

"Woman in a Man's Job" (pamphlet, 1987)

Introduction

In 1861 the vast majority of women wage-workers were either domestic servants or laboured in the textile and clothing mills. Jobs in the metal-working industries, usually higher-paid and more skilled, were monopolised by men.

By 1977, things were different. Women were still confined to a narrow range of 'women's jobs', but now it was different jobs that were seen as 'women's'. 53.6% of all women wage-workers were in clerical work, catering, cleaning or hairdressing. Since 1977 we have had ten years of the Sex Discrimination Act. Has that meant real change? The proportion of women workers concentrated into clerical, cleaning, catering and hairdressing has fallen from 53.6% to 52.7%. 0.9% progress!

In 1977 only 0.35% of construction and mining workers were women. By 1985, the percentage had increased... to 0.91. The ghettoisation of women within wage-labour is even worse than these figures suggest. For example, women are concentrated not just in clerical jobs, but in certain sorts of clerical job. 66% of all women clerical workers are in women-only jobs; so are 77% of women in cleaning, catering, and hairdressing, and 70% of women in manual jobs.

This sexual division of labour is not decreed by nature. Today, typing is a women's job. When typewriters first came in it was a man's job. What has nature got to do with the fact that 100% of sound recordists in ITV are men, and 73% of vision mixers are women?

The relegation of women to 'women's jobs' has scuppered equal pay laws. When the 1975 Equal Pay Act came in, women's average hourly earnings were 72.1% of men's. By 1986 they were 74.1%. Most women are in jobs where there are few or no male workers for them to claim equal pay with.

The Sex Discrimination Act has brought some improvement for a small minority of better-off women. Between 1971 and 1981 women increased their share of judges' and barristers' jobs from 3.8% to 10.01%; and of managers' jobs from 18% to 25%. But for most women wage-workers things are getting worse. Over 50% of women wage-workers are now part-timers. They have lower-hourly pay, fewer legal rights and less job security.

One employer questioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission said he preferred single mothers as workers; they needed the jobs and would work harder. But not only single mothers take jobs from economic necessity. Women wage-workers are as much breadwinners as men. If so many work part-time, it is because of another harsh necessity; the gruelling burden of housework.

Although 42% of all wage-workers are now women, the great bulk of housework is still done by women too. Male workers, on average, have half as much again more free time than women workers- and more free time even than full-time housewives.

Domestic drudgery, and the relegation of women to lower-paid and worse jobs- these are the two pillars of women's oppression today. The vote; freedom of divorce, contraception, and abortion; better opportunities in education; equal pay and sex discrimination laws- all these things that feminists have fought for are important. But until social provision- nurseries, laundries, restaurants, cleaning services- frees women from housework, and until women have real equality in jobs, women's liberation will remain a dream.

Only by a working-class overthrow of capitalism, and the replacement of capitalism by a new socialist society based on cooperation and democracy, can women be liberated. But the working class will not be able to settle its accounts with

capitalism until it has combatted the crippling division within its own ranks which marks 52% of working-class people as second-rate citizens.

More women are asserting their rights, and demanding access to jobs traditionally seen as 'men's'. They have to struggle not only against employers, but often against the sexism and the short-sighted 'bread-butter' trade unionism of male workers.

The labour movement has begun to take up this issue, but so far only at the level of official declarations and glossy brochures. This is a necessary beginning, but it is far from being enough. This pamphlet shows how things stand at ground level. We publish it as a contribution to the struggle to change things- not only in industry, but within the ranks of the working-class itself. (Figures from Labour Research, January 1987, and from Social Trends 1987).

1. Everybody stopped and watched...

I started work as a labourer in November 1985, on a Community Programme (CP) Scheme. This is really a jumped up YTS for adults, the main qualification being that you have been unemployed for over a year. Lasting for one year, the job was designed to give you a job and a wage (if you can call it that) while you looked for full-time work. I stuck it out for just five months- and I would think very carefully before doing it again, however long I had been unemployed.

I was employed by the City Council as a "labourer-driver". I worked, with about ten others, in a conservation store, attached to the architecture department. What we did was knock down buildings that weren't wanted, and clean up the materials (bricks, slates, tiles, fireplaces) so they could be resold. So we didn't just sledge hammer them down, we took them apart brick by brick.

The job could be anything from demolition to cleaning bricks, to driving bits of wood round to somebody's house. On that level it was good. It was hard work but I enjoyed it. As I'll explain, it was not the nature of the work that would make me think again.

There was always a quick turnover of staff- people leaving either because they had found a job (rare) or because their year was up. I found out after some weeks that many of the men there spent one year on CP and one year unemployed alternately and had been doing so for some years- the job situation being so bad. What were we doing basically was doing council workers' jobs on the cheap- with no prospects.

All of the other workers were men apart from the secretary who worked part time and had nothing to do with the manual labour. I was the only woman who had ever applied. And that is why I got the job- as a result of a policy of positive discrimination by the council.

Positive discrimination is all right if it means giving women the right of equal opportunity as mean to obtaining skills, getting highly-paid and harassment-free work. What it meant in this case was the right to low pay, non-skilled labour and subjection to quite vicious sexual harassment because positive discrimination hasn't extended to enough women in the construction industry, but it is still very rare and I get the impression that it is rare for women to go into it as a labourer. Mainly it is the women who have slipped through the net to get onto training schemes and gone to work in building with a skill: chippie, brickie, electrician, or whatever. Such training schemes were virtually non-existent in my town unless you could manage six months on £38 a week after which you still wouldn't be skilled enough to compete on the job market anyway. Apprenticeships are just unheard of.

