

Should Mothers Work?

A Prophetic Question

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ONE of the most significant changes of our time — perhaps the most important of all — has been the gradual and insidious breakdown of the family unit, which has served man since his earliest moments. And no aspect of this breakdown is more alarming than the growing number of mothers who spend their days at work outside the home.

The extent of this trend is dramatically illustrated by figures compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau. In 1890, about 4,000,000 women in the United States — one in seven — were employed outside the home. By 1920, there were about 8,000,000 female jobholders — and most were single women, widows, or mothers whose children had grown and no longer required their care. Even after World War I, the typical American husband considered it his shame if his wife worked to augment his income; it meant to him that he was an incompetent provider.

Contrast those statistics with today's. In 1958, according to the same government sources, about 23,000,000 women were in the labor force. One worker in three was female. For the first time in our history, more married than single women are employed by business and industry. Even more startling is the fact that one of every five mothers with children under five has a full-time job. Economists have estimated that if present trends continue, the married woman between 35 and 65 who remains at home will be in the minority within fifteen years; before this century ends, the woman who strives to fulfill her historic role as educator of her children will be virtually extinct.

What lies behind the frantic effort by so many American mothers to relinquish their position in the home and to place themselves on a payroll?

An obvious answer might be that their family needs the money. Actually, however, a survey by the U.S. Department of Labor has revealed that only about one woman worker in seven is the sole support of her family. Such bread-winners are usually widows or are separated from their husbands. They can see no alternative to work. They either take outside employment to support their families or go on relief.

The vast majority of mothers work for reasons other than absolute economic necessity, however. Most seek to provide higher standards of living than would be possible on the husband's income alone. For instance, many take jobs so that the family may have a more expensive home, better furniture, an automobile, the opportunity to take vacations and similar privileges. Another category of working mothers consists of those who seek creative satisfactions, which they feel that they cannot obtain by caring for their children. Many in this group have been educated to work in the professions, or as secretaries, typists and the like.

Other factors — and combinations of factors — doubtless contribute to the decision of mothers to work. A woman may desire to avoid the loneliness, which frequently accompanies the job of caring for small children. She may want to feel independent of her husband. She may seek the excitement often found in the business world where there are new challenges and people to meet. But regardless of why a woman leaves her children in other hands and becomes a wage-earner, one fact is paramount: unless she has a compelling economic reason for doing so, she is downgrading motherhood as her career. And since civilized people have long agreed that the development of young minds and souls is the greatest and most rewarding task that can be entrusted to humans, it is obvious that the woman who voluntarily turns away from her responsibility is changing the function of motherhood, which has existed for ages. She is thus encouraging a revolution, which will have a powerful effect upon society for generations to come.

In fairness to working mothers, however, it must be stated that the majority probably do not fully realize the consequences in terms of harm to their families and themselves that result from their long daily absences from the home.

Harm to the child. The young child needs his mother. No one else can adequately substitute. A child needs her constant affection and tender guidance, because only upon these foundations can he build the sense of security he needs for his full emotional development. He cannot get this affection at a nursery school. Nor can he obtain it from a succession of trained nursemaids who — however conscientious — cannot give the continuity of love essential for his growth.

The obligation of the woman who bears a child to care for it during its early formative years is recognized even by primitive societies. But what every woman instinctively knows is confirmed by the cold, analytical studies of scientists. For example, in a historic report on “Maternal Care and Mental Health,” published in Geneva in 1952, Dr. John Bowlby declared that the child’s entire personality development depends upon the continuity of his relationship with his mother. If the child learns to give his love intimately and consistently to one person throughout his early years of growth, he develops a trust in human goodness and an inner security that enables him to meet confidently the problems of growing up.

What are the effects upon a child deprived of his mother’s love during his early, crucial years? Medical records provide a voluminous and terrifying answer. During World War II, governmental authorities in Europe decided to evacuate children from zones in danger of enemy attack. Doctors had the opportunity to compare the psychological effect upon evacuated youngsters separated from their mothers, and upon children who remained with their mothers in areas where bombs fell. The doctors found that the incidence of neurosis and psychosis was fantastically higher among the evacuated children. Those who remained at home could endure even the threat of death without permanent psychological injury, because the security of their mothers’ love sustained them in every time of danger.

