

Are Housewives Slaves?

A Debate

I — The Sisyphean Struggle

by SARA S. MOSER



NOT ONLY in some European countries but our own as well, much is being written and done to urge women to return to or stay in the home exclusively. It is pointed out that the woman who tries to manage both a home and an outside position frequently does a poor job of both. Therefore it is concluded that the only thing for her to do is give up the outside job and go back into the home. That always has been her place. Why should she try to grow beyond it? So we stumble along, women and men, trying to pour new wine into old bottles.

With an amazing lack of comprehension we fail to take into account the fact that women have made some gain beyond their collective sexual function — hence the necessity for a new home pattern as they emerge from their primitive level.

The days when practically all a woman's energy, both physical and psychical, was consumed in frequent childbearing are gone forever. She does not have to reproduce *ad nauseam*, as she once did through the combined efforts of nature and man. With good reason it has always been glibly pointed out that women are all alike and incapable of making cultural contributions. But originality and independence have no place among slaves, and women were long enslaved to a biological function.

In a physical sense woman has been freed from her sentence of slavery, but she has yet to establish herself as an individuated character, as one who is as free to develop in the varied ways man is. The main substance of her life has altered in degree, in the decrease in number of the children she must bear, but she is still held fast in the ancient pattern and forced largely into one mold regardless of ability, temperament, or education.

Every woman whose personality is evenly developed wants a husband, a home, and children, even as a man does. It is time we gave up the infantile attitude that a woman must choose between marriage and a career. While it is generally best that she devote the major portion of her time to her children when they are very young, there is no reason why she should surrender all personal proclivities either then or later. By the exercise of intelligence and foresight she can establish the proper balance in her life as an individual and a responsible member of the collective mass. But it is the obsolescence of the home pattern that makes this dual development difficult even when her children have reached a responsible age.

Women bind women to the traditional setup as much as men do. There are many of them

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who, content with things as they are, either through temperament, training, or sheer inertia, cannot tolerate different ways of thinking and living. Progress is never without work and trouble, yet they prefer to remain appendages to man, cut off from life rather than subject to its risks.

By pulpit, radio, newspaper, magazine, by every agency that helps to form public opinion, woman is exhorted to stay in the home. She is told that it is her prescribed sphere, that it is natural for her to be there. Of all arguments, this "natural" one is the most asinine. The whole history of the human race is the effort to control and modify nature.

Psychology has erred, too, in doing some wishful thinking. Since men were its first students, it was entirely masculine in viewpoint. Woman, they contended had no ego; she was only a sexual creature and so no subject for psychology. She was merely the tail to the kite whose only justification for existence was in adapting herself to the caprices and dictates of man.

It took a woman, Dr. Beatrice Hinkle, the first psychoanalyst in this country, to show that there is such a thing as feminine psychology. Tersely she sums up the fundamental difference in attitude toward the two sexes:

Man's history is the story of a definite, never-ending struggle to transcend instinct. Woman's history is the story of an unending repression of all her desire and effort to transcend instinct.

II

TO MANY WOMEN who do not want to limit their lives to the instinctive level of homemaking, it looms up dishearteningly as a veritable Sisyphean struggle. Sisyphus was a king of Corinth who was condemned in Hades to roll uphill a huge stone; but no sooner would he get it almost to the brow than it would plunge all the way down again; and incessantly he had to repeat the ordeal.

For the mother of young children who does all her work with little or no assistance, life is often a similar struggle. Never does she have any specified time off. Her working days are seven days a week, hours unlimited and often longer than usual on Sundays and holidays. Rarely does she know what it is to have a whole day for purely private interests or merely to refresh her soul and body. Over and

over again with deadening, unceasing monotony the same chores have to be done. Her energy is consumed in satisfying constantly recurring physical needs. Marketing, food preparation, dishwashing, sweeping, dusting, window cleaning, laundering, baby tending, darning, mending follow each other in endless succession. Seldom is there the satisfaction of a permanent achievement. The pleasanter and more aesthetic aspects of homemaking can very infrequently be enjoyed because of the relentless routine pressure. There is nothing creative and stimulating about working on a treadmill.