I have done heavy work before. My job at the Post Office involved loading mail bags onto station wagons and trains. I had no idea however what to expect on my first day at this job. I went there with a completely open mind. I was careful, though, to refold my copy of the *Guardian* so that a women's page article on lesbianism wasn't showing. I did know that I

was going into an all-male environment and one where the men probably had little experience of working with women and I wasn't prepared to open myself out just yet to either jokes or abuse.

'Women aren't often given the opportunity'

Despite my job at the Post Office, I wasn't sure if I would be physically capable of the job. Women aren't often given the opportunity to find out what they are physically capable of: except having babies or moving dead-weight bodies from one bed to another. That work is devalued, not considered heavy manual work, so although women do the heaviest work going, we tend to think we can't handle heavy jobs.

Well, the day I started they had just finished demolishing an old barn and I was told to go with three of the men to clear up the site and pick up all the materials to be brought back and cleaned. When we got there, there were loads of bricks and stuff lying around, bits of wall that still had to be knocked down and concrete slab foundations to be lifted from the ground.

We couldn't get the pick-up truck close to the site but had to put it on the other side of a field. That meant we had to load wheelbarrows up and push the stuff to the truck across bumpy hard waste ground with holes and pits and old bicycle wheels and God knows what else lying around. Then the barrow had to be pushed up a ramp onto the back of the truck. When I saw this I wondered whether I was going to be able to do it — and they were obviously wondering the same thing. So I mucked in and started loading a wheelbarrow up with bricks. When the barrow was full I almost instinctively went to stand to on one side to let one of the men push it to the truck. But then I thought "no". I couldn't let them think that I was only prepared to do the light work or that they had to carry me on the job. I had to start the way I meant to carry on. So, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, I picked up the end of the barrow.

And everyone stopped...dropped whatever brick or slab they were holding and watched. And I was really sweating because I did not know if I could get that barrow anywhere near the truck, let alone up the ramp. Well, I started to push. It was really heavy and the bloody thing was swerving and toppling all over the place, dropping bricks out on the way. One of the men shouted, "Do you want a hand?" I could feel their smiles on the back of my neck, I thought I could say "You don't ask other men that, do you?" or "No, no, I can handle it", but I didn't know if I could. So I decided that honesty was the best policy: "I don't know but if I do I'll shout". Somehow I got that barrow across the ground — minus a few bricks — up the ramp and onto the truck. I don't know to this day how I did it. But I had a little feeling of triumph despite how foolish I must have looked.

I can do it now. There is a skill involved in pushing a loaded wheelbarrow which is not just to do with physical strength (though that helps) but is also about balance, weight distribution and sense. You have to keep the back of the barrow as close to the ground as possible without touching it and keep your arms straight so the wheel takes the weight and not you.

But I didn't know that at the time. There was me lifting it as high as I could and trying to run it across the ground with my arms bent up and straining like mad, losing balance all over the place. It wasn't until about two months later that one of them showed me how to push a barrow. Well, we did that for the rest of the day. By the time I got home my muscles were screaming. Everything ached. I felt really sorry for myself.

Since then I think I have developed physical strength that I didn't have before. I can now lift much heavier weights. One of my later jobs was lifting large blocks of sandstone from the ground to above waist level onto the truck. If I'd had to do that on the first day I would have been in serious trouble. But you develop gradually. I don't think there is anything biological

about women's ability or inability to develop strength. The only problem specific to a woman that I had was when I was on my period — which I was that first week. I lose a lot of blood and feel very weak and lethargic. But I never mentioned that, or used it to get out of work. If I did I would have reinforced their view that women can't or shouldn't do the work.

If one of the men came in one morning with a hangover and said "I feel tired today, you lift for me" it would have been "John feels tired". But if I had done it, it would have been women — not Jean — can't handle the job. So for women who suffer very badly with their periods (pains, sickness, fainting) it would be another big hurdle to get over as far as men's attitudes are concerned, and I was very little help in crossing it for any women who came after me. I felt I had enough to handle just by being a woman and being there. My biggest hurdles were yet to come.

2. Working with the macho men

I began to find that most men had very short memories. If I worked particularly hard and well one day, I would get a comment like: 'Well, you might be a woman but I'd rather work with you than so-and-so, the lazy bastard'. But only the next day I might be doing the same work, at the same pace, and slip or drop something, or not manage in some way and there would immediately be smiles and comments about how hard the work must be for women.

The fact that you did well before is never remembered. It puts you in the position of constantly having to prove yourself. You can never let up. This was especially true when new men started. People were coming and going quite quickly, since it was a one-year Community Programme scheme. And every time a new man started you had to work at being accepted and proving yourself capable of the job all over again.

I can't think of any men who work under that kind of constant pressure. None of them had to prove themselves daily. I did it for 5 and a half months. My main problems in terms of being accepted, however, extended beyond the actual work. From the first day I arrived on the job I felt that they were having to modify their behaviour because I was there. We used to have a 15 minute break in the morning, and a half-hour break at the middle of the day. At these times we sat in an old hut at the back of the yard with a table and chairs in it and made a massive pot of tea.

