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Five feminist myths about women's employment*

ABSTRACT

Feminist sociology has contributed substantial revisions to theory, especially in the sociology of work and employment. But it is also creating new feminist myths to replace the old patriarchal myths about women's attitudes and behaviour. Five feminist myths about women's employment are discussed whose acceptance as fact is not damaged by being demonstrably untrue. Arguably the most pervasive is the myth of rising female employment. The myth that women's work commitment is the same as that of men is often adduced to resist labour market discrimination. The myth of childcare problems as the main barrier to women's employment is commonplace in advocacy research reports. The myth of poor quality part-time jobs is used to blame employers for the characteristic behaviour of part-time workers, including high labour turnover. The issue of the sex differential in labour turnover and employment stability illustrates clearly how feminist orthodoxy has replaced dispassionate sociological research in certain topics. The concluding section considers the implications of such feminist myths for an academic community that claims to be in the truth business and for theories on the sexual division of labour.

The expanding field of research on women's position in society that is now labelled gender studies has created a wealth of new knowledge on sex roles, cultural stereotypes, socialization processes, women's labour force participation, occupational segregation, income differentials and sex discrimination. Although the bulk of the new research has been carried out since World War Two, particularly over the last two decades, the new field is refreshingly historical, multi-disciplinary and comparative in its approach, adopting the broadest possible perspective in the search to establish broad trends, to assess explanations for existing social structures, to explore diversities of experience and innovative social arrangements (Walby 1986; Pahl 1988; Bradley

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1989). In the process, a great many myths about women's (and men's) personalities, intellectual abilities, aspirations, achievements, and labour market contributions have been demolished (Myrdal and Klein 1956, 1968; Huber 1973; Barker and Allen 1976), with substantial revision and enrichment of theory in sociology, economics, psychology and other disciplines, particularly in relation to work and employment (Blau and Ferber 1986; 1992; Dex 1988b; Purcell 1988; Crompton, *et al.* 1990).

Counterbalancing these achievements, however, feminist sociology has gone on to create a new set of feminist myths to replace the old patriarchal myths about women's attitudes and behaviour. Five feminist myths about women's employment are discussed in turn, each of them well-established 'facts' about women's position in the labour market, all of them demonstrably untrue, but whose acceptance as fact is not damaged by the lack of any solid basis. The examples are taken from the sociology of work and employment. Similar examples could be found in other fields, including social policy research. The final section considers why myth-creation occurs in sociology, whether it weakens the discipline, and discusses broader implications for an academic community that claims to be in the truth business.

THE MYTH OF RISING FEMALE EMPLOYMENT

Perhaps the most pervasive myth is the notion that there has been a substantial increase in female employment throughout this century, particularly since World War Two and among married women. A huge range of expectations of social and economic change are based on this idea. Labour sociologists and economists address the consequences for women's paid work, most notably for the degree and pattern of occupational segregation, the sex differential in earnings and women's perceptions of sex discrimination (Mallier and Rosser 1987; Walby 1988; Crompton and Sanderson 1990; Sorensen 1990). The 'fact' that large numbers of women now have an occupation of their own has been the key factor in proposals to classify women to social classes on the basis of their own occupations instead of the occupation and socio-economic status of their husband or head of household, proposals that have stimulated a lively debate over practical feasibility, theoretical appropriateness and implications for empirical research (McRae 1990; Dex 1990; Goldthorpe 1990). The expected consequences are taken to include changes in marital and family relationships, the division of domestic labour and who does the dusting, wives' relative powerlessness in marriage, household finances and poverty levels, lifestyles and consumption patterns, with discussion typically addressing the problematic non-appearance of new social patterns.

The thesis is demonstrably untrue. The evidence for Britain was published over a decade ago, and is periodically rediscovered, to little effect (Hakim 198; Joshi *et al.* 1985; Robinson 1988: 117; Hakim 1993a).

Contrary to widespread belief, there was little or no change in female workforce participation rates from 1851 and possibly before, until the late 1950s. There was no change in female full-time work rates from 1841 until 1993, which remained at an almost unvarying level of one-third of women of working age. Economic activity rates for women aged 15–59 years have increased steadily in the post-War decades, from 47 per cent in 1961 to a projected 74 per cent by 2001 (Hakim 1993a: 99). However all change in the post-War period has consisted of the substitution of part-time for full-time jobs, and the substitution of married women for single women workers, largely as a result of the abolition of the marriage bar.[1] There was absolutely no increase in the volume of female employment, measured in full-time equivalent[2] numbers, from World War Two up to 1987 in Britain. Rather than underlining the increase in women's employment, we should be seeking to explain the long-term stability of female employment despite dramatic social and economic change over the past century.[3]

Trends in Britain are repeated in other European societies. In France, for example, women's economic activity rates fluctuated in the range 34–43 per cent, with few exceptions, for over one hundred years 1856–1975 (Riboud 1985). From a historical perspective there was no clear long-term upward trend in female labour force participation rates from the mid-nineteenth century until 1970 or later in Britain, France, Spain, Sweden or the Netherlands (OECD 1988: 129–30; Jonung and Persson 1993). Only the USA has had a steady and accelerating growth in women's employment, although there was little or no growth in married women's average work experience, measured in years, from 1930–1980 (OECD 1988: 129; Goldin 1989). The British labour force may represent an extreme case, but other European countries are also discovering that to a greater or lesser degree the apparent rise in female employment in recent decades actually consists of a conversion of full-time jobs to part-time jobs, of women switching from a full-time involvement in the workforce to a part-time involvement instead, typically on a permanent basis. The substitution of part-time for full-time jobs in OECD countries was first explored by de Neubourg (1985) who found that over the decade 1973–83, in France, West Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Britain the number of full-time workers had declined while there was substantial growth in the number of part-timers. More recently, the dramatic increase in female employment in Sweden has also been revealed as largely illusory, with calls for sharper measures of hours actually spent in market work (Jonung and Persson 1993). Even the

USA has witnessed a *decline* in women's total market work hours since 1940 (Coleman and Pencavel 1993), and similar results could be expected for European labour markets.

