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THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE

FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

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The Changing Role of Women in the Federal Republic
of Germany

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The development of women's position is still very different in different countries, and it may be interesting to find out where they really have more influence. There are countries like Switzerland, France and Spain and countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa where women have fewer legal rights than, for example, in the Federal Republic of Germany and yet they have considerable influence within their families.

But we are living today in a changing world with a social pattern of mass production and mass organization in which the position of women is characterized by their integration into public and community life.

The following problems have been declared particularly worthy of research:

1. Situation of the unmarried woman and the fatherless family
2. Career possibilities for working women
3. Return of the elderly, married woman, whose children have grown up, to work outside the family.

Considering the development of women's right in the past in Germany, there is a movement connected with the general upheavals of the industrial revolution during the last century. It is a question of continual reforms and progress, although the progress has been interrupted by two wars.

In the last century, when women were called upon to do factory work, efforts were made to regulate female work in an adequate way.

Intellectual women such as Helene Lange, who founded the first secondary school for girls in Berlin in 1890 and also the German Association of Women Teachers fought access to education equal to that of men. This, actually, was one of the main aims of intellectual female movement: to gain access to academic professions.

Around the turn of the century, after a long and strenuous struggle, the universities opened their gates to women. Gradually girls schools as well as a number of colleges and vocational training schools for women were founded.

In the political field, the women gained the right of vote in 1918. It is quite amusing to know that until 1908 there existed a provision in the German legislation forbidding "women, schoolchildren, apprentices, and mentally diseased people to take part in any political meetings."

But after World War I it was comparatively easy for women to obtain political freedom.

Today we have 45 women members of Parliament, that is 10 per cent, the second highest percentage of all the European Parliaments, after Finland. Considering that more than half of the 34 million voters of the Federal Republic are female, their representation in Parliament can hardly be said to be sufficient. But the 45 members have been active and efficient, especially in the social and cultural committees, in the reform of the criminal law, and in welfare work. Others pointed to new methods in vocational guidance.

When we consider the goals of the past which have been reached, we find: protection of labour, the maternity protection, admittance to universities and political equality of rights. Last but not least, the basic change of social structure, also a consequence of two world wars, forced women to become more independent.

Today, the whole of development is mirrored in the modern legislation of the Federal Republic. The full equality of rights for women in all fields was laid down in Article 3 of our Constitution in 1949. A decision of 1959 according to which social insurance pensions can already be granted to women at the age of 60 is a remarkable social achievement. In 1959 the civil rights of husband and wife within the family were laid down. The Family Law was altered and the principle of equal rights and equal responsibilities for both partners was adopted. The changed position of women within the family was thus taken into consideration. The household work of the wife was put on the same level as the husband's professional work. Statistics on this point show that the American housewife does 63 hours of household work a week, the French housewife about 90 hours, and the German up to 120 hours. This is partly due to the German half-day school system because of which the children come home for lunch. Furthermore, it still seems to be a tradition in German families that the husband for the most part does not help his wife with her household work also not very many households are as yet equipped with the most modern labour-saving devices.

With the change in the Family Law husband and wife are required to maintain each other and to maintain their children together. The law referring to property affirms separation of property between husband and wife; this

was extended to a community of profits, i.e., all profits obtained during the marriage are shared equally between the two partners.

But in spite of all this progress, which was a consequence of legal equality and general change of social structure, the social position of the working woman is still unstable. What has not been reached is psychological equality. This may partly be the fault of the woman herself, who still feels within her the inhibitions and prejudices of tradition and convention of the past; her feeling of self-confidence is still weak. And yet the appearance of a modern woman depends mainly on her inner harmony. She must learn to develop social, cultural and political judgements from her own observations, and she must understand that through vocational training she will have a chance to discover and develop her own personality. She must get rid of the thought that she becomes less feminine by having a profession or that she has to work only because she did not get married.

Which professions are the most suitable ones for women? Where have they succeeded most? The choice professions for young girls is still very one-sided. The number of office employees is steadily increasing, whereas the number of women employed in agriculture is lessening and could not even be compensated by an obligatory aid year, which is furthermore contradictory to the Federal Constitution. Even the daughters of farmers leave the rural areas and go to town.