These breaks, as time went on, became a time I dreaded. But at first it was just a feeling of unease. I had to say to myself consciously: 'I am not in their way. I have every right to be here.' On the first day I think they expected me to pour my tea and go and sit with the secretary. And, to tell the truth, I was so nervous that's exactly what I wanted to do. But then I would have been out of that hut for the whole of the year. So I forced myself to go in and sit down. The first thing they wanted to know was, was I married and did I have kids. The second thing was why I wanted to do this job. But mainly I felt that more questions were unspoken than asked; and that many things would have been said had I not been there.

The first real manifestation of this was 'Don't swear in front of the lady'. I mean, there was I in steel-capped boots, overalls with the crotch down to my knees, a 'benny-hat' on my head, and they felt embarrassed about swearing in front of a 'lady'! I hardly looked like a dainty little sparrow.

As time went on, things got easier. They, or least most of them, began to feel easier about talking and swearing in front of me. One of the men, Eric, insisted on being a 'gent' for many months to come. Another, Alan, when things eased up, began to say and do things that he had obviously wanted to do from the start. A woman working there was a threat to him, and he was going to make it as nasty and uncomfortable for me as he possibly could. In fact his intention was to drive me out. But that's another story, which I will relate later.

After I had been there for about two weeks, we were given a new building to knock down. It was a big square brick building with a flat roof and enormous coping stones round the edge of the roof. A group of us went there in the truck to take the coping stones down and get the roof off ready to start on the bricks. We went without the gaffer, which everybody liked because it meant we could work to our own time and have a laugh.

After a while I noticed that the roof was made of asbestos and said that none of us should touch it. We should get the council in to remove it properly before we got on with the rest of the job. None of us were wearing gloves or masks. We just had hard hats and overalls on. Most of the men didn't even bother with the hard hats. Anyway, everybody laughed and carried on ripping the roof up. I tried to argue with them, but got nowhere, so Just refused to handle it myself, and when we got back to the yard I mentioned it to the gaffer. He just shrugged his shoulders, and when I got back on the site nothing had been done about it. This was a man who had worked in industry (mostly engineering) for about 30 years.

During the course of the day I must have mentioned it to him about three times. So the next day he turned up on the site and handed out gloves and masks, and told everybody to wear them. Well, everybody hated this. Firstly because I was responsible for bringing the gaffer out on site, but mainly because now they had to wear the safety gear. The objections to this were that they were so uncomfortable — which they were: bloody awful rubber masks strapped behind your head and which made your face sweat. But mainly because it was 'cissy'. You know, 'I'm a big man. I can handle it.'

And my not handling it was largely put down to my being a woman and needing an excuse to get out of the work. I was the problem, not the asbestos. I tried to argue it out with them -- about the effects, about how it takes years for the effects to show, about the kind of safety procedures that ought to be used to remove it — pointing out that gloves and a sweaty mask weren't the answer.

Their response was 'we have it in our council houses, so we've already had contact with it anyway', or 'I smoke. I die one way or I die another. What's the difference?'

The one argument that got any kind of positive response was when I said that Steve McQueen had died from cancer as a result of working on lagging ships with asbestos several years before. Macho-man personified had been brought down in his prime. But the main response was laughter and 'cissy'. They actually started ripping bits of asbestos off the roof and throwing the lumps at me!

The next day I went and introduced myself as a new member to the union office on the other side of town. All the workers at the yard were in UCATT, but no-one else took much interest in the union. The only reason most of them were in it was because they had to. And the union took little notice of them as well, being only on a one-year scheme. The union rarely showed up at the yard.

Well, I asked the official what the council or the union policy was on asbestos. He said, 'we haven't got one'. He asked me what it looked like, and when I told him, he said, 'oh well, it's safe asbestos'. When I said that there is no such thing, he told me not to worry about it.

As I was leaving the union office I asked the official if there were any other women in my branch. He immediately said no — and then... 'oh yes, there are... two women... they're brickies as well' (shock, horror). And then: 'Well, it does us no harm, does it?'

'Harm?' I said. 'Harm?' We're doing you a f...ing favour, mate'. He said, 'Well, there's no need to take that attitude, darling'

I did no more about the asbestos issue except to refuse flatly to handle it myself while making sure that I found equally

heavy work to do instead, so that the idea of me shirking could never be used against me.

3. The art of the put-down

As time went on I got to learn new skills and to know the other workers better. At training school I was learning the basics of brick work, concrete and drain laying. At work I learned how to saw wood properly, how to knock a chimney breast out, how to carry long pieces of wood without falling over. I was also learning more and more about the attitudes of sexist men.

On my first day I remember realising that they had been warned a woman was starting. They were all waiting for me to arrive and I got introduced to them all, one by one. No one starting after me got such a reception committee. It was, 'All right, mate?' and no more. They were all really curious as to what was going to come through the door -- "does she look like the back end of a bus?" — and had certainly been discussing it for a few days. No-one ever told me what had been said, but, knowing some of them now, it wouldn't take much imagination to work it out.

Dipstick, for instance, (so-called because he was so tall and thin you could almost use him to check the oil) would very tentatively have defended the right of a woman to do such work, but then would quickly have fallen in with the jokes about now being able to have a quick fuck in the bogs before starting the day's work.

He was a very bony, angular young man, a bit like one of those jointed metal rulers. He didn't stand up, he unfolded. When he went to pick up a brick to clean it he could stand with his legs apart, dead straight, and bend from the hips with his back also dead straight, joints cracking. He would grab the brick with both hands like a mechanical digger. As he came back up his face would go through several different contortions; cheeks puffed out, mouth pursed, eyes squinting and brows rapidly moving up and down. And as he clicked back into shape he would blow the air out of his cheeks. Puffing and blowing, he would clean the brick, put it aside, and the whole process would start again.

