highly paid consultants. (3) A peripheral casual workforce, badly paid with no employment protection little or no access to training or career development and no social security rights (this group will mainly consist of women).

If this is to happen then the existing social security system will have to be revamped to allow protection of all workers, not merely those in well-paid permanent employment.

In official European Commission reports dealing with the implications of 1992 the 9 sectors identified as being particularly sensitive to post 1992 changes all have a higher percentage of women working in them. Increased competition in international markets is likely to result in a reduced demand for jobs requiring few qualifications (of which women make up the majority). As we move to an information and technology based society this makes it all the more important for women to seek and attain equal education and training opportunities.

## CHILDCARE

In Ireland one of the principle stumbling blocks to date in women's full participation in the labour force has been the lack of adequate childcare facilities. Adequate childcare facilities to allow a higher representation of women in the labour force has been one of the loudest rallying cries of the women's movement over the years but progress is slow. It can not be denied that childcare and social security issues are inveterate aspects of labour policy and should be seen as such.

Unemployment currently haunts all countries of the EC and in turn the future of the European economy. Therefore it is in the European community's best interest to invest and protect all of it's citizens equally. The mushrooming of womens organisations in Ireland is part of a wider process evolving throughout Europe. This is evidence that women are collaborating to effect change in systems that are not seen to be adequate for womens needs. In doing so they are seeking to ensure that they are treated as equal citizens.

## SOCIAL EMPLOYMENT SCHEMES AND THE COMMUNITY SECTOR.

Since it was first introduced the Social Employment Scheme (SES) has attracted much debate concerning its effectiveness to meet the needs of the long-term unemployed. Linked to this debate is the questionable relevance of the scheme as a response to the issue of how to resource community development. The problems that can be identified in the scheme, in many ways, can be traced back to the dual roles that the scheme must perform.

The SES was introduced, in 1985, as a measure to combat long-term unemployment. The SES is a temporary part-time work scheme of 20 hours per week targeted at the over 25's long term unemployed. To participate on an SES a person must be in receipt of Unemployment Assistance or if on Unemployment Benefit must be unemployed for over a year. Payment for the twenty hours is related to welfare payments.

While on the SES and though no longer signing on participants are still not seen as being in employment and therefore able to receive the legal and social protection awarded to a person in employment. Despite the lack of an employment status individuals pay class J PRSI, if they do not qualify for a medical card, and are taxed in the normal way. At the same time they are not on welfare and therefore fail to receive the welfare bonus they would have received if still signing on. The issue of status highlights the difficult situation participants find themselves in while on the scheme and is a major anomaly in the SES. While on the scheme the participants can undertake any available employment without the income from the other employment affecting their payment from the scheme. It must be pointed out that the majority of people on S.E.S. find it difficult to access part-time work.



## 'EXCEPTIONAL MEASURE'.

The SES is funded in the main by the Exchequer. The scheme is also eligible for European Social Funds (ESF) support as an "exceptional measure". In this context the scheme is funded as an employment subsidy for the non-profit making sector under Objective 1, support for industry. ESF support for the SES is due to end in 1992 and unless the scheme is restructured in such a way, so as to include a training element, the SES will no longer receive ESF support under Objective 1. By adding a vocational content the scheme may receive ESF support under Objective 3, measures to address long-term unemployment.

As a response to long-term unemployment the principal objective of the SES is to prevent participants from becoming chronically unemployed through the provision of part-time work in projects identified by local communities as fulfilling a public need.

As a work experience programme the SES has a number of structural difficulties. For example: (1) The lack of training opportunities. (2) The welfare criteria which tends to exclude many women from accessing the programme. (3) The lack of linkages between the scheme and further education and training. (4) The low placement rate for participants into employment. (5) The quality and nature of the work experience varies from sponsor to sponsor with no effective means of maintaining a minimum standard of quality. (6) The short term nature of the scheme. As a programme intended to address the needs of the long-term unemployed the SES therefore clearly had structural problems that need to be addressed.

The nature of the programme and the manner in which it is structured means that there is a reliance by FAS on sponsors, to administer the scheme. In this context the SES has a second role that of supporting the development of projects and work within a local community. As a result the SES is used by a variety of different community and voluntary organizations and in many areas the Local Authorities also use the scheme to carry out work.

The usage by the Local Authorities of the SES raises a different set of issues than does the use of the scheme by community groups. The main issue surrounding the use of SES by Local

Authorities is the issue of whether or not the SES is displacing "real" jobs or enabling work to be carried out which would not otherwise be done. In some Local Authority Schemes, as in the case of community groups, the work experience dimension is questionable.

