

Detroit Free Press

Detroit, Michigan • Tue, Feb 3, 1976

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Not Seriously Enough

How Society Takes Our Working Women

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How seriously does society take the working woman? It seems to vary from country to country, and America is not by any means the most advanced.

Taking the working woman seriously means recognizing her as a primary labor force member, the secondary source of the labor force, it means recognizing her special needs, it means adopting new social attitudes.

For instance, a great many women go to work, stop to have children and then return to work when the children are old enough to go to school. But there are few programs to retrain these women for that difficult re-entry, which means that many wind up in low-skill, low-pay, dead-end jobs.

Alice Cook, a Cornell University labor relations professor emerita, notes that many other countries do have such retraining along with other working women-oriented programs.

In Sweden and a number of communist countries, she said, there are laws permitting fathers as well as mothers to prohibit home work so children a certain number of days a year without loss of pay.

However, few men or persons are actually using the laws in these countries, suggesting that social attitudes may be lagging behind the egalitarian hopes of the legislators. Still, it's more than the United States has.

IT IS NOT ONLY socialist and communist countries which have programs to support the concept of women as primary labor force members, she said. France and West Germany both have large state-supported child care programs, for instance. America does not.

It seems to be tied partly to the tightness of the labor market, at least in the West, she said. "There is very little incentive during a high rate of unemployment for legislators or employers to do much about opening up opportunities for women or to invest in training and support systems.

"Most of the changes which have taken place in other countries came during periods of expansion and boom, when there was a need for extra people in the labor force."

Prof. Cook and others have reported that when women go to work they usually don't get much support at home with housework or child care from their husbands, and that pattern is repeated in every country, she said, including those of the communist bloc.

SUCH SURVEY-DERIVED information ends up as statistical material which often is not able to reflect the wide diversity in people's attitudes toward their share of the statistics, however.

In Detroit, a survey Jane Burgess and her attorney husband Laurence share throughout and child care responsibilities. Their secretary, Susan Monacel, takes care of all the housekeeping and child care arrangements in her marriage. Both wives are happy.

"In my case, I think my husband would do what he does whether I worked or not," Mrs. Burgess



Free Press Photo by ALAN KAMUDA

Jane and Laurence Burgess: For them, a sharing of responsibilities



Free Press Photo by JOHN COLLIER

Susan and Mike Monacel with little Renne: different approach works, too

Detroit Free Press
for and about Women
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said. "He just has a very well developed sense of fairness. If we're both home and there are things to do, he'll help do them."

Mrs. Monacel, whose husband Mike is a dental technician, admits that it's hard doing the cooking and housework in addition to her regular job, but she says, "That's really the way I want it."

Because she thinks women ought to take care of these things? "No. I just like it that way. I mean, my husband would help me if I wanted him to. He's even offered to help me, but things have just stayed the way they are."

Well, does she enjoy cooking and housework? "Yes. I enjoy everything I do."

IT IS TEMPTING, perhaps, to assume that most women in Mrs. Monacel's situation would rather be in Mrs. Burgess'. But if that is true, why aren't they

raising more hell about it, insisting on having more help?

The answer, says Prof. Cook, lies in the deeply ingrained attitudes about the roles of men and women. And a psychologist, Paul Diering of Birmingham, takes it a step further.

"You really have to understand the dynamics of dependence," he says. "I mean, that's why two people get together, because of the interdependence."

"When somebody drastically changes the complementarity in the marriage by going off to work, so that maybe they're not home when the kids come home from school, or dinner's not ready when it used to be, those aren't just technical things.

"Underneath you tend to find that something has been changed in the emotional interaction of the marriage."

Thus the reluctance of husbands to help their wives who go to work, and the reluctance of many working wives to demand that help, may be as much the result of unconscious feelings of betrayal and guilt as of more abstract social patterns.

But whatever the cause, the fact is that women are working harder than ever, often in jobs with little fault, and the time and energy they expend means they do not participate in labor union or political party leadership in numbers proportionate

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Jane and Laurence Burgess