After about five bricks, he would stand up straight, feet still firmly rooted to the ground, shoulders well back, elbows stuck out to each side, fingers linked together in front of his chest, and say, "Take five, lads, take five." (Five minute break). It was a joy to watch.

He made up for his weird appearance and funny antics by knowing "everybody"... personally. He knew the secretary of the local miners' strike committee and he knew the chief of the local fraud squad. And he talked of both as if they were of equal importance in his life. He knew the Coventry boxer Errol Christie, whom he called "Es" and he had had tea with, and given advice to, the lord mayor.

Dippo hated the Tories (Maggie was a "cow") and loyally defended the Labour Party against all comers. But his political fervour would rapidly be turned into a joke in his desperate need to be "one of the lads". Hence my, probably accurate, guess about his attitude to my starting work. Dippo was everybody's butt and mine, too, I'm afraid. If he joined in with "the lads" about how heavy the work must be for a woman, for example, I would say, "You're not exactly King Kong yourself." And everybody would laugh because they agreed, while possibly thinking that they themselves were.

But I had learned at the Post Office, where sexism and sexual harassment are rife, that the quickest and easiest way to put a cocky man down was to make his friends laugh at him. At the Post Office there were other women. You could always get someone to laugh with you or back you up. In this job I was alone so the put-down was an even more necessary tactic.

Then there was Eric the Red. He got this name, not because of any political affiliation, but because he spent all his spare time acting out battles between the roundheads and cavaliers.

I don't know who started the nickname but history wasn't a strong point with any of us.

Eric lived for these weekend battles and told us all about them during the week. He really looked the part too. He was a big man with masses of black, wiry hair which exploded in all directions when he washed it. He had a small pointed beard and a moustache, and one roving eye which looked at somebody else while the good eye was looking at you. Apart from faking battles, Eric went to college in the evenings and was trying to get into university. He had spent about 25 years in engineering factories and wanted out. Power to his elbow, as they say. But he felt that embarking on an academic life set him above everybody else. He knew or had an opinion about absolutely everything. He didn't talk to you — he told you, even if he had walked into the room half-way through a conversation.

You get one everywhere. At some places they are called 'Ino' (pronounced 'I know') because these are the words which invariably precede all others. At the Post Office he was called "Aspro" because it gave you a headache just listening to him. It always is a him. I've never met a female "Ino" yet.

'He would explain to me about sexism...'

Well, Eric knew everything. He even knew all about sexism and would explain to me patiently despite the fact that twice a day I would have to tell him "fuck off" for telling the others not to swear in front of a "lady". Being superior to everybody else in the yard, Eric liked to think of himself as a gaffer. He would tell people what to do, including Pete who was the gaffer!

He worried and moaned about how Pete was running the place — like, not charging customers enough for bricks or fireplaces. When Eric walked into the workshop we would say, "Quick, look busy, the gaffer's coming" and rush to find a hammer or a saw. And when Pete came in we'd say, "you'd better watch your step, mate, or we'll tell Eric on you". The gaffer, not feeling too comfortable in that role, used to complete with Eric for his job, rather than tell him where to get off.

Sometimes they would row and one time it almost came to blows. They behaved like a couple of stags, locking antlers over who was running the yard.

But Eric was like putty. If you stood up to him or shouted at him, he wilted. If you told him he was wrong about something he would agree — and then become a noisy advocate of your argument, as if it had been him saying it all along. I remember him saying to me once how terrible it is that there is no such thing as an all-British car and about British industry needing to stand on its own two feet. So I said that an unemployed Detroit car worker would probably not see it like that — that we are all members of the same class, with the same bosses, whichever country we come from. Immediately, he proceeded to explain the evils of international capitalism to me. But the effects didn't last. A few days later he was again shaking his head sadly and expressing his sorrow that there is no such thing as an all-British car...

Unlike Dippo, Eric was not concerned to be "one of the lads" so much as to be better than them. Like Dippo, he was everybody's butt. He never joined in some of the worst sexist comments — but he never objected to any of it either. Everybody there had something — a weak spot — that the others worked on. Pete "Pedrosa" was bald; Tom had permed his hair and wore an earring; Alan was fat; Kevin had a cherry tattooed on his arse.

But Dippo and Eric were the butts. And I was a woman. What a disability! And when I came in for the flak, knowledgeable Eric kept quiet and political Dippo loved it, because while the pressure was on me, it was off them.

4. The little woman

I would recommend a building yard as a fairly good school for learning new skills, and as a high-class academy for dealing with sexist quips.

I noticed that men never call us "woman" unless it is prefixed with the words "The little..." But there are many other terms used which either stand us on a pedestal, out of reach — "lady" — or lay us on our backs — "the bit of stuff". This last one was used by Kevin one day when talking about his girlfriend. I said: "Oh you mean your bit of fluff?" "Yeah," he smiled. "The bit of skirt?" "That's right". The bit on the side?" "Ha ha, ha". "The little woman?"

By this time, Kev realised that I was taking the piss. The next day when he was talking about her again, he stumbled over what to call her. I tried to help. "The bit of stuff?" He said, "Well, what should I call her?" I asked him what her name was. Mary, he said. "Well, that's as good a name to use as any".

