

Women and Co-operationA NOTE

from

ANN McALLISTER OLIVARIUS

Following Bulletin 47 and its attention to Women and Co-operation came an interesting note from Ann McAllister Olivarius. She is an American who has been reading for a D.Phil. in Economics for the last 4½ years at Somerville College, Oxford - the first three years as a Rhodes Scholar, and the fourth as an American Association of University Women Fellow. She is submitting her thesis to Oxford this summer and in the fall starts at the Yale Law School, New Haven, Connecticut.

The following outline of the thesis and a brief extract "The Decision to Work Co-operatively" show how closely her work bears on the topic of Bulletin 47.

1. Title and Outline

Working Democracy: Prospects for British Labour-Managed Firms in Growth Industries and in Expanding Job Opportunities for Women.

The thesis examines labour-managed firms in expanding industries to see whether the Co-operative form of organisation has special possibilities for newer and faster-growing service and industrial sectors. The high average level of education required in these sectors and the more 'collegial' nature of the work being

performed may make Co-operatives particularly promising in them. Because women's participation in the labour market is also expanding, both in numbers and in types of jobs they perform, the thesis will also evaluate the woman-managed firm in terms of women's particular work needs to determine whether Co-ops. can be a successful gender-response to unemployment/underemployment and sexual discrimination, and perhaps an effective way to advance women in the labour market.

## 2. Extract

### "The Decision to Work Co-operatively

In Britain today there is both a necessity and opportunity for increasing numbers of women to work: the first due to women's need to achieve the dignity of financial independence or to support herself and perhaps a family; the second because women are embracing employment opportunities previously denied them, calling forth skills, competence, and self-confidence which in turn stir them to blaze their own path in business and the professions - even if to do so means they must create their own jobs.

Government statistics continue to report vast inequalities in pay, working conditions and opportunities between men and women working both full- and part-time, as well as intractable sex segregation of work. The large and growing numbers of women who carry financial responsibility for all or a significant proportion of the family income, as single parents, lesbians, widows, divorcees and partners in dual-worker families, render critical the pay

women receive for their labour. But equal pay is not the only requirement for women who work outside the home. Women also need a work environment that recognizes the extra societal burdens they bear as wives and mothers, and harmonizes with the cultural definition of womanhood which, though changing, strongly colours the attitudes and values women bring to work.

New models of work are emerging which conduce to women's work needs. Job sharing provides flexibility to women with responsibilities for raising children. Job rotation helps redress the imbalance in training and skills between men and women. Autonomous work groups encourage initiative among women and the confidence to participate as fully as their capacities allow.

Co-operatives combine all these advantages, incorporating principles of respect and equality of labour in their basic structure. Being by definition non-hierarchical, emphasising collaboration as opposed to competition, they mesh with the cultural norm that labels competition unfeminine. But even those women who recognise the error of this norm can flourish in the collegial environment of the labour-managed firm. The common practice in Co-operatives of keeping everyone versed in the totality of the business, and of teaching a wide variety of new skills to members who show interest and aptitude for acquiring them, serves to correct the imbalance between men and women in business knowledge. The commitment to forthright and regular communication, criticism and self-criticism, helps women identify and correct their

deficiencies, thus developing competence and self-confidence. The practice of rotating boring work frees women from their traditional functions to do more demanding and interesting jobs. The greater flexibility usually allowed members of Co-operatives in deciding hours of work encourages women to look after themselves while satisfying home responsibilities."

The next chapters examine three Co-operatives in depth: one where one woman labours with six men, one where women work in equal numbers to men, and an all-woman firm. In addition to examining other attributes of these Co-operatives, the thesis will investigate whether they in fact prove to have particular benefits for women.