Married Women in Employment

VIOLA KLEIN

London School of Economics

(An earlier version of this paper was read at the Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association in 1960.)

The growing practice of married women to work gainfully outside their homes has recently received a great deal of attention, both of the academic and the popular variety. It has been the subject of numerous conferences, research projects and students' theses, as well as arousing a veritable flood of newspaper articles and controversies.

There are many good reasons for either kind of interest, the academic as well as the public one. To the sociologist, the topic offers an almost classical example of social change — a social change, moreover, which is taking place under our very eyes and at a speed which facilitates observation. It affords a vivid illustration of the effects of technological advance on the social structure — on the institution of the family, in particular; and it provides a case study in the change of social attitudes and mores under the impact of demographic developments and growing industrialisation.

Social scientists are concerned with the problems the phenomenon raises for industrial management, with its implications for higher education, training and recruitment, its possible effects on young children, and on public policy issues, generally.

The widespread popular interest has been aroused, partly because of the apparent novelty of the problem, and partly because at a time of full employment the desire of many women for a more varied range of activities than the home can offer coincides with acute shortages of staff in the very fields of employment which are traditionally "feminine" and in which women form a substantial proportion of the personnel.

The teaching and nursing professions are cases in point, as are the social services. Their continued existence, not to mention their necessary expansion, will be jeopardized — as the authorities concerned have had to emphasize with increasing urgency — unless more married women can be recruited. In this connexion it has now become customary to call "wastage" what, until only a few years ago, was generally considered "a woman's place".

An increasing number of light industries, expanding distributive trades and public as well as commercial services compete with each other for the semi-skilled and unskilled hands of women. Shortages of office staff and of domestic servants have become chronic. Virtually all single women who are not still at
school or in training are gainfully employed. Hence the only potential reserve of labour are married women.

The novelty element of women's "dual role" is, however, more apparent than real. The combination of domestic activities with some economic productivity is, on the contrary, a traditional pattern of women's lives in all non-industrial economies. It was, historically, the accepted order of things in Western society wherever, and as long as, the family was the primary economic unit; it is still common practice in the agricultural communities which form a large part of the world's population today.

The cleavage between the attitudes in industrial and pre-industrial countries towards the "dual role of women" was obvious, for instance, at a recent congress held in Istanbul by the International Council of Women on the theme of "Women and the Family in a Changing World". The problems of married women with jobs outside the home dominated the interest of the Western delegations, while the issue was of less concern to the representatives of the emergent countries who accepted without question the fact that women do two jobs, one at home and one in the fields.

In the early days of industrialisation, too, large numbers of women were employed away from home, in the new industries and even in the coal mines. It will be recalled that the first piece of social legislation in Britain, the Factory Act of 1802, was concerned with the protection of women and children in industry.

In the mid-Victorian era, the Census of 1851 recorded one married woman in every four as having an "extraneous occupation", that is, an employment other than housewife; among the widows, 2 in every 3 had occupations outside their homes.

The work those women did, although mostly of the personal service variety, included a wide range of occupations, from cotton operatives to dressmakers and milliners, from washerwomen and seamstresses to lodging-house keepers, book-binders, steel-pen producers, shoemakers and butchers.

The conditions of work in those days of course left much to be desired. They were often appalling and sweated labour was widespread, particularly in the textile and garment industries. Moreover, those women had an average family of six children and an expectation of life of no more than 45 years.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that the employment of married women was considered to be an unmitigated evil and resorted to only where the wife's earning was absolutely essential to prevent starvation.

The introduction to the Census of 1851 therefore states: "The duties of a wife, a mother, a mistress of a family, can only be efficiently performed by unremitting attention; accordingly, it is found that in districts where the women are much employed from home, the children and parents perish in great numbers."

This historical situation has made a deep and lasting impact on popular attitudes towards the employment of married women. It explains partly, at least, why the working-class man today shows, on the whole, a stronger emotional