Another day, as we were laying hard core for a car park, Kev raised his shovel above his head and slammed it into the ground shouting, "Who's shagging my missus?" The others were laughing at his antics until I said, "I suppose it depends on who she asked." The idea that she might have had a say in it didn't occur to them. Women don't do things. We have things done to us. Occasionally, however, some of the men would feel compelled to tell me how reasonable they are really. "I do the washing up sometimes", or "I help around the house sometimes", always accompanied with an injured or self-righteous expression.

Dave, the brickie, one day told me how he would hate to live alone as I do. I asked him if he thought he would be lonely. But he said no it wasn't that. It was more the thought of having to cook and clean for himself.

I asked him if he ate food. "Of course I eat", he said. "Well how can you eat if you don't cook?"

"I've got a wife and three daughters at home to do that", he said. "So you need nursemaiding then, a big capable man like you." Not liking this idea very much he admitted that despite having four women in the house he did occasionally turn his hand to a bit of housework now and again. "So what do you want?" I asked. "A medal?"

While sitting in the tea-room one day it struck me that I must be the only one there who made her own sandwiches, and washed her own overalls. They all had another "her" to do it for them — for free. I heard tell of a woman in a similar situation to mine who used to open her snap-box every day and say, "O God, not cheese again. Couldn't he do any better than that?" I wish I'd thought of that one.

Women have a very specific place in our society. And it isn't in a builder's yard. It is servicing the men who work there — domestically and sexually.

When men are confronted with the reality of a woman who does work there, they become full of contradictions. While they were raising scaffolding or lifting great slabs of sandstone around with me they were drooling over and yelling at any "bit of stuff" that walked past. "Get 'em off, darling".

They would constantly pass comments about the way women looked and dressed. Criticising the smallest detail that didn't fit in with the fantasy on the front of Vogue or on page three of the Sun.

The women that walked by were either overdressed or didn't cover up enough. Had on too much makeup or were too plain. Were too fat or didn't have enough to get hold of. All this despite the fact that many of them had beer guts, tattoos or were constantly showing the "builder's bum" as they worked.

Such stupendous arrogance never ceased to amaze me. The weakest and most simple minded of them felt unquestionably better suited to the work than any woman. The ugliest or worst

dressed felt able to criticise any woman that walked by. Where do they get their confidence from? What is it about having a prick and balls that makes them feel superior? Of course, to "have balls" means to have strength or "guts". Whereas to have baby-making equipment is a sign of weakness. What do men call each other if they behave like fools? — "cunt" or "tit".

When you explain that you don't want babies then you're not "natural", the possibility of having a choice not to use this equipment doesn't arise. Because, as I said before, we have things done to us. We don't do things ourselves.

I was often bombarded with questions in a genuine wish to understand why I didn't fit in with their "norm".

"Why are you working here?"

"Wouldn't you prefer an office?"

"Would you like to sit behind a typewriter all day? Well neither would I!"

Then, "why don't you want kids."

"Because I want my time to be my own."

"But women should have kids. They're nice. You can teach them things and play with them."

"Do you clean up the shit or stop the crying?"

"Well, why won't you marry?"

"And have someone like you around telling me to clean up the shit and not to work on a site?"

The inevitable conclusion was "I don't think you like being a woman. I think you want to be a man."

"What? And behave and have attitudes like yours? In my book that would definitely be a step down in the world."

It was hard to combat their ideas without getting personal. But then they are always personal to us. They want to tell us what to wear. They want to tell us what we can or can't do. They want to categorise us; to push us into a role. And if we reject that role we are unnatural and a threat.

Usually the response to that threat is laughter and jibes; to belittle us. But sometimes, depending on how insecure the man is, it gets nasty. There came a time when the joking stopped and the nastiness began.

5. A daily battering.

By the time Christmas was over I felt fairly well established at the yard, and that the men were used to me. They no longer gave me the impression that they modified their behaviour because I was there but felt free and able to talk, swear or behave in their usual manner.

This talk and behaviour was almost always sexist and racist (all of us were white). There was always plenty of opportunity to have a debate or, more often, a row about something or other. But on the whole it was generally accepted and taken for granted that "Jean's a bit of a leftie" or "Jean has got funny views".

One of the men, however, Alan, was not so easy going. Perhaps because he was not very confident in himself or maybe because he was not much liked by the others, he decided to use me as his butt; the scapegoat by which to elevate himself in the eyes of others. I don't know.

I do know that his behaviour had the specific aim of making me as uncomfortable as he possibly could — in fact of driving me out. And he very nearly succeeded. I started out by just talking dirty. Not much different from the behaviour of the others — general sexist comments and jokes that are a "normal" part of men's behaviour and that make any woman feel defensive. He would talk about "tits and bums", page 3 pin-ups and use derogatory language about women in general.

When women are forced to listen to this stuff they have three choices. They can ignore it and take no part in the

conversation, thereby cutting themselves off from relations; or they can laugh along with it, or if it is directed specifically at themselves, blush and giggle in their discomfort and unease; or they can argue and fight back, thereby keeping some semblance of self-respect.

Now, the problem with working in a builders' yard is that sexist comments come thick and fast. If you jump on every one you very quickly become a "bore" or have "no sense of humour" and make an enemy of everyone around you. So you let a lot of it pass — while the laughter sticks in your throat. That's the regular, routine problem. But Alan went way beyond that. It soon became apparent, and not just to me, that Alan was talking in this way not as a part of everyday conversation, but as a means of embarrassing me. As time went on his descriptions of what he did to his girlfriend the other night, or what he would like to do to the "Sun-bird" became more and more graphic. His way of talking about women became more insulting and he made a sexual innuendo out of almost everything that was said.

