

Working Mothers

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THE theme of the working mother is a part of the continuum of issues and challenges facing the American Jewish family today and needs to be seen as an integral part of the total gestalt of issues regarding family life. It invites what I call "bottom-line" concerns: the demand for answers to a myriad of complex issues that for many reflect the wide spectrum of points of view such as the traditional concepts of Jewish family life and those who espouse the feminist and/or more liberal, open-ended changes in family life styles. I might add that widely held divergent points of view of current family life styles have been spearheaded and have as their most eloquent spokespersons and advocates, Jews of all shades of opinions and backgrounds.

Also, there is the pressure of various segments from within and without our Jewish community to espouse a particular point of view, and changes which are part of the human condition do present a threat to all of us who seek the comfort of the old and the familiar. The Jewish family service field has been concerned with the institution of the Jewish family for a long time, with some family agencies old enough to have roots in the last century. Our vantage point of experience gives us pause when we hear uncritical reference to the "good old days" or "golden age" of the family. The experiences of childhood and family life are often happier in retrospect than

they were in actuality.¹ I, on the whole, view Jewish family life today as having considerable strengths and resilience that need to be underlined and strengthened. Too often we think in terms of pathology instead of strengths and resilience and we keep many Jewish families away from our doors as they don't wish to be labeled either as pathological or as not following prescribed traditional concepts of family life. At the same time, the rapidity of change in family life styles is of concern in its impact on that minority of families with weaker and more fragmented individual and family egos, who now have less clear "do's and don'ts" and more options to live by. For these families this wider range of permissible life styles could potentially increase their avoidance of struggle in relationships, or their inner chaos, and the greater possibility of breakdown in family relationships.

Studies on the contemporary Jewish family reveal similarities and trends between over-all studies of working mothers and the impact on family life today. In my presentation I will raise more questions than give answers, but I hope that these identify some concerns for the Jewish community to consider.

¹ *Families & Society*—Family Service Association of America Guideline Statement for Public Policy & Public Relations, File No. 60.02, New York, 1981.

The National Institute of Mental Health commissioned numerous national surveys, beginning in 1964 until today, which can be summarized as follows: "Women of all ages throughout the country became more liberated in the way they saw themselves in relation to men, marriage, children and work. The rising egalitarian spirit took hold in a wide range of women, not just the educated, middle-class women who are most outspoken about feminist issues." Research indicated that although dual career couples may have egalitarian attitudes, women are still primarily responsible for the majority of domestic tasks. Also, both partners tend to relegate the wife's career to secondary status, secondary to her husband's career and secondary to her roles as homemaker, wife and mother. Recent economic conditions, marked by recessionary and inflationary trends, also have profound effects on the family. National periodic surveys indicate that many American families have decreasing confidence in the economic future. This would appear to be an important change from the American myth of endless economic betterment.²

More than five out of ten women living in families are now employed outside the home, while three out of ten are full-time homemakers. Most of these women working outside the home are married and most have children under the age of eighteen. Looking at this picture another way, the U.S. Department of Labor reports that the proportion of children under the age of eighteen with two working parents has risen to 50 percent and that one working

woman out of nine was the sole support of her family. These changes are also occurring at a time of continuing inflation, when two pay checks have become a necessity for millions of Americans.³

Facts and statistics indicate that a majority of women will continue to work outside the home, marriage and child-rearing responsibilities notwithstanding. They will work not only to help support their families but also for personal challenge and satisfaction. The trend toward both parents working outside the home has been identified as having some negative effects on families. The central issue is whether homes where both parents work are less able to provide children with proper care than are those where at least one parent is engaged in full-time child care. This issue sometimes gets incorporated into the overall concern for some that the quality of parenting generally has changed for the worse because of the impact of changing family patterns and life styles. The reason most often cited for feeling that there has been a negative effect on families is that children need stronger parental guidance, supervision and discipline than can be given when parents work. However, many working women, looking at the positive effects, feel that the fulfillment for women working outside the home, the added financial security and independence for children outweigh negative effects on the family.⁴

Many adults would prefer that mothers and fathers approach equality of roles in caring for children even if it means taking some time away from their jobs. Many studies being done of the effect mother's working has on her chil-

² Robert M. Rice, "Social Indicators Concerning the Family" Family Service Association of America, 1977, extracted from Bertram H. Brown, "How Women See Their Roles: A Change In Attitudes," *New Dimensions in Mental Health*, Sep. 1976.