The feeling that he has been deserted is one of the most terrifying experiences a young person can face. As proof, consider the hysterical scenes in a hospital ward. A child deposited in strange surroundings may experience such an intense fear of the unknown that it etches itself into his memory for the rest of his life. Psychiatrists report that the loss of their mother — through death, desertion, divorce or other factors — gives some children a fear and insecurity that they never entirely lose. Such a child may revert to infantile habits — his attempt to recapture the days when he had his mother’s love. He may resist all efforts at discipline, and may whine or cry for no

apparent reason. As an adult, he may require psychiatric care, for the adult patient who lost his mother during his early childhood sometimes is unable to give unstinting love to his wife — or to any human being — because he dreads the pain he would feel anew if his love were rejected again.

Of course, few children suffer in this acute way if a working mother shows her love when she and her child are together. Nonetheless, the child suffers more psychological damage than a parent perhaps realizes. The extent of the damage depends, naturally, on the amount of maternal deprivation.

Dr. Bowlby, in a report quoted by the “Ladies’ Home Journal” of November 1958, says that the commonest result is a tendency to feel anxious and unhappy and to dread solitude. These symptoms are related to a feeling of basic insecurity. Dr. Bowlby says that children who have never received continuous loving care from one person cannot learn to love and develop emotional depth. “They act from whim,” he says, “and are very sad, unreliable people indeed.

“Children who have known real mothering for a time and then have lost it before they are three sometimes grow up full of hate and mistrust, mixed with a desire for love that they are afraid to admit but which comes out in such things as stealing and promiscuity — lone wolves and lost souls, they are. Deprivation after the age of three isn’t quite so bad, but it still results too often in excessive desires for affection and excessive jealousy which cause acute inner conflict and unhappiness.”

Many working mothers report that on Saturdays and Sundays, when they are at home, their little ones are with them constantly and do not want to let them out of their sight. The mother interprets this as an indication that she retains her child’s love and trust. True, but it also indicates the child’s insecurity and his fear that she will again leave him.

Harm to the husband. The damage that a working wife may inflict upon her husband may be almost as great as that done to her child. Man by nature must be the head of the home. From our earliest day, and through all stages of our civilization, he has been the family’s provider. He is best fitted for this role: he is naturally active and decisive; he is muscularly stronger than woman; his physical reflexes are better developed. These characteristics have enabled him to hunt, fish and provide the other necessities of life to enable the family to live together. Even today, when physical prowess is not the most important attribute for the provider, typical masculine traits are required to achieve success in the business world.

By taking a position outside the home, a mother throws the historic relationship with her husband out of balance. How can he be the head of the house when he is not considered capable of performing his basic function? The very qualities she must develop in the working world — masculine traits of aggressiveness, decisiveness, coldness, impersonality — are the antithesis of those she needs in dealing with husband and children. She no longer complements her husband as nature intended. She becomes his rival. However much husbands sometimes encourage or accept the employment of the wife outside the home, the situation is not normal and not conducive to a good husband-wife relationship.

In other days, the mother always was responsible for the care of the home, and boys and girls knew that it was her job to mend clothes, prepare meals, wash diapers and clean the house. Today, husbands of working wives often do all of these tasks. Their youngsters have a difficult time in determining where Father’s job begins and ends, and where Mother’s function begins and ends. But as we have seen, a human being’s full development can come only if he knows clearly what is

expected of him as an adult. Boys must know what a man's work is. Girls must know how mothers should act. When there is a vast neutralized area, neither clearly masculine nor feminine, the sexual development of youngsters and their ability to comprehend their own responsibility in marriage are impaired. One of the great causes of marital unhappiness is the uncertainty of partners as to their respective roles. This confusion was first created in their childhood experience.

In view of the fact that her act of working outside the home downgrades her husband, his resentment might often be expected. Researchers of the Marriage Council of Philadelphia found this to be a fact. They studied the causes of troubled marriages referred to them for help, and they concluded positively that tensions in a home tend to increase when both partners produce incomes. The largest number of disagreements centered around management of the house, finances, the wife's job, the husband's work, the sharing of household tasks and the upbringing of the children. The researchers concluded flatly that the very existence of the marriage is threatened if a wife works against her husband's wishes.

Harm to the family unit. A working mother may cause more subtle damage to the family unit. For instance, if she works merely to improve material standards of living and not from sheer necessity, she may tend to put false values in first place. The family may come to believe that a new rug, steak on the table instead of hamburger, or clothes that reflect the latest decrees from Paris all are necessary to the enjoyment of life. Such standards may accustom her children to view life's successes and failures from a materialistic point of view. They thus may be taught, by example if not by word, to put spiritual and emotional values in a lower place.