At first I dealt with it in the same way I had dealt with everyone else's sexism — I put them down or laughed at them. During one of Alan's bouts, for example, I remember saying, "Well, if you do it with as much finesse as how you talk about it, god help whoever is on the receiving end".

But I soon learned that this was just what he wanted. It was grist to his mill, and would drive him on to more and worse of the same. He started bringing in filthy cartoon books and similar material to show round and talk about — consciously excluding me from looking at them, but obviously watching its effect on me. 'Those that didn't like it just kept quiet'. After a while even some of the men began to look uncomfortable. It was too much even for them. But none of them had the guts to tell him to shut up. Those that didn't like it just kept quiet and those that did, one in particular, egged him on.

After several weeks of this daily battering I began to lose my sense of humour and feel very isolated. I knew, and so did the others by now, that Alan was doing all this for my benefit. If I answered back, I was punished with more — mostly indirect filth said or shown to everyone but me. Sometimes comments were specifically directed at me; but direct or indirect it was all designed to wear me down.

One day, when we were all sat in the hut with the pot of tea — an enormous green affair with a big spout he drew balls and hair under the spout and a vein going up it, then poured the tea out, laughing uproariously. Another day, when we were getting ready to go home, he watched me pull my overalls off my shoulders and said. "That's what I like to see, a woman undressing".

He would make comments and signs behind my back about the size and shape of my arse as I put my foot on a chair to undo my laces, making me self-conscious about my movements and my body. His behaviour was unbelievably childish for a 25 year old, but coupled with the filth that came out of his mouth all day and every day, and with the fact that it was clear why he was doing it, these little things became part of the whole process of destroying my confidence.

His sexism was never physical — only verbal. If he had ever put his words into action he would have been a rapist. But sexual harassment is not just about bruises and scars. Verbal harassment is just as difficult to deal with.

For in fact, if he had ever physically abused me the other men might have been quicker to come to my defence. But mental scars are not so easy to detect. It took a long time for me to admit to myself that I was a victim of sexual harassment, and much much longer for me to persuade any of the others. But for me, and possibly some of them, it was now no longer a joke.

I was losing sleep, lying awake at night rehearsing what I would say to him the next day. But when the next day came, when the onslaught started, I was too tired and worked up to get the words out. Instead I blushed and stammered and my heart pounded. I began to take pills to try and sleep. My head ached constantly and my neck and back muscles were rigid with tension. I was irritable and nasty to people and isolated myself at work and at home so that I had no-one to talk to about it.

I hated going to work — to a job which I had previously enjoyed — and dreaded going into the tea room. When I did I sat in the corner from which I could view everyone without having to look at them, and where nothing could be done behind my back. And I kept my head down and read my paper, talking to no-one and letting no-one see the effects that Alan was having on me. In short, I was ill. And I was desperately unhappy. I was angry. But my anger was directed at me, for not being able to deal with it, adding to my unhappiness and loss of confidence.

To be able to turn my anger to effect, I was going to need help. I could not deal with it alone. And since that made me feel inadequate and a failure, I could not accept that I needed help. It was a never-ending circle. For the privilege of working under these conditions I was picking up £67 a week. The work itself wasn't worth that let alone the sexist shit that came with it.

6. 'A bad indictment of this society'.

I had always, up till this time, fancied myself as being pretty sharp when it came to dealing with sexism. I had the reputation in the Post Office of being "hard". During my years as a socialist and of being in the women's movement I have spoken about sexual harassment and talked with other women about it, feeling subconsciously pretty confident that if it ever happened to me I could handle it. Ha! Such ignorance! I had never dreamed of the crushing effects that it has upon you, both mentally and physically — but especially physically. Because it is not just words. A bit of clever repartee can deal with mere words. It's a whole attitude and outlook of men who want to put women in "their place" and are prepared to act on it.

And if you are isolated amongst a lot of men who basically think the same, it is very difficult to combat. As far as Alan was concerned, I had a "fanny" and my place was either at home with the kids or putting it out to men like him. It was definitely not in a builders' yard, and he was going to let me know it.

The hardest thing about dealing with it was the isolation. If there had been even one other woman to just raise an eyebrow to when Alan started, as if to say, "here he goes again", I could have kept it in perspective. But there was no-one. The other men either enjoyed it or kept quiet.

And, being on your own, you start to wonder if it's you — if you're the one who's acting weird. "Maybe I'm imagining things." "Maybe I'm taking this too seriously". Alan's behaviour at times was so childish it would have been laughable — if there had been someone to laugh with.

It finally came to a head one day when we were sitting in the tea-hut. I, as usual, was reading my paper, keeping my head down and talking to no-one. Alan, as usual, was talking filth. I can't remember the actual words any more. Thank god. But take it from me, it was vile, insulting stuff and all designed for my discomfort.

After a while Dippo, who enjoyed Alan's behaviour immensely because it kept the pressure off him, the usual scapegoat, asked Alan if he'd seen the latest Unipart Calendar, and was he going to bring it in. That was enough! Putting up with his talk and his dirty behaviour was bad enough. I was not going to have pictures on the wall that he could bounce comments off all day long.

"If he does bring it in, it's not going up", I said. Alan smiled — at last, a fight!

"Why not?"

"Because I find it offensive," I said. "I find you and your filthy mouth offensive and I think you have a problem and should see a doctor".

