

Women

Held down by myths and the nuclear family

BEING A WIFE AND MOTHER IN THIS SOCIETY is a full-time 12 to 14 hour-a-day occupation for married women with children.

As long as a woman's time is subject to the demands of others, she is not free even in the most minimal sense. A man's time is not entirely his own either, since 8 hours a day belong to his employer, but however degrading his servitude may be, it ends after 8 hours. For a woman on the other hand, the demands of others define her every waking moment. Her energy is channeled into a narrow round of activities which must be endlessly repeated.

Woman is the means by which the species reproduces itself; consequently she is defined solely through her biological function (reproduction and sexuality). She is chained by preconceptions of her being as essentially physical. It is considered her prior duty to subjugate all impulses towards creative action to the interests of private labour in the home.

Prevailing myths of our society say that woman's natural place is in the home and that naturally she will find fulfillment in bearing and raising children and in submitting to a man.

This idea that childbearing and childrearing is the fulfillment of a woman's destiny is the most damaging and destructive myth that binds her and her family. To live through other human beings (husband or children) is a deeply frustrating experience for many women. For most women, childbearing is no substitute for creating one's own life.

We are trained for particular roles in this society and we are given very few alternatives.

Why, if these roles are so limited and dehumanizing, have they been perpetuated? It would be easy simply to see men as the immediate enemy and the cause of woman's oppression; yet this would imply that the cause is rooted in something inherently evil in men. It is necessary, therefore, to look into the present social system and to examine how, over a long period of time, society programs people — men and women into specific roles that fit its requirements for maintaining itself.

Social order grows out of basic human needs. In early human history, these needs were quite simple: food, shelter and physical protection. To survive, ancient humans devised ways of caring for themselves, creating simple forms of social organization to meet these basic needs. As methods for meeting these basic needs became more sophisticated, social organization changed to adapt more efficiently to changes in methods of production.

In *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels describes the change from a primitive, communal society, with group marriage and collective work for collective ends, to a property-oriented, pairing social structure that developed class differences of work and life style.

Tribes, Engels said, divided labour so that men cared for cattle and women maintained communal farms and cared for children and domestic chores. In this early period, there were no status differentiations between men's and women's work. Both were necessary for survival and both contributed to the good of the whole community.

System of trade begins

Then, early forms of trading began. Cattle became the early unit of exchange around which all other forms of trade were measured. Trade broke down the concept of work for the necessity of the community, and developed the notions of bartering and property.

If one could trade something for something else, one owned what he traded. Since cattle, which were the assigned responsibility of men, became the unit of trade, it followed that men became the first owners of property. This subtle shift spelled the end of communal production and the beginning of private wealth vested in the hands of men.

Property owned by men could not be passed to their sons if paternity was uncertain. Thus the economic development of trade slowly changed the family structure from a kind of group commune to pairing and marriage. Whereas before, sexual relations were free and open within the group, now strict fidelity was demanded to ensure known paternity and thus lineage. Women became, like cattle, the property of men.

Several groups or classes emerged: those men

By Judy Darcy



who owned cattle and those who did not. Secondary to this were the women who were the property of either the owners or the labourers.

The basic social and economic unit became the patriarchal extended family, that is, children, parents, grandparents and other relatives living together in a unit headed by one dominant male. All goods the family used were produced by its members; work was divided so that women cared for the house and the farmyard, while men brought home lumber, meat, grain and wool. The house was a small factory that employed old men, women and children and produced all the family needed.

With the growth of industrialization and therefore a move from rural areas to urban centres, the extended family developed into the present nuclear family structure composed of one man, his wife and their children.

With the invention of the spinning jenny, the power loom, and other industrial machines, and with a rising demand for mass-produced items, a new era in production in Western capitalist countries began. Women began leaving their homes and flocking to the new mills to gain some economic independence and freedom.

Mass production made it easier and often cheaper to purchase the family's needs than to rely on home production. This meant that the family's greatest need was cash income to buy processed foods and manufactured goods. Because the new factory system needed workers, women and even children were encouraged to seek employment.

But, 'freedom' to work and to leave the

demanding family unit was deceptive. Factories merely moved hard labour from the home to the central work place, and made money for the mill owners, while the workers were still impoverished. Economic freedom did not appear, and the living conditions of workers grew steadily worse.

Expanded industry created a new middle class and freed growing numbers of women from domestic drudgery, giving them time to work in the new 'service' occupations. Women began to teach and to do hospital work, and, with the invention of the typewriter in 1867, they entered new clerical fields.

Although the two world wars have changed the situation for short periods (wars always being times when women are enlisted to take on the work of fighting men) women have remained in the same occupations they held before the First World War.

They did clerical and factory work and they continued expanding the new 'soothing' professions like social work, nursing and teaching, jobs which essentially are only extensions of the work a woman does in the home, that is, caring for people, looking after children, being sensitive and efficient. Propaganda and mass mobilizations for the war effort got women to fill in while men fought, but they were quickly sent home again when the fighting stopped.

Women believed what they were told and followed the needs of a changing economy. When women were wanted during the Second World War, companies provided child care facilities; when the

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