The Economic Depression and the Employment of Women: II[1]

by

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THE ABOLITION OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AS A REMEDY FOR UNEMPLOYMENT

THE problem of abolishing women's employment as a remedy for the present unemployment situation leads us to dangerous and rocky ground, strewn with philosophical and sociological theories and prejudices as to woman's place in the family and in society, shaken by the conflicting tendencies of traditionalists and evolutionists, feminists and anti-feminists, and the passions aroused by all such movements of opinion ; and torn by the more or less overt egoisms let loose by all catastrophes. It is the rather presumptuous intention of the following pages to discuss this difficult problem realistically, with special regard for economic facts and the probable effects upon them of any solutions proposed. And if on the way we stumble over a theory, we shall try to surmount the obstacle with all possible speed.

Approaching the problem from this purely practical standpoint, we are at once struck by the perversity of a solution which proposes to cure unemployment—that is, lack of work—merely by taking work away from some of those who have it. This obviously results only in shifting the incidence of unemployment, not abolishing it. By ceasing to describe as unemployment the state of forced and permanent idleness to which women formerly in employment had been reduced, the level of unemployment recorded could of course be lowered ; but this process would not add a single new opening to the opportunities for work of mankind as a whole. To any unprejudiced observer it is

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[1] For the first part of this article, cf. *International Labour Review*, Vol. XXVII No. 4, April 1933, pp. 443-470.

obviously wrong to present the problem in these terms. If a solution of this kind is to be described as a remedy for unemployment, it must be postulated in advance that the right to work, to earn one's livelihood by one's own activity, is an exclusive prerogative of the masculine portion of humanity, instead of being recognised as a fundamental right of every human being.

Let us for the moment accept this postulate, as some people appear to do. A number of questions at once arise in regard to the proposal to abolish women's employment (gainful employment being of course implied) as a remedy for unemployment. Is this in fact possible, and if so to what extent ? Since it is proposed as a remedy for the economic situation, we must ask whether it would prove an effective remedy, and what its probable effects would be.

The first question is fundamental, for it is obviously useless to do battle for a plan which is quite impracticable. Attempts have been made to answer it by a survey of the facts of the situation. In Germany, when this idea first began to attract attention two years ago, several reviews published detailed studies of the effects of women's employment with a view to estimating the practical value of its abolition. In an article published in December 1930 [1], Lorenz Popp analysed the returns of the last occupational census in Germany as follows. In 1925 there were 11,478,000 women in gainful employment. Of these 6,802,000, or 59.3 per cent., were unmarried, 1,030,000, or 9 per cent., were widows or divorced, and 3,645,000, or 31.7 per cent., were married. Thus 7,832,000 women and girls were dependent on their own work for their livelihood, and in many cases had to support dependants as well, so that there could be no question of excluding them from the labour market and thus depriving them of their means of support. There remained, therefore, the 3,645,000 married women ; would it be possible to evict these from their employment and transfer their work to men ? It should be noted in the first place that 2,501,335 of them, or over 75 per cent., were merely helpers in the family business—farmers' wives who help their husbands to run the family farm, wives of small shopkeepers or handicraftsmen, or even of wage-paid home workers who share their husbands'

[1] Lorenz Popp : "Kann durch die Abschaffung der Frauenerwerbsarbeit die Arbeitlosigkeit beiseitigt werden ?", in *Gewerkschaftsarchiv*, Dec. 1930, p. 356.

work during part of the day. No legislation against women's employment could touch these women, who are not bound by a contract of employment, nor could it affect independent women workers, of whom there were 309,160. According to these calculations, therefore, any compulsory transfer of paid work from women to men would affect at the most only 835,600 married women.

But even among these the qualifications of the workers concerned must be taken into account. They include, for instance, 44,233 domestic servants in private houses. It would be obviously impossible to replace a children's nurse by an unemployed glazier or mason, and it would even be difficult to substitute tailors and hatters for dressmakers and milliners. Finally, among married women, the question of means must also be considered. Many of them have families which the husband's wages are definitely inadequate to support ; it appeared from various enquiries carried out in Germany at that time that 80 per cent. of the married women in employment were driven to it by stern economic necessity. Taking everything into account, therefore, Lorenz Popp concluded that there were perhaps some 200,000 women workers at the very most who could be replaced by men. Other writers placed this figure at 80,000. Could this reasonably be proposed as an effective remedy for an unemployment situation which at that time counted 4,380,000 victims, and was subsequently to become considerably worse ?