All the while I was saying this, I was reddening and stammering and shaking. It was part of a great speech I'd worked out in my mind one sleepless night when the pills wouldn't work. But, of course, it never comes out right when you need it.

Alan beamed. "If you're going to do a man's job you'll have to take what comes with it."

It was the first time he'd actually come out straight with what he was up to. I got furious. I grabbed his lapel and shouted into his face, "This is not a man's job. This is my job. And if you can't take my being here, you leave." Another part of a great speech...but after all the weeks of putting up with his innuendos, being alone and losing confidence, I blushed, stammered and became inarticulate. Alan went out of the hut with his mates, laughing and joking — the hero of the day. I started to cry.

There was one man left in the room, Dave the brickie, and I was mortified letting him see me cry. Dave was older than most of the others, married with four kids. He didn't like Alan or his behaviour. Mainly, I think because he didn't think you should act like that in front of women rather than because it was offensive in itself. But by that time support on any basis was good enough.

We started to talk about it. When I called what was happening 'sexual harassment' he looked startled and suggested that I was exaggerating. He'd heard of it before but didn't recognise it in Alan's behaviour. He thought of it as bum-pinching and sexual favours for promotion — that kind of thing. But he accepted what I said eventually. I then told him that if you take verbal harassment, physical sexual assault and rape altogether, then I did not know of any woman who hasn't suffered it in one form or another at some time in her life. He again looked startled.

Finally he said: "That means that out of my wife and three daughters, one of them is quite likely to suffer it in its worst form at some time?" I said "Yes". He sat down and became visibly distressed. "That's a pretty bad indictment of this society, isn't it?"

We spent the rest of the afternoon working together and talking about various aspects of the same subject. He had also thought that rape was committed by sex-starved old men in dark alleys. But he was open-minded enough to accept my facts and figures about rape being carried out in the most part by husbands, boyfriends, fathers, etc., at home.

'And she backed me up...'

As luck would have it, Dave spoke to his wife that night about what had happened and she, I believe, backed me up. Also, that very night, there was a film on TV about sexual harassment at work — a slightly romanticised but nevertheless pretty accurate portrayal of a working-class woman whose job and livelihood was threatened by it and its effects on her private and social life. This drove the lesson even further home.

That same night I again lay sleepless in bed and then finally decided that I needed to get help. I was prepared to go to my gaffer and to the council next day to report it. Going to the union was going to be a non-starter as the bloke there was as sexist as the rest and would certainly not take it seriously. Just getting that one supporter had made all the difference in the world and I realised that I had been stupid in trying to deal with it alone.

The next morning I told the gaffer that I had been having problems with one of the men and may want to take it through the grievance procedure. I wanted to see if Alan was going to bring in his calendar and carry on where he'd left off. But Alan was off work that day and Dave and I continued our discussions. The previous evening Dave had persuaded his eldest daughter to take self-defence classes!

The next day Dave and I came into the tea-hut to hear Alan saying to one of the other blokes how disgusting it was that a judge should be caught kerb-crawling. (There was an article on it in the Mirror that day).

I said "I thought kerb-crawling would be right up your street, Alan".

To which he replied, "I would never go to a prostitute."

"Alan," I said "a prostitute with any sense would never come to you."

"No, because I wouldn't pay her. I don't have to pay for mine."

"She'd have bigger and better reasons than that," I said, and waited for the backlash. But to my surprise the backlash never came. He just looked crushed and embarrassed. I later found out that Dave had talked to a couple of the other blokes about Alan's behaviour and, deciding that enough was enough, they had taken him out and threatened him with a beating up if he didn't pack it in. Dave had also gone to the gaffer, quite independently from me, and told him that if I raised any complaint of any kind, he would back my statements up. Alan left soon afterwards, having found a full-time job — night security man in a police training centre! Not many openings for harassing women there.

Unfortunately Dave left not long after that, though fortunately for him, he'd also got a job. From the day Alan was threatened with a beating my working conditions immediately got better. It might not have been a very orderly way of dealing with the problem and it might not have been for the best of motives (I think it was still on the basis that you don't behave like that in front of women) but it was heaven for me. I went back to enjoying my work — lifting great slabs of sandstone, knocking out chimney breasts and driving my pick-up truck. The pay was abysmal, but at least I could sleep at night. I was constantly aware, however, that it would only take another Alan to turn up (and there are plenty of them about) for the whole process to begin again. Except that next time I would be wiser about dealing with it.

7. How to deal with the sexists.

I left the yard half way through the one year scheme, having found a full-time job. I was lucky.

Most of the men I was working with will now be on the dole and in a year's time back on another one-year scheme. Me, I really enjoyed learning new skills. It was creative, useful work and should be treated with more respect. All the men I worked with were skilled or good at something or other. Some had worked in industry for years before becoming unemployed. And the work was good. Now they are unemployed again.

It's such a terrible waste! These are men who should be building houses, and they are now on the dole, while thousands go homeless or live in rat-holes. But there are other kinds of waste too. There are millions of women who don't even know they are capable of such work, and who are never given the opportunity to find out. And if my case is anything to go by (and I'm sure it is), when women do push their way in, it's such a horrible experience in terms of sexual harassment, that they are likely to get out again, quick.