## ISSUES FOR COMMUNITY GROUPS.

The issues for community sponsors are more complex. This arises due to the nature of community development and the variety of projects and types of organizations who use the SES. The issues will also vary between rural and urban areas and between low and high income communities. In disadvantaged areas, for example, with high levels of poverty, community groups tend to find it difficult to maintain their existence and develop. This happens for a number of reasons (1) The resources available from within the area, in terms of skills, personnel and material are limited. (2) The type of support that is available through State and other agencies is not sufficient. In addition there tends to be restrictions on how such support is used and the support tends to be of a short-term nature. These conditions make it difficult for community groups to make full use of grants and support. (3) The scope for fundraising within disadvantaged areas is small.

Among the drawbacks for community groups who use the SES, particularly in disadvantaged areas with problems as outlined above are: (1) the turnover in personnel and short term nature of the scheme (2) The complex administration of the SES (3) The small amount of the material grant and the restrictions on what this can be used for. (4) The problem for groups of coping with the responsibility of being an employer. (5) The problem of obtaining experienced persons to supervise their scheme on the low wages offered. (6) The burden of PRSI which the group have to pay for using the SES. (7) The level of support from FAS in terms of training for groups who sponsor SES is limited. As a consequence, such drawbacks, puts in doubt the relevance of the scheme in meeting the needs of community groups, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

## NO ALTERNATIVE

The involvement by community groups in sponsoring a SES is a voluntary decision. Having said that, for many groups the absence of an alternative form of support for their project



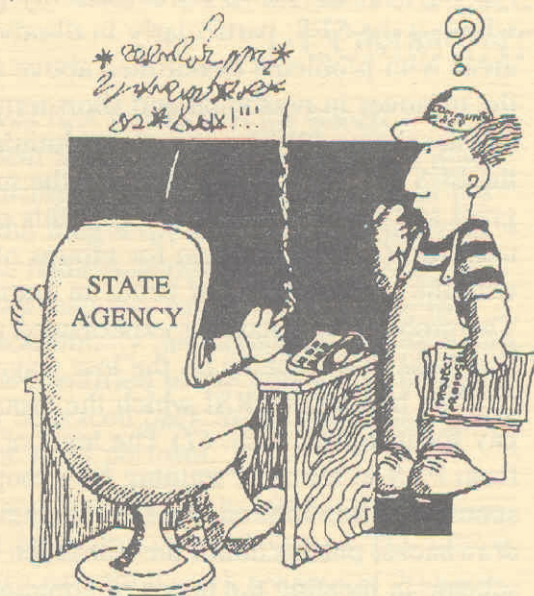
compels them to use the scheme as a means of obtaining personnel and material support. As a consequence, many community groups have developed projects which are heavily dependent on the continuation of the SES. The over-dependency by community groups, on a measure intended to address the needs of the long-term unemployed, to assist community development action creates a number of problems.

Firstly, a discontinuation of the programme, for whatever reason, without the provision of an alternative source of support, would have an adverse effect on community groups. Secondly, it makes addressing the structural drawbacks, affecting the individual long-term unemployed, identified above, more difficult. This arises because any changes would have to find a balance between the needs of the sponsoring group, in terms of the SES enabling them to develop their project, and the needs of the individual unemployed person, in terms of giving him/her a good quality work experience. Both these separate needs are not necessarily compatible.

The shortfall in the SES programme can be gauged by examining what both community development and the unemployed person needs. Community development requires committed, planned and integrated funding on a medium to

long-term timescale. Community groups require trained personnel to support the work of the project. The long-term unemployed individual requires long-term individual support, advice and counselling. They need access to good quality skill training, education and personal development, but most importantly of all the programmes they access must provide a realistic opportunity of employment.

What appears to be required to address both the need of community groups and the individual long-term unemployed are separate but interrelated programmes. One programme designed to resource the development of community groups, by financing personnel and materials on a long-term basis and the other targetted at the long-term unemployed which would provide a combination of work experience, training and guidance. In areas of disadvantage, where there is a lack of employment opportunities in which to generate work experience placements, well resourced community activity can provide an effective mechanism through which to provide work experience opportunities for the long-term unemployed. Without major changes to the structures of the SES which may not be possible without altering its whole nature and purpose, and given the separate needs of both the sponsor and the participant it is difficult to see how one programme can act as a work experience placement for the long-term unemployed and at the same time be a programme used to support effective community development.



Artwork by Mary Whelan from I.P.A.M.  
booklet "To Scheme or not to Scheme"