The same conclusions have been reached in a number of other countries after a careful analysis of the facts.

In the United States, for instance, the Women's Bureau of the Federal Department of Labour and various other official or scientific bodies have devoted a number of analytical studies to the economic aspects of women's employment. [1] The reasons for

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[1] WOMEN'S BUREAU : *The Family Status of Breadwinning Women* (Bulletin No. 43, 1922 ; 43 pp.) ; *The Share of Wage-Earning Women in Family Support* (Bulletin No. 30, 1923 ; 170 pp.) ; *Married Women in Industry* (Bulletin No. 38, 1924 ; 8 pp.) ; *Family Status of Breadwinning Women in Four Selected Cities* (Bulletin No. 41, 1925 ; 145 pp.) ; *Facts about Working Women* (Bulletin No. 46) ; *Women Workers and Family Support* (Bulletin No. 49, 1925 ; 10 pp.) ; *What the Wage-Earning Woman contributes to Family Support* (Bulletin No. 75, 1929 ; 21 pp.) ; *Wage-Earning Women and the Industrial Conditions of 1930 : A Survey of South Bend* (Bulletin No. 92, 1932 ; 84 pp.).

CHILDREN'S BUREAU : *Children of Working Mothers in Philadelphia : The Working Mothers*, by Clara Mortenson BEYER.

Several articles have also appeared in Germany, among which the following may be cited : A. GEYER : " Die Bedeutung der Erwerbsarbeit verheirateter

which married women go out to work, the extent of the family responsibilities of women workers, and the economic value of the work they do have been carefully studied. These studies have led to the conclusion that 90 per cent. of the married women employed in industry in the United States work because they have to. In all these enquiries, in every part of the United States and in different industrial surroundings, the reasons the women gave for taking up jobs were invariably the same, where they had not been forced to work as the only breadwinner of the family. (The latter case is not exceptional; according to an enquiry carried out by the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in December 1931, 1,700 of the 4,000 families investigated were entirely supported by a married woman.) These reasons are: to supplement the husband's wages, which are too low to support the family, to pay for furniture, to pay debts contracted during sickness or unemployment, to pay doctors' bills, to help elderly parents, orphan brothers and sisters, or near relations in trouble, to save for a rainy day, as otherwise the family could never put anything by, etc. To read this litany of utilitarian reasons leads to the conviction that in the majority of cases to deprive these women of their employment in order to give it to men would merely mean that society would have to pay poor relief instead of unemployment benefit, with no gain to anyone, the only difference between these two forms of assistance being that the former is more demoralising to its recipients than the latter.

In Austria the enquiry recently carried out by Mrs. Käthe Leichter [1], which has already been mentioned, gives a still higher percentage for the women who are driven to work by economic necessity. When asked whether they would prefer to go on working or to stay at home if their husband earned enough to support the family, 95.3 per cent. of these women replied that they would stay at home if they could.

This is not at all surprising if it is remembered that most kinds of unskilled manual work have no intrinsic interest and are merely breadwinning occupations rather than vocations. The

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Frauen für die wirtschaftliche Lage und den Zusammenhalt der Familie", in *Die Arbeiter Wohlfart*, 15 Oct. 1930; Gertrud HANNA: "Vom Kampf gegen die verheirateten erwerbstätigen Frauen", in *Die Arbeit*, April 1931; "Zur Forderung: Kampf den Doppelverdienern" (unsigned), in *Die Gewerkschaftliche Frauenzeitung*, 15 March 1932.