Only in the late 1980s was there a genuine expansion in the volume of female employment, measured in full-time equivalent jobs, as women's full time work-rates and absolute levels of full-time work began climbing alongside the continued expansion of part-time work in Britain (Hakim 1993a: 98–104), a trend that was temporarily halted and reversed by the recession in 1990–93. The social and economic significance of this development is being overlooked, because it is widely held to have already occurred. The evidence is that the predicted consequences of increased employment are manifesting themselves (Hakim 1992: 136) but are largely restricted to people in the full-time workforce (Hakim 1993b: 309).

THE MYTH OF NO SEX DIFFERENTIAL IN WORK COMMITMENT AND WORK ORIENTATIONS

Criticisms of labour market discrimination as unfair and unjustified often rest on claims that men and women do not differ in work orientations and behaviour, that women workers are just as committed, dedicated, hard-working and productive as are men. Surveys regularly show that employers see female workers in a different light from male workers. Women are perceived to be less career-conscious, with weaker or no commitment to paid work, less likely to seek training and promotion, less likely to approach their job with a long-term perspective, having high turnover and absentee rates, and be unwilling to take on responsibilities at work that would compete with their domestic responsibilities (Hunt 1975: 55, 94–101, 104–9). These work orientations are attributed to part-time workers more strongly than to full-time workers (Hunt 1975: 105–7; Beechey and Perkins 1987: 118). For the most part, such survey results are interpreted as evidence of how prejudiced employers are, how little they know about their female workforces, even when the evidence demonstrates that employers' stereotypes are corroborated by workers' behaviour (Hunt 1975: 95–6, 109).

Recent research demonstrates that non-working women and women working part-time continue to hold more traditional attitudes towards women's role in the home and at work than are held by women working full-time, attitudes that echo male views on women's role (Martin and Roberts 1984: 169–84; Dex 1988a: 124; Hakim 1991; Alwin, *et al.* 1992). The different work orientations of men and women are demonstrated most succinctly by their non-financial work commitment, defined as the wish to continue with paid employment even if the purely financial motivation were eliminated (presumably

TABLE I: *The sex differential in work commitment*

(a) *If without having to work you had what you would regard as a reasonable living income, would you still prefer to have a paid job, or wouldn't you bother? Proportion (%) saying they would still prefer a paid job*

		1984–5	1989
All employees		70	74
Women:	all	66	76
	full-time	71	77
	part-time	56	74
Men:	all	74	72
	full-time	75	72
	part-time	45	80

(b) *People still preferring a paid job as a per cent of population of working age (16–59/64) years*

	1984–5	1989
All persons	54	59
Women	44	54
Men	65	63

Source: Hakim (1992) Table 9.

for the intellectual and social rewards of a job, the lack of which is underlined as among the key hardships of unemployment). A question of this sort has been asked in national surveys in the USA, Germany and Britain, invariably revealing a marked sex differential in work commitment which is duplicated in the contrasts between full-time and part-time workers (Warr 1982; Hakim 1991).

If they could have a reasonable living income without working, two-thirds of working women would still prefer to have a paid job (though not necessarily the same job), compared to three-quarters of working men (Table I). Men and women working full-time differ very little in work commitment, with three-quarters saying they would carry on working in the mid-1980s. In contrast, only half of men and women working part-time would continue to work if they could afford not to. When the question was repeated in 1989, the work commitment of part-time workers had risen sharply, closing the gap with full-time workers, and eliminating the sex differential of the mid-1980s (Table I). The research finding is based on a small sample for 1989, but is statistically significant. Similarly, a 1992 national survey, covering workers aged 20-60 years, found no sex differential in non-financial work commitment within the working population (Gallie and White 1993: 18). It would be easy to conclude that the sex differential in work commitment and, associated with it, the commitment gap between full-time and part-time workers, had disappeared from the working population by the early 1990s in Britain. This is not so.

Firstly, the commitment of a part-time worker to a part-time job is not equal to the commitment of a full-time worker to a full-time job. At the minimum, the two levels of commitment differ in degree, and arguably they differ qualitatively as well. Secondly, the full extent of the sex differential in work commitment is of course understated by data on the *working* population. Well over one-third of adult women choose not to work at all in Britain (see Table II). Unlike working men, working women are a heavily self-selected group with above average work commitment (Fiorentine 1987; Hakim 1991). After adjusting survey results to take account of the non-working sections of the population of working age, the sex differential in work commitment in the *adult* population of the working age is revealed to be much larger than in the workforce alone (Table I). Recent surveys confirm that this sex differential persisted into the 1990s. A national survey of people aged 33 years in 1991 found that employment remained more central for men than for women – for example two-thirds of young women compared to half of young men agreed that one could have a satisfying life without a job, and two-thirds of young men compared to 45 per cent of young women agreed that a person must have a job to feel a full member of society (Wiggins and Bynner 1993: 175–9). These results for Britain are in marked contrast to the sharp rise in work commitment among cohorts of young women in the USA (Rexroat 1992: 24).

We conclude that by the early 1990s about half of adult women were committed to paid employment, compared to two-thirds of adult men.[4] In effect, the adult female population divides into two fairly equal sectors. The first group of women are committed to careers in the labour market and therefore invest in training and qualifications, and generally achieve higher grade occupations and higher paid jobs which they pursue full-time for the most part. The second group of women give priority to the marriage career, do not invest in what economists term 'human capital', transfer quickly and permanently to part-time work as soon as a breadwinner husband permits it, choose undemanding jobs 'with no worries or responsibilities' when they do work, and are hence found concentrated in lower grade and lower paid jobs which offer convenient working hours with which they are perfectly happy. Women working part-time or not at all hold the most traditional sex-role attitudes, and are married to men with even more extreme views of women's role in the home (Martin and Roberts 1984: 176; Hakim 1991). In West Germany, Britain and the USA, part-timers are twice as conservative as full-timers in their emphasis on a wife's domestic responsibilities taking priority over the market work, *even when there are no children of any age at home*, that is, before there are children or when they have left home (Alwin, *et al*, 1992).