³ Louis Harris & Associates, Inc., *The General Mills American Family Report*, General Mills, Inc., 1980-81.

⁴ *Ibid.*

dren reflect a range of issues and data. Some conclude that maternal employment affects the child, and particularly the daughter, because the role models provided by working and non-working mothers differ. Data on the whole suggest that the working mother who obtains personal satisfactions from employment and who does not carry excessive guilt and has adequate household arrangements is likely to perform as well as the non-working mother, or better, and the mother's emotional state is an important mediating variable. In the final analysis, there is also widespread agreement that "it's not the amount of time you spend with your children that's important but what you do when you spend time with them."⁵ Parenthetically, I sometimes worry about this oft-quoted comment and while I agree with its essence, some families use it as a rationalization to avoid their children and each other.

There is a myth about motherhood and therefore the working wife and mother. This is the myth of incompatibility between qualities traditionally associated with the role of the wife-mother (e.g., nurturance, emotionality, responsiveness to people rather than ideas) and qualities associated with the role of achiever in the occupational and professional world (e.g., aggressiveness, rationality and independence). A woman who exhibits achievement-oriented characteristics in her career is frequently considered to be fulfilling a socially inappropriate sex role and thus will most likely experience some anxiety and possibly some social sanctions as well. Thus, we need to question stereotypical assumptions about sex roles, with different standards of mental health for women and men, including the assumption that dependency, masochism and passivity are normal for

women and the tendency to treat assertiveness and aggression differently for women than for men. Being assigned the role of prime psychological parent means that many women cannot leave for work with a clear sense of division between home and office.

Ambitious fathers work very hard at their jobs too, but if the kids are in trouble, it's usually pre-determined that it is because the mother is working. The work-family connection has been understood in a very different way for women than for men. With the increased participation of women in the paid labor force, it becomes even more important to pose new research questions and to challenge conventional assumptions about men's and women's work orientations and their impact on family life.

Viewed from the perspective of a lifetime, most mothers probably would say that the mother role was their most creative endeavor. But in her day-to-day experience, especially with preschool children, a mother can easily lose sight of this long-range creativity. The period when the mother has preschool children often may be a frustrating one, a time when she must hold back impulses, defer gratification and, above all, remain often physically in the home. Mothers and fathers, to a degree, recapitulate their own past history through their children and such motivations can compound at times already frustrating, difficult issues not always clearly understood. Whatever the reasons, the youngest child's entering school can provide a release for many of the frustrations of the preceding years and outside employment for the mother may be an expression of this release.⁶

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Anne M. Seiden, "Overview: Research on the Psychology of Women. Women In Families. Work & Psychotherapy", *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 1978.

For some mothers, the period when the youngest child enters school is managed in another way. They may feel no longer needed and that their prime role is completed. Not only are the child or children physically absent from the home, but they are less dependent on the mother and for some women, this is an important change of role. Thus, mothers who return to work when their youngest child enters school may be motivated not only by practical consideration, but also by a psychological need to be involved and needed in another way. Working mothers often find much support from their adult contacts in the work world and it can also give them a sense of personal growth and development which eases their ability to cope with family issues.

Generally, family members support all improvements which help working parents but are most clearly in favor of flexibility on the part of the employer and of increasing the responsibility of the children themselves. The concept of flex time is an increasing consideration in the workplace and one that Jewish institutions as well need to begin to understand and consider as an important option to support family life.⁷

Over one-third of households with children also have other child-care arrangements, typically other family members, paid help inside the home and day-care centers. Nearly two in five American families are now supplementing primary parental care with alternative child-care arrangements, and this proportion should increase as there is every expectation that increasing numbers of women will enter the work force over the next few years. My concern is that child-care alternatives need to be worked out carefully and that rigorous standards of quality child care be provided by the Jewish community.