[1] *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

replies are not by any means the same in enquiries among women engaged in professional work. Here again, however, although they generally appear to be sufficiently interested in their work to want to continue it even if not forced to do so by financial circumstances, most of the professional women questioned nevertheless admitted that they worked because they needed the money to support themselves or their dependants. In the replies to a questionnaire circulated among the members of the American Association of University Women, which were used by Chase Going Woodhouse [1] to ascertain the reasons for which professional women continue working after marriage, 58.8 per cent. of married professional women holding a University degree gave financial necessity as their chief reason for working ; for married women with children, considered separately, the percentage rose to 65.2 per cent. The particulars collected by the Bureau of Vocational Information [2] and a number of other enquiries also show a similar situation. [3]

In these direct enquiries, particularly among industrial workers, the monotonous list of reasons for going to work sometimes contains replies that perhaps make it easier to realise the loss the working classes would suffer if women were robbed of the possibility of acting as breadwinner as well as home-maker, not only when their livelihood depends on it, but simply in order to improve the family's standard of living. One of the reasons given, for instance, is to enable the family to live more decently than is possible on the father's earnings ; another, to give the children a better education. It may well be asked whether the first effect of any measure to abolish women's employment would not be to bring about a considerable fall in the standard of living of the working classes, since the husband's wages would not at once be raised by 50 to 75 per cent. (the usual ratio of women's wages to men's) when his wife was deprived of her work. And reduction of material resources means reduced con-

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[1] INSTITUTE OF WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS : *After College—What ? A Study of 6,665 Land-Grant College Women, Their Occupations, Earnings, Families, and some Undergraduate and Vocational Problems.* Edited by Chase Going WOODHOUSE. Bulletin No. 4. Greensboro, North Carolina College for Women, 1932.

[2] *Marriage and Careers.* Edited by Virginia MacMakin COLLIER. New York, 1926.

[3] Cf. in particular Anne Byrd KENNON : " College Wives Who Work ", in *Journal of the American Association of University Women* (Washington), June 1927, p. 100 ; Clara ELIOT : " Married Barnard Alumnae ", in *Bulletin of the Associate Alumnae*, Vol. XVIII, Dec. 1928, p. 6.

sumption by the family, which is forced down to a bare subsistence level. Any general abolition of women's employment would certainly lead to a fall in the purchasing power of the working classes—a result hardly to be desired at a time when ths world is suffering from a disquieting degree of under-consumption.

If, on the other hand, only a few women who are in easier circumstances were deprived of their employment, the effect on men's unemployment would be insignificant. The problem of finding employment for millions of unemployed men cannot be solved by the compulsory retirement of a few hundred married women civil servants or the dismissal of some of the higher women employees in the big administrative offices. It may even be argued that the dismissal of women workers, even when confined to those who are not absolutely dependent on their earnings, may nevertheless react on their less prosperous sisters. Most of the women employees who have been dismissed from administrative posts kept servants to help to run their homes. With enforced leisure and a reduced family income, they dismiss the domestic helpers—the maid, charwoman, daily dressmaker, etc.—whom they no longer need or can no longer afford. These results were to be expected ; that they have actually occurred has been proved by enquiries. In France, where although there is no legislation to this effect some large private businesses have dismissed women on this ground, an enquiry was conducted among the regional employment exchanges to ascertain the effects of unemployment on the shortage of domestic servants from which France had been suffering for some years. The employment exchange for the Rhone Department replied that there are now large numbers of domestic servants seeking employment, and explained the changed position in the following words : " In the Rhone Department many households in which both husband and wife worked used to employ domestic servants. Owing to the depression, many of these wives have had to return home. They now have time to look after their own homes and have therefore dismissed their servants. " [1]

According to the investigations of Miss Anna Campbell Davis, of the Economics Department of the University of Wisconsin, on the probable effects of the dismissal of married women from State employment, it appears that the dismissal of

[1] *Bulletin du Ministère du Travail*, April-June 1932, p. 135.

64 women would have the effect of throwing out of employment about 100 domestic helpers of various kinds employed directly or indirectly by these professional women. [1]

Finally, it may also reasonably be argued that to eliminate from human activities precisely those forms of work which are performed from free choice, vocation, or at least from inclination, and not solely under the spur of absolute necessity, would be not only to rob certain individuals of one of the noblest of all possible pleasures but to deprive society of the most efficient services at its command. What a waste of talents it would be, for instance, to relegate to household duties which can be performed by any domestic helper a fully-trained teacher who brings to her work whole-hearted devotion and an experience still further enriched by motherhood! Once again, viewed from the standpoint of the general interest, the value of any such measure seems to be more than doubtful.