'All the women had a story to tell'

My experience was not a one-off isolated case. It was not one particularly nasty man giving one woman a hard time. Sexual harassment is suffered in one form or another by thousands of women in all kinds of work — in shops, offices, factories,

hospitals. And thousands of women lose their jobs, their right to work, as a result of it. At the Socialist Organiser summer school I gave a talk on my experiences and all the women at the workshop had a story to tell. One of the women had worked in a shop. Her boss had chased her round the shop, blocked her way in the store room, touched her up, etc., etc. And she couldn't tell him to get his hands off because she would have lost her job!

Because my job was considered "men's work" and because I was isolated, my situation was particularly bad. But whenever it occurs, sexual harassment must be dealt with. As long as women are treated as, and portrayed as, sexual objects, and as long as women are possessions of men, there will be men like Alan around. What can we do? We can make life difficult for them! We can change our working conditions and make sure the Alans of this world get their comeuppance sooner and more efficiently than happened in my case.

* For a start no woman should be put on a building site on her own. She must always be with other women. Even if an employer had a good policy for dealing with sexual harassment, an isolated woman finds it hard to come forward with her complaint, and she has no witnesses.

* Secondly, there should be separate washroom and changing facilities for women on sites. When I went for my interview I remember my prospective gaffer (who was looking uncomfortable at the thought of my getting the job) said, "there are no separate toilets or anything like that, you know". At the time I just shrugged my shoulders, eager to let him know that such trifles would not put me off. On reflection my response should have been, "Why aren't there?" Have you ever been in a workplace where there are no toilets for women? If women can do the work then provision should be made for them, even if there are no women there at the time. If women can't do the work, then the work shouldn't be done. It's either too dirty, too hard or too dangerous — conditions to which no-one in this day and age should be subjected.

* Thirdly, it makes no sense to have a policy of positive discrimination (PD) for women to get such work without providing PD for good training so that women can apply for the job in the first place; without providing the hours and facilities (such as creches) to free women to do the work; and without back-up policies and agreements for dealing with sexual harassment at work.

Finally the unions in the construction industry should be taking all these issues up. What little I saw of my union rep didn't inspire me with confidence to take my case there at all. As more women get into the industry they are going to have to organise as women within their union and force them to take issues like sexual harassment, recruitment of women and safety at work seriously. I can just imagine one of my old work mates reading this and thinking to himself, "god, if these are the conditions in which women are coming into the industry then they can just stay out. We didn't ask them and we don't want women to come in anyway. We don't get special treatment, so why should they?" But actually they would directly benefit from it. When women in America started working in the coal mines they fought for safer work practices from which both the men and the union had to admit they benefited.

From what I saw during my short experience, men in the construction industry work under dirty and unsafe conditions and they are largely non-unionised and poorly paid. In the building industry there are more deaths and injuries than in any other industry. Women who go into building suffer these conditions, as well as a special affliction of their own — the daily battering from men's sexist attitudes. So women will have to fight to change those conditions. And of course the improvement of women's conditions can only improve the

men's as well. But the women are going to have to organise to get this done. That's why it is so important that women are not left isolated on individual sites — apart from the personal grief she would suffer, that is.

So, the next time any woman who has read this gets whistled and shouted at as she walks past a building site, look a little more closely as you are sticking your fingers up. You may see a woman under one of the hard hats who is probably receiving much worse treatment for longer periods of time. And she is badly in need of support and encouragement.

8. Afterword

In recent years, as the TUC guideline shows, sexual harassment has become a union issue, taken up by many unions such as NALGO, NATFHE, NUPE and in some instances campaigns against sexual harassment such as the removal of pornographic pictures have been won. But still every year thousands of women lose their jobs, their right to promotion and their self-respect as a result of sexual harassment.

Union branch procedures and complaints negotiating procedures can take up and may successfully deal with specific individual cases of harassment. But they don't change sexist attitudes or the way men and society see women.

More often than not, when women in a workplace object to sexist behaviour, abuse or to pin-ups, their first battle is with the union, to make them take the matter seriously at all. When I worked in the Post Office I complained about the nude pin-ups. They were on the union wall! When I argued that they be taken down I was laughed at and when I began to deface them, one of the union men threatened to take me to the management and charge me with destroying his private property! It wasn't until some other union women and also the cleaning women who did the union room began to complain as well that we won the argument and the pin-ups were taken down.

That unions have a policy on sexual harassment is to be welcomed. But it is women organised in the workplaces who will make their policies effective where it matters. Finally, we need positive discrimination for women to get the training and the jobs that we are normally excluded from, such as construction work. But we also need positive discrimination and positive action for women to become active members of their unions. Places on union committees at all levels should be reserved to ensure that women members are represented, and women's sections of unions should be set up to ensure that women's views are aired. That is positive discrimination.

Unions must look at the times their meetings are held, the places they are held in and the lack of crèche facilities which exclude even the most willing women members from taking part. That is positive action. In this way a woman isolated in her workplace as I was in the builders' yard, need not suffer alone and in silence.

This is sexual harassment:

"Repeated and unwanted verbal or sexual advances, sexually explicit derogatory statements or sexually discriminating remarks made by someone in the workplace

*which are offensive to the worker involved;

*which cause the worker to feel threatened, humiliated, patronised or harassed, or;

*which interfere with the worker's job performance, undermine job security or create a threatening or intimidating work environment.

Sexual harassment can take many forms from leering, ridicule, embarrassing remarks or jokes, unwelcome comments about dress and appearance, deliberate abuse, the offensive use of pin-ups, pornographic pictures, repeated and/or unwanted

physical contact, demands for sexual favours or physical assaults on workers."