The division of the adult female population into two rather different groups is not fixed and immutable. The relative size of the two groups

TABLE II: *Patterns of employment and non-employment among women of working age, 1991*

Age groups	% working		% not working	Base 000s = 100%
	full-time	part-time		
All women				
16–24	42	7	51	75
25–34	40	22	38	85
35–44	35	34	31	78
45–54	34	33	33	64
55–64	14	21	65	59
All ages	34	23	43	360
Women with no dependent children				
16–24	64	7	29	37
25–34	77	8	15	32
35–44	56	22	22	24
45–54	37	32	31	48
55–64	14	21	65	55
All ages	45	19	36	196
Women with dependent children				
16–24	20	8	72	33
25–34	16	31	53	51
35–44	25	40	35	53
45–54	25	37	38	15
55–64	12	19	69	3
All ages	21	30	49	155

Source: 1991 Census 2% individual Sample of Anonymised Records, Great Britain, which is Crown Copyright. Data for women aged 16–64 years by age and whether they have dependent children living with them in the same household.

will differ between countries, and over time, and some women will switch between groups over their lifetime. The key point is that the existence of two qualitatively different groups polarizes women's experiences in the labour market, as Humphries and Rubery (1992), Coleman and Pencavel (1993) demonstrate and the 'average' or 'typical' working woman becomes a fictitious and misleading illusion.

THE MYTH OF CHILDCARE PROBLEMS AS THE MAIN BARRIER TO WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

Evidence has long been available, for Britain and for other European societies, showing that part-time work is chosen voluntarily by women who prefer to give priority to non-market activities and hence work not at all for long periods or only part-time (Martin and Roberts

1984: 41, 74; Nerb 1986; Hakim 1990, 1991; Marsh 1991: 27, 66–9, 75; Watson and Fothergill 1993). None the less the dominant feminist view continues to insist that part-time work is an unwilling 'choice' forced on women by the need to cope with childcare responsibilities, a compromise taken up *faute de mieux* rather than as a positive preference. Even taken at face value, the argument is unpersuasive. It fails to take account of part-timers having the highest levels of job satisfaction despite being restricted to the least attractive jobs, nor the fact that childcare problems do not prevent large numbers of mothers from working full-time, while others insist childcare must be a full-time activity.[5]

But the key problem with the argument is that the popularity of part-time work, and of not working at all, extends well beyond women with childcare responsibilities (Watson and Fothergill 1993: 214). Women with dependent children have the highest rates of part-time work, and they are also very likely to be out of the workforce (Table II). However over half of the more numerous group of women with no childcare responsibilities also choose not to work at all, or only part-time, the percentages increasing over the lifecycle, so that the proportion of women working full-time declines steadily across age groups (Table II). At best, the thesis about childcare explains patterns of work and non-work in the 25–34 years age group. It does not provide a general explanation for patterns of work and non-work among women of working age.

Cross-national comparisons are often used to demonstrate the importance of childcare facilities over and beyond all other causal factors, whether structural or personal. A well known example is the comparative study of women's employment in the USA and Britain carried out by Dex and Shaw (1986). In their conclusions, Dex and Shaw underline the importance of childcare tax allowances in facilitating women's full-time work in the USA and explaining the much lower incidence of part-time work in the USA as compared with Britain. However the authors have previously noted that most families recover no more than 20 per cent of their childcare costs through the allowance, and lower income families much less than 20 per cent. The authors acknowledge a series of other causal factors, such as the fact that employers pay for health insurance for full-time employees but not for part-time employees in the USA, whereas in Britain's free health care services are not dependent on working status or contributions; that British women have a greater preference for part-time work; and that the British fiscal and social welfare systems make part-time work more attractive to both employers and workers than in the USA (ibid: 8, 126–7). The overall conclusion to be drawn from their careful study is that women in Britain make 'freer' choices in that they are less constrained by fiscal, social security and national health service policies that shape or even dictate the labour market behaviour

of women in the USA, and that given the choice, a large proportion of women actively choose part-time work, despite the fact that in both countries part-time jobs are concentrated towards the bottom end of the occupational hierarchy. Yet the study is commonly referred to as proving the importance of (tax allowances for) childcare services. Recent research on the economics of childcare in the USA confirms that while childcare costs have a significant negative effect on women's labour force participation, the magnitude of the effect is far smaller than expected: universal no-cost childcare is estimated to increase women's labour force participation rate by just 10 percentage points (Connelly 1991: 110). Clearly, childcare costs have only a limited impact on women's work decisions (Humphries and Rubery 1992: 253).

International bodies usually present a more balanced assessment of the empirical evidence. The European Commission has now noted the significance of the fact that part-time work is most prevalent in all Member States except for Belgium, not among women of child-bearing age between 25 and 49, but among older women of 50 and over (European Commission 1993: 159). In 1991, one third of women in employment aged between 50 and 64 worked part-time in the Community as a whole, compared to half of those over 64 years. In contrast, only 29 per cent of women aged 25 to 49 were employed on a part-time rather than full-time basis. Indeed in a number of countries – Denmark, France, Italy and Greece – the lowest proportion of women working part-time was in this age group. As the Commission notes (1993: 159-60), this fact is not wholly consistent with the argument that the major reason for women working part-time is to enable them to reconcile employment with family responsibilities. The report goes on to acknowledge that childcare responsibilities are a factor in the rise of part-time work, but not the only factor nor necessarily the most important factor. In 1991, significant proportions of working women in the 25 to 49 age group chose to work part-time only: 63 per cent in the Netherlands, 45 per cent in the UK, almost 40 per cent in Germany, and almost a third in Denmark. However 30 per cent of working wives with no childcare responsibilities also chose to work part-time rather than full-time, and the proportion rose as high as 66 per cent in the Netherlands, as compared with only 36 per cent of single women without children. In Germany and Denmark, over 40 per cent of married women without children chose part-time work in preference to full-time work, with similar contrasts in other countries. Only in Greece does the incidence of part-time work remain at a low and unvarying level for both single and married women without children.[6] Earlier Commission reports have acknowledged that child-care services, while important, are clearly not a crucial factor when a comparative perspective is adopted. The much quoted example of Sweden, with highly subsidized childcare and high levels of women's

employment is countered by the rarely quoted example of Portugal, with the highest, *full-time* female work rates and non-existent childcare services (European Commission 1990: 92–8; Meulders, *et al.* 1993). Work orientations and attitudes are the 'hidden' factor that national statistical surveys could measure, but rarely do.