Welfare and social professions have become more popular, whereas employment in the crafts has decreased. The choice of academic professions is steadily increasing. 36 per cent of the candidates for the final school certificates are girls and 30 per cent of them study at the

university. A high percentage become doctors and teachers and the amount of female lawyers, librarians, pharmacists, journalists, museum staff is constantly rising. Some of the typical feminine professions which require special training are medical auxiliary personnel, such as nurses, medical technical assistants, nurses for kindergardens, midwives and physical therapists.

Opportunities for education have enlarged, but the increase of female labour has brought relatively few qualified positions. Qualified women still find it hard to move into responsible and adequate positions. The world of work has been created by men for men, and does not therefore always correspond with the biological and psychological conditions of women. Their professional life is often difficult, mainly because they are regarded as man's assistant or substitute.

And yet there is a constant demand for female labour, not only as a consequence of shortage of labour but also because of the demand of work in the particular female field. Nevertheless, women are still hesitant in assuming their role in public life, because they are still subject to the inhibitions inherent in the patriarchal system to live for the beloved man only.

The opportunities for both marriage and career are better for the present generation, since the social and financial prestige conditions of former generations have lost their importance.

You can hardly imagine a young girl today who does not learn some kind of profession. The desire for vocational training therefore should be promoted in young girls. Even as young wives they often practise their professions so as to contribute to the household expenditures.

If you ask men in our country what they think of this problem, you will find that 65 per cent do not object and that 32 per cent are very much against their wives working outside the family. In any case, girls should be advised to get some qualification. If they remain unmarried this will secure their income, and should they become widows or divorcées, they will always have something to turn to.

The participation of elder women is usually esteemed very highly, because they have more sense of responsibility and also work more diligently. In 1980 we will have about 5.2 million women of the age round about 65. Since life expectation is so much higher today, all these women could do some kind of work between 45 and 65. Here is the problem of vocational training for adults: How can the elder woman be led back to activity in public life? By courses? by television instruction? by evening schools for higher education? or by membership in vocational associations, charitable or civil service organizations?

Today we tend to divide a woman's life in three phases:

1. Education of the young girl with diploma and short period of practise
2. Marriage and family
3. Return to activity outside the family in older years.

Since 1945 women have also played a role in welfare work. In 1950 the wife of President Heuss established the "Mothers Recovery Association," which gives women whose health has suffered under the double strain of work and family life the possibility to take a recuperative holiday.

In 1960 the wife of President Lübke, Mrs. Wilhelmine Lübke started the idea "Welfare for the Old."

Finally, I would like to say something about the development of work done by women's organizations since the war. In contrast to many women's organizations abroad, our associations found it very difficult to find members who were in the position to make considerable contributions. Everywhere there was a great impoverishment of the associations. But right after the breakdown in 1945 women of all social and political affiliations, especially of the elder generations, put themselves at the disposal of various organizations engaged in the work of reconstruction. They knew that the women's organizations had acted as the representatives of the feminist movement and they had brought matters of fundamental importance to the attention of the public. Finally they developed women's organizations as a part of new unions; they joined the traditional women's organizations with clearly political trends, but independent of party politics.

When we compare the past and the present, we realize how broad a base the past created for the present. We live in a present which gives the woman the chance to be socially and economically independent. She is the master of her own life. The development of our modern life has given her a new feeling of self-confidence. Education, vocational guidance and advice are meant to help her on. But she herself seems still to be in a conflict. Psychological equality which should become reality and is the value of the individual human being; this she must create and find herself. The possibility exists, the world has become more human. The woman can manifest her feminine characteristics outside the family by making everyday life more harmonious.

She will then keep in contact with life for the sake of her self-confidence and for the development of her personal judgement. The question of the role of women today puts many problems into focus which concern the problems of our modern life, for instance, school reform, education, courses for adults, reform of universities, and so on. All these problems are related to each other and are the tasks for the future. But the future does not come of its own it must be anticipated, influenced and prepared.

The men should show their readiness to accept women as partners in work and help to increase mutual respect and mutual trust and the women must learn to take their rightful place and fill it with both: charm and efficiency.