Once materialism takes over in a home, the birth-control mentality almost surely follows. When a mother works to raise her family's living standards, she may more easily succumb to the temptation to prevent the birth of a new life, which would force her to quit her job and thus lower her standard of living. Or, if she becomes pregnant, the child may be held responsible for reducing the family income — and may never receive the loving acceptance, which is his right. Family limitation almost always goes hand in hand with the young working mother. The great tragedy of this arrangement is that it deprives children of brothers and sisters who contribute to a well-rounded and affectionate family life.

Harm to herself. The harm a working mother does to her children and her husband may be equaled by that she does to herself. First, she takes the risk that once she gets a job — even a temporary one — she will not be able to become a full-time homemaker again. As millions of working wives can testify, it is all too easy for a family to live up to its new income.

One mother, by no means atypical, once took a sales clerk's position to earn extra money for Christmas. She boarded her two small children, four and two years old, with her married sister who lived a mile away. Thanks to her earnings, her children had better clothes and her husband purchased expensive photographic equipment he had always wanted. After Christmas, however, the family was as badly off financially as before, and the mother decided to continue working — just for a few months more, of course. But soon the family was spending the additional income as soon as it came in. The husband was a salesman who could take days off at his convenience — without pay — and now that his wife had a dependable income, his days off became increasingly frequent. Before long, the family depended as much upon the mother's earnings as they had upon the father's. The children continued to spend their days under their aunt's care. It is now eleven years since the

mother took her “temporary” job. Her husband has become steadily lazier and her children respond less warmly to her than to her sister. She has been trapped into a lifetime of unrewarding drudgery.

The emotional harm that working mothers may do to themselves is often overlooked. One group of researchers interviewed young mothers and found that 64 per cent cited neglect of their home, their family and their housework as the main disadvantages of working. It would be an odd mother who did not feel concern when she went to a place of business leaving her sick child behind to be cared for by someone else. Few mothers can remain totally serene as they give their young sons and daughters latchkeys so that they can let themselves into the home after school to spend several hours without adult supervision. Indeed, one psychologist has described the typical working mother as a person subject to opposing pressures — the pressure to concentrate all her energies and efforts on succeeding at her outside job, and the pressure of being a good wife and mother. When she devotes herself to business, she cannot help but be aware that she takes time and energy away from the service she owes her husband and her children. Few mothers can avoid the nagging, emotionally harmful sense of guilt that results.

In order to compensate for this time spent away from home, some seem determined not to let their home and family suffer. After working outside all day, they plunge into frantic housework, preparing meals, scrubbing floors, mending clothes — tasks, which stay-at-home mothers perform during the day. By trying to fill two jobs, they often become so tense that they cannot relax and enjoy their family’s company. They become martyrs to their dual obligations — and their conduct hardly presents to the child an appealing picture of the burden of motherhood. It is likely that more than one spinster is unmarried today because she was determined not to duplicate the life endured by her mother who worked outside the home by day and inside it far into the night.

Does it really pay mothers to work? Many economists have pointed out that the actual financial gain achieved by the average working mother may be considerably less than she imagines. Many go further and state that she often is not substantially better off financially than if she remained at home.

Economists of the Department of Agriculture recently interviewed 365 wives with jobs outside their homes. This survey established that for every dollar a working wife earns, only sixty cents is actually added to the family’s income. The average wife earned \$2,200 a year in 1958. But she paid almost one third of that sum — \$614 — for transportation, lunches and other work items. In addition, she had to pay \$184 for laundry, child care, et cetera. She also paid \$105 for clothing and personal grooming which she probably would not have needed had she remained at home. Instead of \$2,200, therefore, she actually had only \$1,297 to show for her year’s work — before taxes!

Other economists have found that a working mother’s expenses may be much greater even than this survey shows. For instance, taxes must be deducted from her salary and the government usually takes a greater percentage from her than from her husband, because the tax rate increases as family income increases. A typical working woman no longer has time to prepare low-cost meals or to shop for food bargains. As a result, her family eats more prepared foods — canned or frozen foods or restaurant meals — which are naturally more expensive. Out of her earnings, she often must pay someone to care for her children, and medical bills tend to shoot up sharply. Unable to care for her children personally and often distrustful of the person she hired to do so, she seeks a doctor’s advice more often than would normally be the case. There are also extra expenditures for cleaning help, laundry, and possibly for the sheer luxuries she feels entitled to because she is doing two jobs.

When these factors are considered, it can be seen that the working mother often merely changes jobs and does not receive any substantial financial gain from doing so.