Another key factor is that reliable methods of birth control became available to the cohorts of women born after the Second World War and entering the labour force in the 1960s. Having children is no longer an unforeseeable hazard of women's adult lives, but volitional. The most recent British survey of women's fertility behaviour and attitudes indicates that women in the lower social classes hold marriage and childbearing as their principle objectives and reach these goals earlier in life than women in the higher social classes who are more likely to plan employment as well as marriage. The main attitudinal difference between ever-married women was in the proportion anticipating employment as a key achievement before marriage: only 8 per cent in Social Class V rising to 38 per cent in Social Class I (with class based on husband's occupation at marriage). Within each social class some women were 'planners' and some 'just let things happen', but the second group consistently had more children: half had three or more children compared to one-third of the 'planners' (Dunnell 1979: 19–27). Childcare problems are in a sense chosen by women who choose to have large families, a less reversible decision than most employment choices. Research in the USA shows that women's work commitment is a key factor in women's employment decisions around the time of pregnancy and birth. All women respond to the economic costs of labour force withdrawal; only women with no work commitment (who actively prefer a homemaking role) are influenced by financial pressures and the job's convenience factors, such as part-time or part-year work (Desai and Waite 1991; see also Rexroat 1992: 25). In effect childcare is an issue primarily for women who prefer homemaking and are secondary earners. Finally, many women now avoid childcare problems by simply not having children. Women born in Britain since the Second World War display a rising trend of voluntary childlessness, to just under 1 in 5 for women born after 1955, which is strongly associated with increasing level of educational qualifications, that is, with an investment in their human capital and the employment career (Werner 1986; Werner and Chalk 1986).

The evidence is incomplete, but it is consistent with the thesis of women's polarization into two groups that are currently fairly evenly balanced in size: a group giving priority to marriage and child-rearing as their central life activity, and another group giving priority to market work as their central life activity.

THE MYTH OF EXPLOITED PART-TIME WORKERS

Historically, the trade union view of part-time jobs, in Britain and in most other European countries, was that they could not be regarded as 'proper jobs' and were a marginal element in the workforce. This became a self-fulfilling prediction, as trade unionists colluded with employers in collective bargaining to exclude part-time workers from the contractual employment benefits offered to full-time workers.[7] A 1980 national survey of working women found that half of full-timers compared to one-third of part-timers were offered opportunities for further training; 41 per cent of full-timers as against 16 per cent of part-timers had opportunities for promotion; 96 per cent of full-timers and 77 per cent of part-timers received paid holidays; 80 per cent and 51 per cent respectively were entitled to sick pay. Among employers who ran a pension scheme, 74 per cent of full-timers and 22 per cent of part-timers belonged to the scheme (Martin and Roberts 1984: 46–53). By 1991, among people whose employer had a pension scheme, 61 per cent of full-time men, 55 per cent of full-time women and 17 per cent of part-time women were members of the pension scheme (OPCS 1993: 118). Fortuitously, this joint policy of marginalizing part-time workers fitted well with the fact that the work most readily organized as part-time jobs by employers is typically lower grade and low skill work with low earnings. In most countries, part-time work tends to be located towards the bottom end of the occupational hierarchy. However employers perceive part-timers as not seeking demanding work with opportunities for training and promotion (Hunt 1975; Disney and Szyszczak 1984: 80; Beechey and Perkins 1987: 118).

The volume of part-time work has now risen to levels where marginalization is no longer a viable policy. Added to this, in Britain, the fall in the volume of full-time permanent 'standard' jobs has eroded trade union membership levels to the point where trade unions are forced to reposition themselves; most now actively seek members among workers in non-standard jobs, in particular among part-timers. The new line is that part-time *workers* are no different from full-time workers, and need the same degree of employment protection, rights and benefits; however employers have constructed part-time *jobs* to be the worst jobs in the workforce. Behaviour which used to be seen as a characteristic of part-time *workers*, such as low work commitment, high labour turnover, absenteeism, or lack of interest in training and promotion, is now argued to be a characteristic of part-time *jobs*, with employers rather than workers in the role of guilty party (Beechey and Perkins 1987). The argument is that part-time workers will behave just like full-time workers, if only the quality of the jobs can be improved. In some cases these arguments are rehearsed with reference to male full-time workers and female part-time

workers, so that the sex differential in labour market behaviour is overlaid on the contrasts between full-time and part-time jobs. However, as noted above, the evidence from all surveys which address the question is that part-timers' compromise between market and non-market activities differs qualitatively from that chosen by full-timers, so that the contractual employment rights demanded by full-time workers are not given the same priority by part-timers who typically prefer convenience factors over good pay and promotion prospects (Martin and Roberts 1984; Desai and Waite 1991; Hakim 1991; Marsh 1991: 69; Watson and Fothergill 1993; Hakim 1993b: 106).

One of the most frequently heard demands in Britain for the improvement of the quality of part-time jobs has been for part-timers to have the same statutory employment rights as full-timers (Disney and Szyszczak 1984; Beechey and Perkins 1987: 158). In fact they already had the most important rights, and EC proposals to improve them through the Social Charter and Directives on atypical workers would not substantially alter the situation, since it is widely agreed that all such legislation will have to include, in addition to the usual two years' length of service requirement, some hours or earnings threshold below which workers will not be eligible for employment rights and social security benefits, largely because of disproportionate administrative costs. The 8 and 16 hours a week and minimum earnings thresholds applied in Britain have not been very different from the minimum hours and earnings thresholds applied in other countries, which range from 8 hours in Belgium to 15 and 18 hours in Germany and (for unemployment benefit) 17 hours a week in Sweden (OECD 1994: 95). The European Commission proposed a common threshold of 8 or 12 hours a week (Disney and Szyszczak 1984: 85; Hepple 1990; Meulders *et al.* 1993: 83; Meulders *et al.* 1994: 30) which the Conservative UK government refused to accept up to late 1994.

