

THE WORKING MOTHER

The African mother has always worked. In primitive society it was either seasonal or part-time, and because of the nature of the economy she did not work far away from home. The plots she tilled, the soil in which she planted seed and reaped her crop were in the vicinity of her household. The pottery and beadwork could also be done at home. In economic history this period is characterised by home industries. In essence, the mother had time to be with her family, and particularly her children. It is important to note that in this set up, the family was an extended unit, with numerous aunts, grannies and cousins ready to look after the children if for some reason the mother had to be temporarily or permanently away from home. As these relations were members of the family, and not strangers, they could assume the role of mothering the children without any emotional strain on the part of both. On the other hand the absent working mother did not have to suffer the anxiety of knowing that her family was not well looked after during her absence.

In rural areas the position remains more or less the same. The family pattern has not changed much. In these communities the families know each other and all the families watch the child grow up: its behaviour is everybody's business. The migrant labour system - one of the out-growths of the South African pattern of industrialisation - has major effects in the rural areas because unless men qualify for urban domicile, which is being made increasingly difficult, the families are by law not allowed to join them. In fact, the families of qualified men are nowadays not allowed into the town if the family lives in a "homeland". Hence many women are left behind to grow the crops and keep the families going as best as they can, and this often has unsatisfactory consequences because the father who exercises the main authority in the family is absent. This means the discipline and model of a father with whom to identify is missing. This contributes towards that lack of parental control which is so widely observed today.

What is the position in urban areas today? Who looks after the children during the long hours when the mother is working far away from home? Urbanisation and industrialisation have changed the family pattern: it is no longer a joint-unit. The grannies and aunts may be living in the same township, but they are no longer available to look after the children, when the mother is away working, as so often they have to work for themselves too. Urbanisation is changing the character of the African family, which is becoming increasingly individualistic. Many women work, but the majority of them do not earn enough to meet the minimum requirements of their families. Often they have to work until they are old. As a result the working mother reluctantly leaves her child in the care of older children if she is lucky enough to have them, or she employs a stranger if she has not secured accommodation for her child in a creche.

The child left with the stranger is deprived of the warmth and love that are essential for its emotional stability. There is a great need for trained child-minders, for pre-nursery school children, and for nursery schools, and creches staffed by trained personnel. The average working mother is deeply concerned about this problem of child care. There is a grave shortage of creches in all our urban townships. The huge complex of Soweto, with a population of 600,000 has only got 52 creches (1): Alexandra Township, with some 55,000 people has 4 creches. As a result all these creches have long waiting lists, e.g. Untokozweni creche with a maximum roll of 150 children had a waiting list of 132 in October, 1967. This creche has a monthly average waiting list of over 100 children. This has been so even in spite of the continuous removal of families from Alexandra Township since 1958.

Little wonder that almost all women's organisations in this country have had this issue - of the necessity for adequate and inexpensive places of care for small children - on their agendas at some time or another. As a result of industrialisation, people have to travel long distances to places of employment.

Factories and industrial centres are situated miles away from residential areas. For the African townships in particular, transport is inadequate. This means that the African mother has to leave home very early in the morning to queue for transport or in an attempt to avoid crowded trains. She returns home late in the evening and so has little time to be with her family. The African woman's day still begins at dawn and she carries on in both factory and home till darkness sends her to bed. The hours of work are long, particularly in domestic service. I need not emphasise the fact that the main occupation of an African woman as a wage earner is still domestic service of some kind.

According to an extract from the statistical year book 1966, there were 838,579 economically active African women and of these 460,116 were in domestic employment (2). The position has not changed much: in fact it is a familiar pattern.

According to O.P.F. Horwood in "The Private Budget of the Urban African", "The occupational distribution of the population reveals a pattern that, in its basic features, is common to all Native Urban Communities in South Africa. Only 2% of those in employment were in the professional and managerial category, 4% were office workers, 2% salesman and 8% drivers and delivery men. Three fifths of all were recorded as ordinary labourers and almost four fifths of the female workers were employed in domestic service"(3).

As domestic servants they live on the property of their employers or they have to travel long distances to and fro after a full day's work. This throws a great strain on the working mother and often has adverse effects on her family relationships. She arrives home late, physically and mentally tired, and in this frame of mind she becomes impatient and easily irritable with her husband and children. Many homes have been broken because of tensions and frictions that have arisen under such conditions of living. All these factors are not conducive to a healthy family relationship.

The child in the lower primary school presents

another kind of a problem for the working mother. Under Bantu Education - characterised by double-sessions in the sub-standards - the hours of schooling are short. So the child returns early from school, hungry and quite often to find closed doors or empty and lonely homes. Needless to say this kind of child suffers severe maternal deprivation. Consequently, in an attempt to belong somewhere, he joins undesirable groups that later swell the ranks of delinquents.

It is time that those who plan our educational programme include free school meals for African children in all age groups. Well organised play centres would go a long way in engaging children purposefully during the long hours when they are not at school.

Since World War II there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of working women. For instance, in the United States one third of the nation's working people are women, the majority of whom are married or have been married (4). For better or worse the trend of social change appears to be towards mothers working (including African women) for at least part of their lives and in most cases until they are old. Much of this trend is due to the increasing cost of living. By and large the great majority of women who work do so because they need the money. They may be sole breadwinners as in the case of widows, divorcees or unmarried mothers, or they may work to supplement the husband's income. Their greatest job satisfaction lies in the cash it brings, the goods it buys, and the sense of independence it gives.

The important thing to realise is that women's work outside their home is no longer merely a matter of conflicting family responsibilities or of what they want to do for their own personal finances. The fact now is that women are needed in the fast growing economies of most countries. "Nowhere in the industrialised countries", writes Dr. Helga Pross, "neither in Europe nor in the United States nor in the Soviet Union, could the national economy function effectively without women co-operating as workers, clerks, civil servants, teachers etc. (5)."

This is true of South Africa too. The South African Nursing Council had a registered membership of 7,300 General Nurses, and 6,723 Midwives at the end of December 1966 (6).

The Department of Bantu Education had 7,848 female teachers in the Transvaal in 1965 (7). A good number of women are employed in factories. This number is increasing and should continue to do so with the development of border industries near the Bantustans. This is a trend that is common to most countries. However these countries devise ways and specific methods to assist these women who must work. Most highly industrialised countries have shorter working hours, or a shorter week for working mothers so that part of their time is devoted to home matters. In certain instances they are encouraged to take up part-time employment. In Sweden, which has the highest standard of living in the world, married women are not permitted by the Government to take up full-time employment particularly while their children are small. They are limited to part-time employment so that they can give the necessary care to their children and home.

If wages for Africans could be increased, the African mother would not have to work all the time, especially when the children are very small. She would in this case be able to devote more time to her family. In this way she would be able to fulfil her natural role. As Alison Raymond says, "No matter what else she may also be called upon to do women's essential function will always be as guardian of the family" (8).

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R E F E R E N C E S

- (1) Non-European Affairs Johannesburg: Information Section.
- (2) Statistical Year Book 1966.
- (3) "The Private Budget of the Urban Native", by O.P.F. Horwood.
- (4) The American Almanac Atlas and Year Book: 1964 by Dan Golenpaul.
- (5) The Position of Women in a Modern Society, by Dr. Helga Pross.
- (6) Registrar: South African Nursing Council, Pretoria.
- (7) Department of Bantu Education Transvaal: Information Section, Pretoria.
- (8) Half the World's People: G. Alison Raymond.