⁷ *Ibid.*

I wish to identify a professional concern as to very young children and the impact of the working mother on this relationship. There are conflicting views among a variety of professionals regarding early separation of the mother and the child. My own experience and those of many of my professional colleagues are that the attachment-relationship of the mother and the child during the ages of birth through ages three and four is in many ways crucial, and the separation-individuation process of that relationship needs to be especially maintained and supported.⁸ During that period, everything possible should be done to support the mother-child relationship at home. Subsequent to that age, much is being done and reported on day care in small and intimate group settings, particularly in a home or family setting called family day-care homes or home start. For those families where the parents and children are clearly "at risk," the concept of family day-care homes is an important concept of prevention and support to the more fragile family constellations. For children ages four through six, small group nursery schools with quality day-care standards are critically important. In the Jewish community, we need to focus on services for very young children and their families (and I stress the total family approach) so that we can early on be educationally and, if necessary, therapeutically supportive to the whole family, both in terms of Jewish identity as well as family developmental issues.

The specific problems raised in the debate over child care lead inevitably to a more general question: How are adults going to manage the successful care and rearing of future generations

⁸ Margaret M. Mahler, "On the First Three Sub-phases of the Separation-Individuation Process," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1972.

of children while spending a substantial portion of time at work away from home? Loss of income because of childbirth may be viewed as being as much of a normal risk for families dependent on the income from two wage earners in an industrialized society as was the loss of the sole breadwinner in earlier years. Raising the question of how adults who need to be employed can marry, bear and rear children successfully and Jewishly suggests the need for a wider policy discussion about social responsibility than one which focuses only on how children are cared for during the day. Such an exploration would have to begin to consider choices having to do with income support, modification in work hours as well as innovative quality child-care programs with significant Jewish content for the entire family as well as an appreciation and understanding of family and community systems approach.

Therefore, traditional assumptions about family roles and relationships have become untenable in the last fifteen or twenty years. The father as breadwinner and mother as homemaker are primary examples of former stereotypes that no longer fit a majority of the family situations in today's society. Males in their husband and father roles are increasingly engaging in housekeeping and parenting tasks. More and more women are adding jobs to their roles as wives and mothers. As a consequence, husbands and wives who are both working and homemaking have overlapping, less distinct roles than their counterparts of an earlier period. Under these circumstances, couples are called upon to communicate sensitively and to establish equitable ground rules, complex developmental life-stage tasks for many.⁹

In a two-parent household where

both parents work, children are in situations where they may have minimal parental supervision and a high degree of self-reliance. Working parents in such instances must become quite clear about their expectations of each other and of their children. Where parents are away from the home, it is especially important to give children clear guidelines about their responsibilities and encouragement to participate in healthy growth experiences. It is equally important to provide for their physical needs and to assure access to designated adults who are able to fill a number of other needs.¹⁰ Children in an age-appropriate way need to be included in the discussion of, and decision as to, changes that will occur in the family as a result of the decision that both parents will be working and the care arrangements.

To delineate further some of the considerations relating to dual career and single parent families, many dual career couples were not necessarily committed to this life style when they first married. Financial considerations, the wish to develop and enhance one's potential and other developmental changes may result in a couple's attempting changing their life styles as their marriage progresses. With respect to issues of a working wife and mother, couples need at various points to clarify how their marriage contract with one another, because of a variety of reality factors, has changed social and emotional aspects of their relationships and decide whether and how they can cope with such changes. Focusing on the understanding of marriage as a process is always helpful; that is, change could be viewed as a positive concept and emphasis placed on the necessity of developing skills and the willingness to keep each other current concerning changing attitudes of self and marital roles. A common feeling

⁹ *Families and Society op. cit.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

which adds stress in a dual career relationship is resentment over "role overload." Women may experience this if they are having to do more than their share of domestic and/or child-care tasks in addition to their career. In contrast, men may resent having to add "women's work" to their schedules or having to make career sacrifices because of their wives' professional pursuits. The scapegoating phenomenon also sometimes arises. Dual career spouses may use each other's career involvement as a vehicle for displacing resentments, hurts and guilts stemming from other issues out of the past or in their marital roles.