The argument of inadequate protection for part-timers persisted because labour lawyers presented their evidence in relation to the definitions of part-time work employed in labour law, namely work of less than 8 hours a week or less than 16 hours a week, whereas labour economists and sociologists used the statistical definition of less than 31 hours a week, so that the two groups were not comparing like with like, were not even discussing the same categories of (part-time) workers (Hakim 1989a; Hepple and Hakim 1995) – a problem that arises also in other EC countries and bedevils cross-national comparisons (Meulders *et al.* 1994: 1–2; OECD 1994: 74). Thus feminists quoted labour lawyers who insisted that part-timers were not covered by employment legislation and that EC Directives would have a major impact on the employment protection of part-timers (Disney and

Szyszczak 1984: 85, 1989), while other social scientists pointed out that three-quarters of full-timers and half of part-timers met the job tenure and hours requirements for the main employment rights, so that the gap between the two groups was minor rather than total (Hakim 1989a; Marsh 1991: 57). Similarly employers would be castigated for increasing the number of part-time jobs of less than 8 hours a week, thus depriving these workers of all employment and social welfare rights (Disney and Szyszczak 1989: 226; Beechey and Perkins 1987: 155). Although there are millions of women engaged in marginal work involving very few hours per week, such as babysitting (Hakim 1989b), schoolchildren and students in full-time education probably account for most of these jobs, typically in the form of Saturday jobs, which increased dramatically in the 1980s (Hutson and Cheung 1991). By winter 1992-3 students and schoolchildren aged 16–24 accounted for 584,000 part-time jobs, 11 per cent of the total.

In March 1994, a House of Lords ruling on part-time work was acclaimed as a major victory (Napier 1994), and reported as extending full employment rights to the 6 million part-time workers in Britain. In reality, the judgment only applied to *statutory* employment rights, with no impact on the *contractual* employment rights that are of more immediate interest to most workers, such as rights to paid holidays and pensions. In addition, the Conservative government took a long time to concede that the House of Lords had forced it to accept more extensive changes than those proposed by the EC, which accepted the need for minimum hours and earnings thresholds. It finally accepted that from January 1995 people working less than 16 hours a week had the same statutory rights as those working over 16 hours a week, subject only to having completed two years' service with the employer. While it is true that women gain most from this decision, the workforce affected by it is a small minority by any standards, and the statutory rights gained are restricted.[8] The two years' length of service requirement for such rights, which applies to all workers, is in practice a more important barrier than the minimum hours threshold: 41 per cent of part-timers compared to 23 per cent of full-timers do not have the necessary two years' tenure with their employer (Table III) because, as the next section demonstrates, part-time workers are less stable workers than full-timers. A series of decisions by the European Court of Justice in September 1994 were arguably more important, and apply to all EC member countries, but proved to be a two-edged sword. The ECJ confirmed that part-time workers had the right to join employers' pension schemes. However it also decided that in order to eliminate sex discrimination in retirement ages, employers could raise women's retirement age from 60 to 65 years to equalize with men, without any compensation to the women so affected.

THE MYTH OF EMPLOYMENT STABILITY AMONG WOMEN AND PART-TIME WORKERS

The issue of the sex differential in labour turnover and employment stability illustrates most clearly how feminist orthodoxy has replaced dispassionate sociological research in recent years. Post-War writers on the 'controversial phenomenon' of women's employment sought to encourage the trend, defending women's right to work, demonstrating women's physical and mental abilities for wage work, and suggesting arrangements (such as part-time work) that would facilitate women's double burden of domestic work and employment (Myrdal and Klein 1956, 1968). None the less, their explicit espousal of this cause did not prevent a dispassionate data-based analysis of the issue. In particular they addressed the sex differentials in work attitudes, behaviour and performance that were claimed by employers to justify their preference for male workers over female workers and to justify lower rates of pay for women doing the same job as men. Of these, the most important behavioural difference was women's higher rates of absenteeism, higher labour turnover and lower employment stability with one employer, all giving rise to additional costs for employers. Employers' investment in on-the-job training offered a lower return for female workers, who were less likely to stay with the firm, due to more job-hopping or to leaving the workforce for domestic reasons; there were also the extra recruitment costs of replacing workers who left.[9]

'Employers' problems' were analysed in detail by Myrdal and Klein (1968: 91–115) who admitted that all the available evidence, for the USA and Britain, was that women were the less stable workers, with substantially higher absentee rates. They found that absenteeism was 'considerably higher among women than among men – often twice, three or even more times as high' even when absences associated with pregnancy were excluded. One study found that women lost about twice as much time as men, with married women looking up to three times as much as single women. They conclude that 'one of the major objections against the employment of women is based not merely on prejudice but on actual experience. The statistical data are undeniable evidence that, with all due variations as from one type of employment to another, the rate of absenteeism is higher among women than men in each occupational group' and they attributed this in part to 'a certain laxity' and 'immaturity' in some women's attitude to their job (ibid.: 94, 97, 105). Similarly, they found labour turnover to be very much larger among women than among men, on average 50–60 per cent higher, but reaching 100 per cent per year in textile industries. Here too, they note that most women as yet lack a sense of career and adopt a casual attitude towards continuity of employment, changing jobs for casual reasons (ibid.: 106–7).

Twenty years later, Hunt's report on a 1973 national survey of management attitudes towards women at work is necessarily factual in its presentation of the results, but her interpretation is already excusing and downplaying sex differentials as unimportant, glossing over the inconvenient results on labour turnover and absenteeism to underline those showing women in a positive light, notably employers' view that women scored better than men in patience with dull work! (Hunt 1975: 101, 105, 107, 109). None the less, the sex differentials remain in evidence. Only a minority of employers thought there was no difference between men and women in their propensity to take days off for sickness or for other reasons, or to work continuously for one firm. The dominant view was that they did differ, men being preferable for their lower absenteeism and turnover rates. The perceived sex differential in behaviour was corroborated by analyses of actual absenteeism, job tenure and job mobility. The same pattern was found in management perceptions of full-time and part-time workers: the majority view was that they differ, with full-time workers markedly better than part-timers on low absenteeism, continuity with the firm (low turnover rates) and working hard. Again, employers' 'prejudices' were supported by experience, with personal and family reasons dominating turnover rates among women (ibid.: 94–6, 105–6).

