New Status for Women

Equality, Independence and Modernization

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Traditionally, German society has been dominated by an emphasis on the masculine, and although one hears today that the era of Kinder, Kirche, Kueche, (children, church, kitchen) has passed, in reality change is slow.

Within the German home, boys are still privileged; they are served and receive special care and attention. As men, they still are served and their word is not questioned. Girls, on the other hand, defer to their brothers and take a humbler role. They must study only practical domestic sciences in school, for equal training and work opportunities are not provided them. And as grown women today, representation in proportion to the labor they are performing is granted them neither in public affairs nor in councils.

When Mrs. Elizabeth G. Holt, instructor and authority in art history, arrived in Berlin in 1946 with her husband and family she became active in voluntary work with German women. Appalled by their underprivileged status, she and other interested American women called the matter to the attention of MG officials. In 1948, a Women's Affairs Section was established. Mrs. Holt acted as chief of the section from Oct. 26, 1948 until Feb. 15, 1949 when Ruth Frances Woodsmal was appointed chief.

Workers are not open to girls. If they want to be employed as apprentices in other than the traditional occupations, they have a hard time, for many master craftsmen refuse to employ them even in professions that have been officially opened to women, such as watch making, engraving and optics. The modern approach of the electrical industry in freely hiring women is the major exception, probably resulting from its long tradition of employing large numbers of women. Women have come to accept as a fact that they are unfit for any but traditional occupations.

Politically, it is true that German women were given full equality under the Weimar Republic. In the Weimar Assembly about 10 percent of the delegates were women. But the number decreased for there was no change in the educational system to stimulate, encourage or support women in their participation in public life. Today about 10 percent of the delegates in the state legislatures of the US Zone and Berlin are women. Women are employed as civil servants and employed by political parties to fill administrative offices. This, however, does not alter their basic inequality, nor does it mean that they
have any real influence or voice in the political party which puts them on the list to serve more or less as window-dressing.

The Parliamentary Council at Bonn defeated the amendment to admit women to equal rights with men under the Basic Law. Women are of the opinion that the Basic Law should correspond to the concept of their equal rights as citizens and their constitutional right of civic freedom. They can submit a revision of the Basic Law Book before 1952 so that it may correspond to the idea of equal rights for all.

Economically, the status of German women is serious because of the consequences of war. Destruction of dwellings and possessions and the resulting lower standard of living; lack of financial security or means of support are all aspects of this problem. Those whose husbands may be dead or still prisoners of war in Russia have an unclear legal status, and insurance and inheritance money cannot be paid them. While there are no statistics to show the numbers of employed women with dependents who are the sole wage earners of the families in the US Zone, it is estimated in Berlin that 56 percent of the families are supported by the earnings of a woman.

No change, however, has been made in the training of German women to correspond with the alteration in their economic status. There are limited possibilities of employment as house servants. To support themselves and their dependents, they must sell their possessions and secure work as unskilled laborers. They are therefore particularly attracted to industries such as agriculture and textiles.

The Manpower Conference held last year in Rome was notified that there was an exportable surplus of 250,000 women from the US Zone. The inadequate and discriminatory utilization of women as well as their own unwillingness to enter new fields of occupation is responsible in part for this high figure. As there is an overall shortage of men and a shortage of semi-skilled workers, by an intensive program of training within industry and the establishment of apprentice training stations, some of this number could be absorbed. But in few occupations do women receive equal pay with men even though their performance may be the same. Unless considerable expansion of women’s employment is achieved in new industries, there is no economic future for many women.

In the year since its establishment, the Women’s Affairs Section of the Education and Cultural Relations Division has developed a program to meet these problems by calling to the attention of OMGUS divisions the specific problems concerning women falling within their particular work. Joint projects with other branches and divisions both at state OMG and OMGUS levels, have prevented duplication of effort and have supplemented existing programs.

The Women’s Affairs Section is especially interested in discouraging in this way the tendency to separate women’s problems rather than to integrate them into programs affecting the general community life. While women in Germany need special help and education, an integrated program prevents a widening of the gap already existing between “men’s interests” and “women interests.”

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