There are indications that the divorce rate may be higher for marriages in which wives work and contribute to the family income. This may be a result of the fact that unsatisfactory marriages, where the union was based primarily on economic considerations, are more likely to fall apart when both partners become increasingly financially independent. Also, the stress, tensions and concerns involved in working out dual career responsibilities, particularly during the transitional periods of understanding and accepting changing family roles and working on patterns of communication, may result in marital instability. This is especially so since studies show that women tend to be more interested than men in greater equality in marriage. Women generally have gone further in sharing the provider role than men have in sharing the housework and child care responsibilities. As dual career couples experience greater social and psychological supports for themselves in the community and the workplace, their ability to work out their relationships with one another should increase.¹¹

¹¹ Audrey D. Smith, "Egalitarian Marriage: Implications for Practice & Policy", *Social Casework* Vol. 61, Number 5 (May, 1980).

In regard to the single-parent family, for the mother who must now manage a household alone, the responsibilities of being both provider and homemaker can frequently be overwhelming. The loss of father is not the only drastic change for children after divorce, but also the loss of the mother's time and presence as she spreads herself between work and home. It is clear that the demands of work and family must be integrated more successfully for single-parent families to survive.¹² More and more the Jewish community needs to be concerned with a genuine reaching out and with making provisions for informal and formal support networks between single-parent households and for their being positively and Jewishly reinforced.

A major prerequisite for encouraging family growth could include greater community sensitivity to the aspirations and achievements of Jewish women and the provision of support which would enable them to achieve career goals as well as to experience motherhood. Studies indicate that the higher their level of education and managerial skills, the more likely are Jewish women to use their higher professional and educational preparation in careers outside the home. One of the more important aspects of changing roles in the family structure is the need for husbands to play an increasingly important role as fathers. Many fathers have nurturing abilities and nurture need not be the exclusive domain of mothers. The changing aspirations and opportunities for women, and therefore men, must be taken into consideration if raising a Jewish family is to have status equal to careers among this generation of women. In the carrying out of these de-

¹² Esther Wattenberg and Hazel Reinhardt, "Female Headed Families: Trends & Implications" *Social Work*, Nov. 1979.

velopmental negotiations between parents, care must always be taken to protect the children and not to put them in the middle but to include them in age-appropriate ways.¹³

The Jewish community must also be creative and supportive in developing ways to help parents in the increasingly dispersed suburban environments with the increasing lack of traditional family supports (grandparents, aunts and uncles). For example, I have read of some innovative work in regard to expanding Jewish Big Brother and Big Sister programs, including the use of adolescents in after-school programs for the children of working single parents or of dual working parents. The issue of the "latch-key" child is an important one for the Jewish community to consider and address.

Synagogues, social agencies, day schools and other Jewish institutions should therefore place emphasis on mutually supportive outreach services and find newer ways of utilizing each others' expertise. Jewish family and children's agencies should develop more family life programs which stress the preventative and educational approach

to individuals and families going through a variety of life stage tasks.

Last, but far from least, the Jewish community needs to develop family policies that advocate for and are supportive to family life and the working mother. I refer to policy encouraging legislation and work standards that strengthen the family's ability to cope. Government agencies frequently usurp authority by taxing the family's resources and over-regulating its life style. Places of employment may have requirements that conflict with family needs in time demands, influences or where and how the family must live, and the like. Whether through inadvertent or unwise policies, as in the instances of the marriage penalty tax or the present administration's cut-back in needed social services in such areas as quality day care, government actions and inactions nationally and locally can and do weaken the institution of the family. Government and workplace policies should not intrude upon family life; they should encourage and support family freedom and autonomy. The organized Jewish community should lend its considerable energies, talent and clout to see to it that legislation and its own workplace enact programs and personnel policies that strengthen and enhance family life.

¹³ Dr. Gladys Rosen, "The Impact of the Women's Movement On the Jewish Family" American Jewish Committee, October 27, 1977.