Another twenty years on, and British scholars have defined the problem of women's employment instability out of existence. Studies routinely draw the conclusion that there is no evidence that women in general, and women working part-time in particular show a lesser degree of attachment to work in terms of loyalty to a particular employer (Marsh 1991: 57), that women part-time workers do not appear to be necessarily more unstable than women full-time workers (Dex 1987: 115), or that the evidence that part-time jobs are high-turnover jobs should not be taken at face value (Elias and White 1991: 32–6, 58). When differences are noted, they are again attributed to the occupations in question rather than to the incumbents, to labour market segmentation (Blossfeld and Mayer 1988: 129; Elias and White 1991: 5) or to age effects (Elias and White 1991). One possibility is that the sex differential in work orientations and behaviour has now disappeared, so that sex differentials in labour turnover and employment continuity are also reduced to trivially small levels. However all recent evidence shows that while the sex differential in labour mobility has fluctuated over time, it remains substantial, not only in Britain, but in all OECD countries apart from France (OECD 1993) and perhaps Denmark (Hakim 1995).

Average male job tenure is 50 per cent–100 per cent higher than that for women. Average female labour turnover is at least 50 per cent higher than among men, just as it was in Myrdal and Klein's report on the 1950s. In Britain, turnover rates for part-timers can be two to four

TABLE III: *The decline in job tenure among full-time and part-time employees, Great Britain, 1986–92*

Proportion (%) with each length of service with the same employer	Full-time workers		Part-time workers	
	1986	1992	1986	1992
under 1 year	*	13	*	25
over 2 years	75	77	63	59
over 5 years	55	52	42	33
over 10 years	38	32	22	16

Sources: Spring 1986 and Spring 1992 Labour Force Survey, Great Britain. The 1986 data are for employees only (excluding family workers, students and people on government employment schemes for the unemployed), and part-time jobs are those involving less than 30 hours a week. The 1992 data are for employees and the self-employed (excluding family workers and people on government employment schemes for the unemployed), and part-time jobs are self-defined by survey respondents.
Note: * not available

times higher than rates for full-timers. Women, and women working part-time in particular, tend to be unstable workers, as employers have long known. The issue has disappeared only from the social science research agenda. Employers seem to have organized around it by creating a substantially separate, segregated, part-time workforce accommodated to married women's qualitatively different work orientations and behaviour (Hakim 1993b).

The two key measures of labour mobility are job tenure, the length of time workers have been with their present employer (Tables III and IV), and labour turnover, which occurs when individuals leave their employer, for whatever reason. As there is almost no sex differential in changes of occupation or employer within the workforce in continuous employment over a short period of time (Department of Employment 1991: 441; OPCS 1992a: 16, 49), the sex differential in labour turnover arises almost entirely from the sex differential in movements in and out of the workforce (Tables V and VI).

The sex differential in job tenure is not accounted for by women's absence from the labour market for childcare reasons. Women with dependent children have a shorter tenure than women without children, but even the child-free group has markedly lower lengths of service with their employer than male workers. The proportion of people in their jobs for less than one year approximates to an annual turnover rate, which again shows a clear sex differential, highlighted in the contrasts between full-time and part-time workers (Tables III and IV). In 1991, average job tenure for men was 50 per cent higher than for women, and average tenure profiles by age and sex had not changed at all over the 1980s (OECD 1993: 121–7).

TABLE IV: *The sex differential in job tenure*

% with stated length of time in present employment	Women			Men
	all	youngest child aged <15	no dependent children	
under 1 year	27	30	25	19
over 2 years	59	54	62	70
over 5 years	37	27	42	52
over 10 years	20	11	25	35

Source: Spring 1989 Labour Force Survey, Great Britain. Data for people of working age (16–59/64 years) in employment, extracted from Department of Employment (1990) Table 8.

Employers organize the great majority of part-time jobs as permanent jobs; about 20 per cent of part-time jobs are designated as temporary jobs compared to about 10 per cent of full-time jobs (Hakim 1990: 174). Thus employers' policies cannot account for the job tenure differential between part-timers and full-timers, a differential which becomes more noticeable in the longer tenure groups, and which is increasing as part-time work expands (Table III). In the mid-1980s, three-quarters of full-timers and two-thirds of part-timers had at least two years' service with their employer; over half the full-timers as against less than half the part-timers had over 5 years' tenure; a minority of both groups had over ten years' tenure. By 1992, these proportions had fallen slightly for full-timers, but had fallen much more for part-timers. For example, half of full-timers still had over 5 years' service with the same employer, but only one-third of part-timers did.

Labour turnover rates in the years leading up to the 1991 Census are approximated by the percentage not working at the census who had a job in the previous ten years, excluding students with jobs (Table V). A smaller sex differential is revealed by this less precise measure, but it is none the less substantial: one-quarter of women had stopped working compared to less than one in seven men. The sex differential remained after controlling for full-time or part-time work and type of occupation. Men in male-dominated, female-dominated and integrated occupations[10] display the same unvarying entry and exit rates from the workforce.[11] Women in male-dominated, female-dominated and integrated occupations all show the same unvarying entry and exit rates from the workforce. Age does not affect exit rates for men, and has only a small effect on exit rates for women, which decline as women grow older (Hakim 1995).

TABLE V: *Labour turnover rates among people of working age in 1991 who had a job in the preceding ten years*

	Type of occupation	In work	Total not in work	Unemployed	Not working	Retired and sick	Base 000s = 100%
Men	Male	84	16	10	*	6	104
	Integrated	87	13	8	*	5	28
	Female	83	17	11	*	6	21
	All occupations	85	15	9	*	6	153
Women	Male	77	23	5	12	6	12
	Integrated	77	23	5	12	6	21
	Female	75	25	5	14	6	102
	All occupations	76	24	5	13	6	134

Source: 1991 Census 1% household Sample of Anonymised Records, Great Britain. Data for people of working age (16–64 years) who had a job in the ten years preceding the spring 1991 Population Census, excluding students with jobs.
Note: Male occupations are those with <25% female workers. Integrated occupations are those with 25%–55% female workers. Female occupations are those with >55% female workers. * Less than 0.5%.