If the dismissal of married women is to be looked upon as an exceptional measure, carefully limited to cases where it would not affect the vital interests of the worker and her dependants—the plan generally looked on with most favour—some method of discrimination would be needed to determine whether a woman really needs to work or not. What human tribunal would be competent for the eminently delicate task of assessing incomes and requirements, of invading the privacy of the home to ascertain the respective responsibilities of husband and wife and distinguish between those which can be borne by the husband and those which the wife prefers, and in the interests of domestic peace should be allowed, to bear herself, out of devotion to aged parents or affection for needy brothers or sisters? What tribunal could appreciate the anxiety for the future which leads many a wife to continue her work so that if necessary she may take the place of a husband whose health is precarious? Would it also be part of its duties to judge character and distinguish the cases in which a woman can safeguard her self-respect only by economic independence? All this is a formidable task to entrust to persons of average discernment, and would certainly be extremely distressing to the private feelings of the victims of the enquiry. These, however, are moral

[1] Cf. Mary ANDERSON: "Women and their Job: Some Lessons of the Depression", in *Journal of the American Association of University Women*, Oct. 1932, pp. 10-11.

considerations which have been excluded from the scope of this study.

A circumstance which may well give rise to astonishment is the quarter towards which the most violent attacks on women's employment have been directed. The main targets of these attacks are employment in administrative services and in office work, both forms of work which have no physical drawbacks for women, and towards which it might logically be expected that a reasonable system of vocational guidance would direct them.

In connection with this question of vocational guidance, some curious facts may be observed. Any discussion during the depression of the efforts that should be made to provide more efficient vocational guidance for women almost always has in view the purpose of persuading more women to enter domestic occupations. In some cases this is based on logical grounds. During the last few years several countries (e.g. France, Great Britain, Switzerland) have suffered from an unusual shortage of domestic servants and have been obliged to import foreign labour to meet their needs ; at the same time their own labour market has been flooded with other kinds of workers, and in some industries (e.g. machine embroidery in the Canton of St. Gall, textiles in Great Britain) with workers belonging to trades which have little or no hope of ever re-absorbing them. The requirements of the labour market are one of the elements in a practical system of vocational guidance, and it is only right that they should be taken into account. But there are other elements, too, which should not be neglected, and among them the physical and mental qualifications of the persons concerned are of essential importance. Domestic work is not always what is called light work, i.e. work that is not physically exhausting, and it would be a mistake to force it indiscriminately on all women manual workers. Indignation is sometimes felt, and quite rightly, at the performance by women of certain forms of industrial work notoriously dangerous to their health ; but is anyone shocked at the sight of a daily washerwoman handling heavy tubs of water ? There are many kinds of industrial work which mainly require manual dexterity and are much better suited to the physique of women than domestic work of this kind.

As regards office work, there can be no *a priori* reasons for excluding women from it. Further, in consequence of the

improvement in women's education, which in Western countries at least is now on a par with that of men, an ever-increasing number of women are now qualified to perform such work efficiently, a circumstance which should be cause for rejoicing rather than the reverse. [1]

Any attempt, on the other hand, to abolish women's employment on a sufficient scale to have an appreciable effect on the labour market for men, by forcing or persuading all married women to give up paid work, would probably be attended by a number of other economic consequences, which must be briefly indicated.

In the first place, society would undoubtedly be saddled with a number of new and heavy responsibilities. If the family has only one pillar to support it, collapse of that pillar results in total disaster for the household. The State would therefore be obliged to take over the full maintenance of all widows and orphans, since a trade is easily lost when no longer practised and it would be almost impossible for a woman who had lost her job on marriage to find a suitable position after many years away from her work. This difficulty is still greater when widowhood comes to a woman of mature years, for age is a considerable handicap to the placing of all workers, even if they have been continuously in employment. This handicap has very much increased during recent years, for various technical and social reasons which cannot be studied here ; it must at least be noted that it has become especially heavy in the case of women. The problem is serious enough to have been made the subject of a number of studies in the United States. [2] These show that for women workers age begins to act as a handicap in finding work as early as 25 ; from the age of 30 onwards (35 for men) it

