

By Roberta

Women without an independent source of income in a society which celebrates the acquisition of wealth occupy a very special position. The appeal of a future where everyone is employed at socially productive, personally fulfilling work is undeniable. Unfortunately, that future isn't in the immediate offing. Consequently, we must deal with the present.

Jobs for women are not as readily available as jobs for men. Interesting jobs in which women don't have to face exploitation, under-utilization of their talents, discrimination, misogyny and male domination are at a premium indeed. Domesticity with its relative autonomy, chance to occupy a superordinate position and scope for creativity emerges as doubly attractive.

Birth control methods are not entirely dependable. The pill and abortion don't provide answers for everyone.

Women are still expected to be the primary agents of child care and home-making and are socialized accordingly. Freedom of choice is nonsense when the social programming of females for motherhood and domesticity is so ubiquitous and insidious.

There is a lamentable paucity of day care facilities--to say nothing of good day care facilities.

Husbands in our society are expected to have seniority on the basis of age which usually means they also have seniority on the job. To opt, then, for role reversal may be financial suicide and, therefore, out of the question no matter how appealing.

This is a man's world in which all women are handicapped whether they admit it or not, in which many women are defeated and in which not a few opt out by refusing to participate in a hopelessly rigged game.

The preceding paragraphs are intended to make two points: First, alternatives to domesticity in contemporary society are for women few and unattractive. Second, patterns of socialization conspire to prevent serious consideration of the full range of human possibilities which do exist.

The net result of this is that the vast majority of us somehow wind up in the home at some stage of the game. Moreover, we wind up there with no independent income. Financial dependence in a world where status is to some degree a function of wealth is not without consequences for women.

One consequence is that women are prone to suffer from a lack of pride in their "chosen" occupation. Contrast the number of men who would give a similar reply about their occupation with the number of women who will say "I'm just a housewife."

This diminished sense of worth comes from the ability of women to sense the ambivalence behind the rhetoric which proclaims the importance of motherhood and homemaking. The rhetoric is so frequently contradicted in practice.

Look at the salaries paid to babysitters, pre-school teachers, child care workers and domestics. They are anything but handsome. If the work is so important, why is it so poorly remunerated?

Look at the Occupational Index of the U.S. Dept. of Labor which rates cab driving as a profession requiring more skill than being a foster mother. Being a foster mother is evidently a job which requires little talent. Problems faced by foster mothers and natural mothers are astonishingly similar. The conclusion that motherhood in general requires little skill implacably follows.

Look at the lack of realistic preparation in North America for domesticity in the form of supervised training. The implication is that any one can do it with few if any qualifications.

Look at the lack of prestige of those courses which do attempt to provide this kind of training. If the tasks are equally important, why doesn't Foods I have the same prestige as Physics I?

How does a salary change the situation? Pride is a function of prestige. Prestige and income may not be synonymous or even necessarily directly related; but there is a tendency for prestige to rise when income rises, assuming that that income has been acquired in an acceptable manner.

The innovation of a salary can do something more. A salary can be instrumental in breaking the exclusive association of women with domestic labor and child care by attracting men into the home. Sheer altruism won't motivate many men. Who wants to work for low pay or no pay and little prestige? A salary changes the situation and acts as a definite drawing card. Men exposed to the rigors of domesticity on an ongoing basis will emerge as a little more appreciative of what it really does take and a little more sympathetic to the plight of the "pampered" housewife. Bingo, prestige rises.

A second consequence of the lack of independent income is that women who remain in the home are robbed of the joys of providing for their families. Daddy is the provider and at times the nurturer. Mother is to be confined to the role of nurturer, a role which has its own satisfactions but which is undeniably limiting. The anomaly of buying Daddy a birthday present with "his" money does seem absurd. A salary provides the solution.

Money doesn't necessarily buy freedom. Freedom can be achieved without money or so they tell us. Nevertheless, the suggestion is made that there is for the average person in our materialistic world a connection between the two. If a woman has no money of her own her opportunities for independence are circumscribed, yet another consequence of unsalaried domesticity. Salaried domesticity increases the possibilities.

There can be little doubt that domestic labors and particularly child care have their own intrinsic rewards, wonderful rewards at that. Alternatively, there can be little doubt that domestic labors and particularly child care have their own frustrations. A portion of the labors involved are sheer repetitious, never ending drudgery, a drudgery which is inescapable because someone has to do it to maintain even minimum standards of cleanliness. It seems to be a cliché that the dog tracks mud across the freshly scrubbed floor; and that when something gets spilled, it spills wherever the stain is most difficult to eradicate.

Built-in frustrations like these cannot be totally alleviated, but such frustrations can be diminished before they find expression in unpleasant familial and personal repercussions. A salary by providing an antidote for unrewarding work, is a means of doing this. A woman who spends the morning picking-up a house rendered once more messy by dinner has little to show for her labors, but if she has a salary, she is not totally bereft.

Dependency has advantages, but no woman is guaranteed dependency for life. Marriage is no longer a dependable lifetime career. Marriages which begin in bliss are not unknown to dissolve in divorce. What happens to the woman who occupied her time with domesticity and child care unremunerated?

She may be "lucky" enough to receive an indemnity in the form of maintenance--if he can afford to pay it, if he pays it regularly and if she has no second thoughts about making him pay. If he is faced with a situation where she is allotted less money for herself and her children than he gets for himself. However she feels about alimony or welfare, its substitute, nurtured on dependence she may have no real alternative.

If she decides to work, the jobs that are open are not appealing. She has sacrificed a number of years of seniority. Though she has worked all her life, on application forms she must aver that she has no experience.

If she wants to remarry, she must face the realities. Men at age forty or fifty are in their prime. She has become obsolete. Women age more quickly in our society by social definition if in no other way. Because of the cant which says that she must marry a man older than herself or face the consequences, while he is free to marry any sweet young thing that comes along, she must compete with younger women. She may find herself caught in a demographic squeeze such as that faced by those born in the post-war baby boom who must pick a mate from a relatively small group of males born during the war or the depression.

A salary compensates in a small way for these inequities. A salary provides an opportunity to accumulate a nest egg against an uncertain future. A salary provides a vehicle for independence. Salary stubs prove experience and record seniority, ending the humiliation of having to write "no experience" on job forms.

A salary is not a panacea. A salary for domestic service is not without problems. A salary for domestic service is not the whole answer, but it is a way of dealing with contemporary reality. A salary isn't an ideal solution, but we don't live in an ideal world. A salary is merely a viable alternative in a world in transition.

They tell us woman's place is in the home. They tell us the work we do in the home is vitally and equally important. The time has come for them to put their money where their mouths are.

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