Alternatives to work outside the home. Deploring the fact that more and more women seek work satisfactions outside their family circle will not reverse this trend, of course. Women must come to realize anew that their greatest contribution to God and society, and their greatest personal accomplishment, can come only when they bring new lives into existence and teach these beings to walk a path to earthly and eternal happiness.

Frank Gavitt, one of the country's outstanding public relations executives, has recommended that universities award honorary degrees to outstanding mothers as they do to distinguished political, business and professional leaders. His suggestion would help to confer on motherhood the dignity and prestige it apparently needs before modern women will give it their total commitment.

It is ironic that a major trend of recent years has been that of "doing it yourself." It seems that men obtain so few satisfactions from their work that they develop projects at home to give their creative energies an outlet.

But while fathers return to the home, mothers are neglecting the creative aspects of home-making. Many of us can remember mothers or grandmothers who baked bread and cake, canned fruits and vegetables, and made their own clothing. The work not only saved money but gave a feeling of worth-while accomplishment. If today's mothers used fewer of the costly products that take much of the creative joy out of homemaking, they might contribute almost as much to their families economically as they do by taking outside jobs.

What about mothers who must work because of real financial need? They should try to obtain employment, which will enable them to be near their young children when they are needed most — during the daytime. There are more of such jobs than one might imagine. One mother obtained a position soliciting magazine subscriptions; she wheels her infant in a carriage from door to door, meeting his needs whenever they arise. Another woman runs a "day nursery," caring for the children of neighbourhood mothers who wish to shop in freedom. A mother of three small children earns the family income as a typist, working at home for local businessmen while her children play under her supervision. Books listing hundreds of jobs, which mothers can profitably perform in or near their homes, are available at most public libraries.

Mothers of school-age youngsters can find many opportunities for part-time employment. A typical job is that of sales clerk. Most shoppers are women with children, and they visit the stores while their own young ones attend school. Many stores therefore require special help to handle the extra crowds from 10 A.M. to 3 P.M. Women who work during those hours can see their children off to school and can return home when they do.

The problem of "moonlighters." Some of the reasons which prompt mothers to take outside employment also are responsible for the growing number of "moonlighters" — men who hold jobs at night as well as in the daytime. According to the Census Bureau, one male employee in twenty holds a second job.

Like the working mother, the father who holds two jobs can harm the family unit, his mate, his children, and himself. The family suffers because in effect it lacks his leadership. The man away from home sixteen hours a day, who returns only to sleep and to eat a quick meal or two, hardly gives the personal example, which his children need to learn to be adults. When mother and

children do not see the father except when he is asleep, they cannot be said to have a real family at all.

The wife suffers, because she is denied her husband's companionship. As is pointed out in detail in "The Catholic Marriage Manual," (by George Anthony Kelly) mothers are justifiably tired of childish company after a long day spent exclusively with their little ones. They have a right to expect the attention, companionship and affection of their mates for at least a few hours of the twenty-four-hour period. The man who is busy earning money may love his wife and may want to make life easier for her. But a willingness to spend his free hours with her, even at the expense of material comforts, would be a greater indication of his affection — and would do far more for her.

The "moonlighter's" children suffer because they lose the opportunity of knowing their father at leisure. It is usually only after his day's work is done and the evening is at hand that he can talk to his children — recount his own experiences, prepare them for their future, and instill standards of conduct that will guide them throughout their lives. It is the father who gives his son his ideals and ideas of manhood and who teaches his daughter by example what to expect in her own husband when she marries. By his absence for prolonged periods, therefore, the "moonlighter" may be denying his children direction and example as much as does the father who does not live at home.

Nor should we overlook the fact that the man who holds two jobs for long periods may cause intense physical harm to himself. When he must bolt his meals to get from one job to another, when he works such long hours that he cannot get adequate sleep, when his schedule denies him any opportunity for recreation, he increases his nervous tension and susceptibility to the many diseases, such as heart trouble, high blood pressure and ulcers, which result at least partially from an inability to develop relaxed habits of living.

The man who "moonlights" over a long period of time certainly will find that some, if not much, of his increased earnings must be used to pay doctors' bills.

We Americans make a fetish of our high standard of living. Advertisers and others bombard us with the concept that we can achieve happiness only if we have a better house, richer food, thicker rugs, more powerful cars than those commonly possessed even ten years ago. Acceptance of this false set of values is generally what prompts the mother to work and the father to "moonlight." They overlook the basic fact that a family's essentials for life — food, shelter, clothing — can generally be obtained on the father's salary. When misguided ambition makes it necessary for the mother to work or the father to take a second job, the family achieves not true happiness but only a few materialistic substitutes for it.