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[1] In the United States, for example, the increase in the number of women employed in office work was the salient characteristic of the 1930 census : the rise since 1920 was nearly 40 per cent., while the general increase in women's employment was 25 per cent. During this period the increase in the number of women in large-scale industries was 5.6 per cent., or considerably less than the increase in the population as a whole (20 per cent.), and the employment of women in workshops for hand or light mechanical work (clothing, etc.) had fallen considerably, in some branches by 30 to 40 per cent. Thus the distribution of women's employment over the different branches of economic activity in the United States has radically altered during the last ten years in favour of office work. The same change is taking place in many other countries.

[2] Cf. Caroline MANNING : " Economic Old Age : The Industrial Woman Looks at the Problem ", in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work, Boston, Mass., 8-14 June 1930*, pp. 290-294. Cf. also PERSONNEL RESEARCH FEDERATION : *Eleventh Annual Conference, New York, 17-18 November 1932.*

creates serious difficulties, while the woman over 40 has practically no hope of finding a situation. Women actually in employment, however, need not seriously begin to fear dismissal on the ground of age until they are 55 (65 for men).

In this respect the probable effects of a long gap in a woman's working life are easy to foresee. The widowhood of a woman who had lost her employment would mean both a burden on the State (a burden which when many times repeated would reach serious dimensions) and at the same time the condemnation of widows and their dependants to a life of poverty on an allowance that must necessarily be meagre. It may well be asked whether it is really to the interests of society to shoulder so grave a risk, and whether it has the right to condemn persons who are able to work to such a lowering of their standard of living.

If the practice of giving up work on marriage were to become general, it would very probably bring in its train yet another drawback : the progressive disappearance of all vocational training for women. No one is willing to spend money and time on training for an occupation which must shortly be abandoned. Families will not spend money on their daughters which will bring in little or no return. This consideration has always acted as a handicap to the establishment of women in employment, and its effect would be further intensified if it were definitely known that women must leave their work on marriage. The evil the proposed change is intended to remedy would therefore become still more pronounced : as unmarried women cannot be prevented from working, all occupations would be flooded with women workers who, although unskilled, would be capable of performing certain kinds of mechanised work and who by accepting starvation wages would help to pull down general wage standards.

This danger would be increased by the still greater difficulty of organising such floating labour, which is only loosely attached to its occupation, and of disciplining it to observe the conditions of collective agreements. And it has been noted above that trade unions which follow the movement of their membership closely and make a point of studying its causes have already seen the first effects of the campaign against the gainful employment of married women in a loosening of their ties with the unions.

It may also be expected that any regulations of this kind, which could be adequately enforced only in the more definite

forms of employment, would be evaded by a great many women who, being barred from employment in factories, shops, and offices, would carry on some clandestine trade at home. The result would be the development of the most undesirable form of paid employment—employment at starvation wages which drags down other wages by its competition. [1]

It appears from this analysis of the situation that the measure proposed in certain quarters as a remedy is, in fact, a nostrum which may be expected to produce more disastrous effects than beneficial ones. Throughout this article facts rather than opinions have been taken as the ground of discussion. Nevertheless, without departing from the realm of facts it may be pointed out that loyalty to an occupation which is both congenial and successful, the sense of responsibility which a woman derives from her work, the increased energy demanded of her by the performance of a dual task, in the factory or office and in the home, and even the desire for independence where this is the determining factor that leads her to be self-supporting—all these are progressive elements the disappearance of which might reasonably be regarded as a definite loss to society. Taken even at the lowest estimate, they are psychological realities of our age, hard facts which must be taken into account in the same way as the existence of a high degree of mechanisation. In the course of social evolution certain adjustments must always be made by those who are caught in its stream ; but it is impossible to bring back forms of social organisation belonging to a bygone age.

[1] This danger has been well brought out by Dr. Käthe LEICHTER : cf. " Internationale Krisen-Probleme der Frauenarbeit ", in *Die Frau* (Vienna), July 1931. Cf. also the article by Mrs. Gertrud HANNA, already mentioned, in *Die Arbeit* (Berlin), April 1931.