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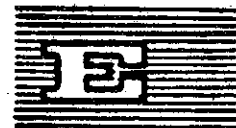
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ROLE OF WOMEN IN PROMOTING MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

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Role of Women in Promoting Maternal and Child Health

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The role which maternal and child health plays in national and international health programmes enjoys the same importance as that played by the eradication of epidemics. The care of mother and child is thus one of the central problems to be dealt with, especially in the wake of industrialization. Taking the European countries as an example, it might be demonstrated what measures have to be taken to guarantee the best possible health for mother and child.

During the storm of industrialization sweeping across a number of European countries, the population began to migrate from rural to urban areas because many hoped to be able to earn more money in the new factories and thus achieve a higher standard of living. For most, this hope could not be realized, at least not in the first generation. Mostly families lived under crowded, insanitary conditions; the parents were unable to provide adequate food for their children, infant mortality reached high figures. Working mothers ceased breastfeeding, one of the main reasons for the increase in infant mortality. At the same time the number of births decreased, a phenomenon which accompanies urbanization and which can be expected to occur in the developing countries as well. It is not easy to discover why it occurs but it may be presumed that there are a number of causes, both physical and psychological, originating in the change in social behaviour. In a changing society it is the women and above all the mothers who must be won as helpers in the cause of progress. A precondition for this is the mother's health. She may well ask where her place is in a society accepting the challenge of change and needing people for new tasks: at home or in the office or factory? At work amongst other women or with men?

It is well known that the following requirements should be fulfilled:

- 1) Legal measures protecting the pregnant woman and nursing mother. Expecting mothers should cease work 6 weeks before confinement and should not start again until 8 weeks after confinement. During this time in industrialized countries full wages are given. Regular prenatal supervision three times during pregnancy must be made available.
- 2) Public health services must provide assistance not only during pregnancy but also delivery, lactation as well as instruction on birth control. Measures must be taken to provide recreation possibilities for women still capable of bearing children who are suffering from exhaustion. Enlightenment must be given on contraceptive measures in order to reduce abortions which are detrimental to health.
- 3) Welfare clinics must be established, babies, infants and schoolchildren must be examined and supervised by doctors, nurses and social workers. Vaccination measures must be taken. Early registration of handicapped children should be provided.

All preventive examinations must be coupled with detailed advice on a healthy way of life. This brings us to the important problem of health education. As in every community, the mother occupies a key position, the success of health improvement depends largely on the willingness of the mothers to accept advice. The confidence of the mothers ought to be won in the interest of the family, the extended family, and the tribe. Women can act as a pressure group in the political sense; even unpopular health measures can be successfully introduced with their help. People very often cannot be appealed to by reason only, new ways of life must be introduced that often are not in keeping with old traditions. Health cannot be promoted without disseminating knowledge. The modern means of communication must be fully utilized.

Under physiological aspects there are many primary differences between men and women. Secondary differences may be caused by more rigorous habitual physical activity of men. But there is great individual variation both among men and women. A strong woman and a weak man are no rarities.

In contrast to widely held opinions about the psychological differences between women and men, experimental psychology has been at pains to find differences in the ability structure of the two sexes. General intelligence is equal, but there are slight structural differences.

Women are better than men in verbal and linguistic ability, writing speed, finger dexterity, speed of observation, and immediate memory.

Men are better than women in visualization ability (i.e., operation with space relationships), logical deduction, numerical ability (as involved in difficult mathematical problems) and technical ability.

Some of these differences may be culturally rather than biologically caused. The accepted sex roles channel the interest.

In the structure of the character, differences also exist. Women have more tendency towards taking care of others, needing care of others, social associations, and neuroticism.

Men have more tendency towards determinacy, self-sufficiency, ambition, and critical attitudes.

Generally, the thinking and attitudes of women are more emotional and less intellectually analytical. Women are emotionally more sensitive, less aggressive and less competitive than men.

As women give more value to the social working environment, they can be excellent health promoters. If they have the chance to be educated in the field of hygiene, nutrition and child care and if they are willing to promote prevention and cure, they can gain influence on the community and national level.

Each woman feels her responsibility for a satisfying family life and each woman wants to have physically and mentally healthy children. She is willing to fight for their well-being.