TABLE VI: *Labour turnover among full-time workers, Great Britain, 1973–1990*

	1973	1975	1979	1981	1983	1985	1987	1988	1989	1990
Men starting present full-time job in 12 months before interview										
– with a change of employer	14	12	11	6	6	7	10	10	11	10
– no change of employer	2	3	3	4	5	6	7	6	5	5
Total (men)	16	15	14	11	12	13	16	17	16	14
Women starting present full-time job in 12 months before interview										
– with a change of employer	18	15	13	9	9	12	14	15	15	16
– no change of employer	7	6	7	6	7	8	6	7	5	5
Total (women)	24	21	20	15	15	20	21	23	20	21

Source: General Household Survey data for 1973 to 1990 extracted from Table 9.31 in OPCS (1992b).

The General Household Survey demonstrates that the sex differential in turnover rates was as large in 1990 as in the early 1970s, even among full-time workers (Table VI). It is notable that the differential began to disappear in the early 1980s, but then it reasserted itself by 1990.

These results demonstrate that there is no basis in fact for the argument that high female turnover rates are a feature of the segregated occupations or part-time jobs they do rather than of the incumbents. Women have higher labour turnover rates than men due to differing work orientations, not because female-dominated occupations are organized by employers so as to produce artificially high turnover rates, as Cohn (1985) has argued for the pre-War decades. Men in female-dominated occupations have the same turnover rates as men generally, and women in male-dominated occupations have the same turnover rates as working women generally. It would seem more appropriate in future to say that employers have adapted to the inevitability of female labour turnover rates being at least twice as high as among male workers, irrespective of the degree and pattern of occupational segregation, with part-time jobs simply displaying the trend most sharply. Another conclusion is that equal opportunities policies ensure that women's much greater propensity to be intermittent workers does not prevent them holding jobs across the whole range of occupations and types of work in the labour market. However women with discontinuous work histories accumulate less work experience than men, and less firm-specific experience that is important for promotion within internal labour markets, with important consequences for vertical occupational segregation and the sex differential in earnings (Hakim 1979: 14–17, 1995).

CONCLUSIONS

In each of the five cases examined, feminist orthodoxy has replaced dispassionate social scientific assessment of the evidence on women's position in the labour market, effectively dictating a narrow range of acceptable conclusions (broadly, that women are victims who have little or no responsibility for their situation) and even eliminating certain topics from the research agenda. The sex differential in earnings and other rewards is welcomed as a research issue, the sex differential in work orientations and behaviour is not. No amount of solid evidence can dispel the myth of rising female employment, and expectations of consequential social change.

Why do fashionable but untrue ideas survive among academic sociologists who are supposed to be in the truth business rather than the power-and-persuasion business? Academic social scientists' only claim to credibility and public attention for their research is that they

offer a more disinterested approach than the reports published by pressure groups, political parties and other public bodies (such as Age Concern, the Low Pay Unit or the Equal Opportunities Commission) which openly advocate particular ideologies and policies and/or support particular interests. Reports based on advocacy research seek primarily to persuade, by marshalling all the empirical evidence and arguments of principle in favour of a pre-determined position. Typically, all contrary evidence is simply ignored, although more sophisticated versions ceremoniously sacrifice a few straw men. In the social sciences, values and interests are allowed to inform the choice of research topic, but they are not expected to predetermine the conclusions to be drawn. A great deal of effort and ingenuity is devoted to designing genuinely open-ended tests of theories.[12] Feminist research has usefully redirected attention to topics and issues previously ignored. But the feminist contribution could be damaging if it introduces the idea that the polemical argument can replace disinterested research, thus weakening public evaluation of the academic community's distinctive contribution to debates on topics of public interest. This is not to wholly exclude contributions that support particular policies or positions, so long as they are clearly labelled as personal opinion rather than as sociology. The example offered by Myrdal and Klein also demonstrates that a *parti-pris* position need not produce a one-eyed reading of the evidence, as seems to be the case in many recent contributions on women's employment. This raises the issue of whether they should be treated as *bona fide* sociology, and in the truth business, or as a special kind of applied research or advocacy research, to be judged by the quite different rules of popularity and public acclaim. Another question raised by this review of the blind spots in feminist orthodoxy is whether a paradigm shift will ever be possible, or is ruled out by the cohesiveness of the sub-discipline, which is closely patrolled through the customary peer review procedures.[13] The question still remains of why fashionable but untrue ideas survive among academic sociologists? A tentative answer is that one-sided ideas of any type (feminist, social or political) are acceptable in Britain because they fit into the adversarial model of intellectual debate which dominates academic and other arenas. If so, feminist orthodoxy is likely to hold sway for a long time, as few will be prepared to mount a positively anti-feminist counter-argument. Hammersley (1992, 1994) is one of the few to do so, in his critiques of the notion of a distinctively feminist methodology, making similar points about the distinction between science and politics.

The failure to address sex differentials where they exist also has implications for sociological theory. Theories explaining the sexual division of labour, cross-national variations and long-term trends in employment need to take fuller account both of the continuing sex differentials in work orientations and behaviour and increasing

polarization *within* the female workforce. Treating the workforce as a homogeneous group may work well for research on male employment but ceased to make any sense in relation to women by the end of the 1980s. There are at least two sub-groups within the adult female (working) population: women who are committed to a career on a continuous basis, and women who have opted for the marriage career but have jobs on an irregular basis. Individual women may change from one to another, but the two groups will always exist, will always differ, and will have increasingly polarized experiences in the 1990s and beyond. To date, the best measure for differentiating the two groups is one identified by Claudia Goldin: she notes that the percentage of a married woman's life spent in employment is U-shaped and has changed very little over the time in the USA (Goldin 1989). One advantage of this measure is that it can be applied in analyses of both aggregate data and microdata for individuals. Other new socio-economic indicators will be needed to monitor trends in the sex differentials in labour market behaviour and assess whether they are in reality disappearing, as feminists would have us believe, or whether they are fading away only in higher-grade occupations and becoming more entrenched in lower grade occupations, as the evidence indicates, increasing the polarization of the female workforce (Humphries and Rubery 1992; Hakim 1993b; Coleman and Pencavel 1993).

