

MOTHERS CAN'T FORM A PRESSURE GROUP

Caroline Webb Discusses Social Evolution and its Effects on Women

WOULD you agree that the present is a particularly significant and difficult time for women? I think it is, for this reason that the conditions in which we live have changed so much since the beginning of the century and are still changing rapidly. This means that we can't just live our lives as our mothers and grandmothers lived theirs. Instead of following a pattern already laid down we have to draft a new pattern to fit the different conditions in which we live.

As I see it there are two major changes particularly affecting women.

First of all there is the change to a one-class society. As far back as history goes there has been a working class and a leisured class, with varying gradations between these two groups. Now we are approaching a one-class society, and New Zealand has gone as far as any country in this direction. New Zealand mothers, at any rate, are all working class—that is, we all do our own work. Fortunately we don't have to work outside as well as inside the home. If any of you have been to Oriental countries and seen, as I have seen, women working in factories with their babies lying underneath the loom or the machine, you will realise the significance of this. The working woman who, in older countries, is forced by poverty and expected by custom to work in a factory and bring up a family at the same time does not exist in New Zealand. Neither does the lady of leisure. Any girl who has been brought up, as the saying goes, without doing a hand's turn for herself is faced with as much hard work as any other woman when she becomes a mother.

Narrow Escape!

I wonder if you have read Olive Schreiner's book *Women and Labour*. I sometimes think of it with amusement when I am hectically busy. Her thesis was that Western civilisation was on the verge of collapse because educated women did not have enough to occupy them. She wrote at the end of last century when all these women had a large staff of servants to run their houses and bring up their children; and she felt that unless women were admitted to all the professions and occupations they would degenerate into idle drones and become a demoralising influence on society. She brought half a lifetime of research to bear on this thesis—but how differently things have turned out! However, it is quite a tonic when life is particularly busy, to remember how narrowly, in Olive Schreiner's opinion at any rate, we escaped the danger of becoming demoralising drones.

But there are other dangers. I am not so sure we have escaped. Worst of all is the danger that life for mothers will

become a mere struggle for existence and that graciousness, beauty and hospitality in the home will be lost. It is to preserve these values that a new pattern of living is needed. It will have to be a pattern that concentrates on the essentials and cuts out the frills, that preserves the worth-while things in life and discards the merely conventional. Already our rooms have achieved an almost Japanese simplicity compared with the over-furnishing of our grandmother's time. Wash-stands in the bedroom, the bedroom fire, and the bath that was pulled out from under the bed have all gone. We take turns in the bathroom and use an electric heater. Our clothes, too, especially children's

clothes, are much simpler than the starched frills I was accustomed to in my childhood. But things have to go still further in this

direction if life is not to be a mere hand-to-mouth existence for parents.

A Word for Father

And here I must pay a tribute to the New Zealand father. He is wonderful in the way he does the washing at the week-ends, and can even cook the Sunday dinner. But surely parents should not have to spend every minute slaving after their children. They should sometimes have leisure to be men and women as well as parents, to keep up with what is going on in the world, to enjoy books, music, or sport and to entertain like other people.

The family allowances, tax reductions, and maternity benefits have of course relieved the financial strain on parents very much. I think, however, that further development along these lines should take the form of assistance in kind rather than in money. There are so many things that money can't buy nowadays. School dinners, such as are provided in the primary schools in England, would be worth far more to busy mothers than the cost of them. So would permanent play-centres for pre-school children, larger houses for families, and help in the home for sick or expectant mothers.

Some attempts have been made by groups of women to organise these services for themselves and they have done most valuable experimental work. But I do not think it would be possible for volunteers from among already over-worked mothers to provide such things on a nation-wide scale. Mothers could be relied on to help at play-centres and with cooking dinners, but I think either the State or local authorities would need to pay the overhead costs and employ the permanent staffs.

Unfortunately, mothers are not in a good position to urge these things for themselves. They don't form a pressure group in any way comparable with the average trade union. Having nothing to sell they can't even stage a strike. And this is a serious state of affairs at a time when people are tending more and



more to divide into occupational groups engaged in securing advantages for their members.

Work Outside the Home

So far I have dealt entirely with the effect of the one-class society on the woman in the home. But there is, of course, a very large group of women who work outside the home—the women who hold jobs, career women. In Olive Schreiner's day the interests of the two groups clashed. They clash still to some extent in many countries. The married woman worker wants protection from the double burden of work—work inside and work outside the home. She wants shorter hours than male workers and special protection to safeguard her health when she is having children. The career woman, on the other hand, wishes to be allowed to compete with men on terms of equality and objects to any differences in conditions of work or pay between the sexes. In New Zealand there are so few women with young families in industry, that the interests of these two groups though different are not opposed. As a result they could, if they would, support each other's interests; the career women backing measures to make the life of the mother less burdensome and the mothers joining forces with the wage-earners in their demand for equality between the sexes.

Conditions in Russia

In Russia, I gather, there is practically no distinction between the two groups, the child-bearers and the wage-earning women. Most women work outside the home whether they have families or not and discrimination between the sexes seems to have been practically eliminated. This, I take it, though I may be wrong, is more the result of conditions in Russia than of principle. Because the demand for labour is very urgent all women are encouraged to work and special institutions are provided to care for children outside the home. It remains to be seen how this system works out. Personally I would not be surprised, when the tremendous demand for labour slackens, if the Russians did not change their minds about the mothers of young children working, just as they have changed many of their ideas about education. It is at any rate interesting to find a different solution to these problems in another country; and it will be interesting to see, as the century goes on, whether we adopt the Russian system or they adopt ours, or whether we continue to differ.

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