

Mothers and Working Mothers

Katrina Alford

A review of Jan Harper and Lyn Richards, Mothers and Working Mothers, Penguin, Australia, 1979.

This book is the product of two studies commissioned by the Royal Commission on Human Relationships (1977), in which the authors interviewed 255 married women, all with at least one child under 12 years. Those husbands not interviewed filled in a short questionnaire. The authors' purpose was to ascertain popular attitudes to both full-time housewives and working mothers. The resulting picture is a highly graphic and very gloomy one of two basic stereotypes of married mothers, which depended on their work role, and both of which were quite negative. The authors summarised these attitudes as: "If you stay at home you are dreary and boring; if you work you are harried and selfish. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't" (p. 30). Within this no-win situation for married women, three important features stand out.

The first is that the crux of the negative stereotype of working mothers is their alleged neglect of their children, and that women and only women should bear the responsibility for child-raising, views which suggest that a rigid sexual division of labour within the family is still powerfully entrenched in Australian women's (and men's) psyche.

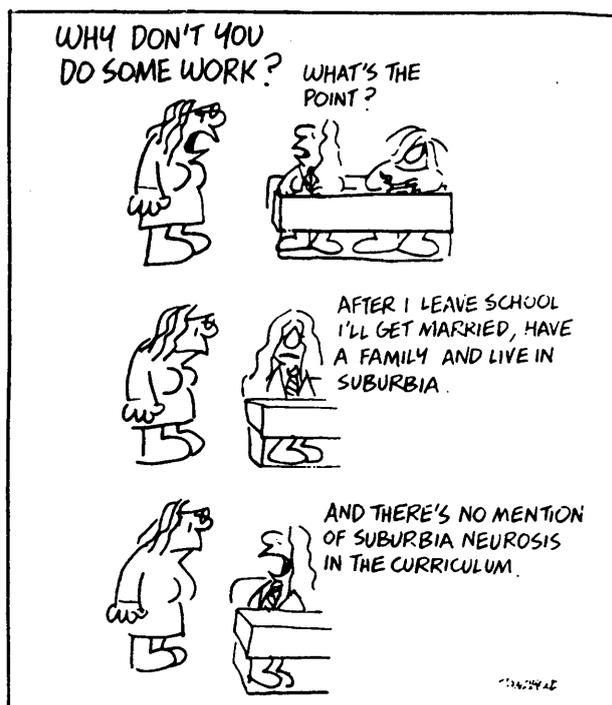
The second feature is the shattering of the conventional notion that most married women totally withdraw from the labour force for several years and re-enter it only when all their children commence school. In fact, many married women work intermittently throughout this period, particularly in part-time employment. They continue to work, despite the stigma attached to their doing so, and labour not only under the onerous burden of a dual role (homemaking and working), but under a cloud of guilt because they are aware of the negative attitude to working mothers.

The third feature is the influence of husbands in perpetuating traditional views about 'woman's role'. The women most supportive of tradition tend to be those who believe married women should be guided by their husbands on the question of going to work or giving up their jobs. This does not illustrate outright domination by husbands over wives, but general agreement between the spouses (which, the authors note, is at odds with British studies indicating husbands' actual dominance of decisions regarding wives working). This does however leave open the question of whether marital 'agreement' about wives working is due to genuine equality in conjugal decision-making, or to an unequal sex-power relation between the 'breadwinner' and his wife, in which the latter rationalises her inequality in terms of 'choice'.

There are certain class and occupational variations in these attitudes (professional women tend to be less 'traditional'), but these appear to be differences of emphasis rather than of underlying values. Also, conservative and traditional views are strongest among full-time housewives and part-time workers, which may be interpreted as being either a cause or effect of their primary domestic role.

The major criticisms of this work is that it is predicated on an unstated 'liberal' assumption that married women's 'to work or not to work' decision consists of a 'choice' between freely competing options. This assumption obscures the institutional and structural features of Australian capitalism which shore up a sexual division of labour both within and beyond the family (eg. lack of child-care facilities, the sexual segregation of the labour force, etc.), and which militate against married women exercising a genuine 'choice'. In other words, the authors reduce the question of married women working to a matter of attitudes, and do not consider the possibility that these may merely be the (predictable) outcome of living in a stratified, unequal and sexually repressive society.

Generally however, the book is compelling reading, particularly for women with children or of child-bearing age. It is a descriptively powerful book, although slightly repetitious, but it stops short of any causal analysis of these attitudes. To this reviewer, the major unasked questions are 'Where do these ideas come from?' and 'Whose interests do they serve?'.



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