This more grounded perspective also leads to somewhat different explanations for the continuing sexual division of labour from those currently available, which have tended to emphasize the links between occupational segregation and the sex differential in earnings.[14] Humphries argues that in the nineteenth century job segregation was prompted primarily by a concern to control sexuality, to avoid social contact between unrelated men and women in the workplace, to reduce or eliminate the potential for heterosexual liaisons and hence illegitimate children (Humphries 1987). Occupational segregation has been reconstructed in the late twentieth century to provide separate occupations and jobs for women following the marriage career, which allows only non-committed contingent work and non-career jobs which are always subordinate to non-market activities. Such a change makes sense of the sharp changes over the century in the characteristics of female-dominated occupations (Hakim 1994). It also makes sense of the contemporary features of female-dominated occupations, with the highest incidence of part-time work, the lowest incidence of unsocial hours, the lowest levels of trade union membership and the ability to tolerate high turnover levels. Thus the social function of occupational segregation has changed fundamentally over the last century, independently of any changes in the level of occupational segregation.

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NOTES

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1. The marriage bar was the formal rule, jointly enforced by employers and trade unions, that women had to leave paid employment on marriage. This rule effectively excluded all married women from the labour market, so that working women were necessarily single, widowed or, rarely, divorced. The marriage bar became widespread in the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain, and was abolished from the 1940s onwards, after a long campaign by women's organizations against employers and trade unions. For example the marriage bar was abolished in the British Civil Service in 1946, but the Union of Post Office Workers maintained the marriage bar for its own employees until 1963. Abolition of the marriage bar constituted a fundamental change in women's workforce participation, and was a key factor in the rise of part-time work after World War Two, yet it is only rarely mentioned by social historians, sociologists and economists in Britain (Lewenhak 1977: 41, 94, 215, 225–6, 265–6, 292; Walby 1986: 57, 171–2, 204–7, 240; but see Cohn 1985: 97–113). In the USA and other countries the marriage bar consisted of social and cultural norms dictating that wives should not engage in paid employment, which did not go as far as a legally-enforceable rule, as in Britain.

2. Full-time equivalent figures for the workforce count each part-time job as half a full-time job.

3. Also, economic activity rates have become a misleading indicator of the volume of female employment, and new measures are needed, especially for cross-national comparisons (Hakim 1993a: 107–14).

4. These proportions can be regarded as reliable, as virtually identical figures for men and women of working age are obtained from Warr's 1981 survey and the 1984–85 BSAS data reported in Table I.

5. There is no denying that women face social structural and cultural barriers to working outside the home, and to achieving higher status jobs within the workforce. However there is no evidence that such barriers are greater for part-time workers than for full-timers, so issues of sex discrimination do not need to be addressed here. Indeed, the expectation is that these barriers would be most important for full-time workers, who are seeking promotion up career ladders, and lowest for part-time workers.

6. These figures refer to part-time workers as a percentage of all in employment in the relevant age group. Arguably a better measure would be the part-time work rate as compared with the full-time work rate, as shown in Table II of this paper.

7. On the face of it, the collusion between the male trade unionists and male employers to wholly exclude married women from the workforce, through the marriage bar (see Note 1 above), was simply replaced by a new policy of marginalizing part-time workers (most of whom are married women) and excluding them from mainstream employment rights and benefits (OECD 1994: 93). Thus women's economic dependency and male patriarchal control were maintained in a new form for a large proportion of women. This collusion between male workers and employers has been the dominant factor in Britain due

to the greater importance of collective bargaining over legislation in regulating the terms and conditions of employment of part-time and full-time workers (Hepple and Hakim 1995).

8. The wording of the House of Lords decision was ambiguous enough to cause some debate as to whether is applied to everyone working less than 16 hours a week, or only to those working between 8 and 16 hours a week. Some doubted that the Law Lords had intended to eliminate the 8 hours a week qualifying threshold as some such threshold had been included in all EC draft Directives on atypical workers, so could not be argued to be incompatible with European Community law, which was the basis of the decision. In addition, previous judgments on this test case accepted that there was a case for the 8 hours threshold, on the grounds of disproportionate administrative costs if statutory rights were extended to employees worked very few hours a week. In 1991, some 687,000 employees (3% of employees) working less than 8 hours a week (Watson 1992: 542), many of them schoolchildren and students with one-day a week jobs. Applying the usual 2 years' length of service requirement to the group working under 8 hours a week reduces the numbers who gain from the ruling to about 250,000 employees. Applying the length of service requirement to people working 8–16 hours a week indicates that about 310,000 people gained from the ruling. References to 6 million part-timers gaining from the ruling were misleading, as the numbers who gained new rights were in the region of 600,000 employees working less than 16 hours a week, representing less than 4% of all employees and 14% of employees working under 31 hours a week (using the statistical definition of part-timers which gives a total of 6 million part-timers). However the decision was politically important in that it changed the climate of opinion on part-timers, insisting that they should be treated no differently from full-timers.

9. From the employer's view, the specific reason for a women worker leaving a job is irrelevant. Whether she leaves to marry, have a baby, to take another job because her husband's job has been moved to another city, or to take another job because it is closer to home does not alter the employer's need to hire and retrain a replacement worker, with the associated costs.

10. This classification is described more fully in Hakim (1993b). Definitions are shown in the notes to Table V.

11. Because many short-term pre- and post-retirement part-time jobs are in female-dominated occupations, there is a tendency for male exit rates into full-time retirement to be enhanced among older workers.

12. Random samples for interview surveys, double-blind experiments, studies of experimenter effects and self-fulfilling predictions among researchers are among the many techniques adopted to ensure that research results are more than simple corroborations of the researcher's prejudices (Hakim 1987).

13. In the USA, where political correctness appears to carry great weight, there have been cases of people whose published work on women's employment diverged from feminist orthodoxy finding it almost impossible to get a job.

14. The example of Sweden underlines the point that occupational segregation can be disconnected from the sex differential in pay (Rosenfeld and Kalleberg 1990).

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