Our much vaunted new leisure is largely a myth for these young mothers of whom I speak. True, modern methods have done away with much hard, heavy work, but there are losses in other ways which take a heavier toll of nervous health and give less satisfying returns. The home, as well as much else in modern life, suffers a loss of whole, completed values and a waste of abilities in a mass of uninspiring details, petty odd jobs, constant interruptions and irritations.

The industrial era, which has also brought about the separation of families and friends, has made the housewife's lot lonely and non-social. But, when any change is suggested to free her from this solitary confinement, there rises a clamor that her individuality will be destroyed. The objectors are unconscious that under the regimented drudgery already existing there is small chance for original achievement.

A new pattern for home life was given us about 1890 by Mrs. Charlotte Gilman, one of this country's most advanced social philosophers and writers. We have as yet made only fragmentary use of it. Nursery schools for all young children were a part of this plan. Such schools are now no innovation but are accessible still to only a limited number.

While Mrs. Gilman was denounced as an unnatural mother, she stressed the mutual benefit of nursery schools to both mothers and children. For, when children pass their most formative years secluded in homes where they are the objects of an unhealthy amount of attention, they have little chance to develop early in social consciousness and adaptability. On the other hand, the free time made available through the schools to the mothers could be

used by them largely in learning to take better psychological and physical care of their children. Mrs. Gilman was indignant that women had no expert training for motherhood, and she also pointed out that to be at once a good mother and a good housekeeper is often impossible. Too frequently the highly important work of motherhood is incidental to that of cook, laundress, charwoman, and scullery maid.

To eliminate this wasteful, inefficient housekeeping, as an integral part of her new plan, Mrs. Gilman recommended "professional housekeeping" (not co-operative, as some have believed). Briefly, this meant that all marketing and meal planning and preparation would be done by persons expertly trained in those pursuits. At specific locations there would be professional kitchens from which food would be sent in airtight containers for home consumption. It would thus be more economical in price, to say nothing of human labor, and more scientifically prepared than by many an unskilled housewife who hated cooking. Homes would not necessarily be entirely kitchenless, although such a system would do away with private ownership of the elaborate and expensive equipment which we are all urged to buy and few can afford. The housewife would have a minimum of kitchen equipment, with which she could cook as she pleased without

being bound to the three-meals-a-day grind.

Mrs. Gilman did not advocate such freedom from the exhausting, blighting routine of housework in order that women might have more leisure for meaningless activities but instead that they might have the opportunity to grow in social consciousness and responsibility and as individuals capable of making vital contributions to culture and society.

If her plans could be combined with widespread use of the Dymaxion house, described in *THE FORUM* in March, 1937,* the top of the hill would be reached. This revolutionary dwelling, described as "a house for a god," is designed to eliminate all the more burdensome aspects of housekeeping while giving the maximum freedom for serene, happy, creative living.

Supporters of the *status quo* will object violently to freeing women from their pristine bondage. Why, they will ask, should women be free to choose various types of work when there aren't enough jobs to go around among the men? Such criticism reveals a depressing lack of intelligence and vision and an awful blindness to the stupidity of our present way of existence. Shortage of jobs? Why in combatting ignorance and human misery and in beautifying the earth there are plenty of jobs for everybody for the next million years!

*"A House for a God," by Janet Mabie.

II — Creative Freedom

by MRS. RALPH BORSODI

THE ESSENCE of Sara S. Moser's ringing protest against homemaking for women and her passionate plea for its transfer from homes to institutions such as those which Charlotte Perkins Gilman provisioned is that "to many women who do not want to limit their lives to the instinctive level of homemaking" the making of a home "looms up dishearteningly as a veritable Sisyphean struggle."

Now there are three assumptions implicit in these phrases which must be challenged.

The first derives from her reference to the instinctive level of homemaking. She assumes that all careers other than homemaking — the one career natural to nearly all women — are nobler and more desirable. But many years ago Ellen Key, an even greater feminist than Charlotte Perkins Gilman, summed up the hollowness of this pretense in her statement that "the problem of women was not that of enlarging her sphere, but that of ennobling it."

The second assumption — that all women