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**STATUS OF WOMAN AS
WIFE, MOTHER AND
HOME-MAKER**

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PAMPHLET

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For many years the position of women in industry and in the professions has been discussed in all countries. From time to time steps have been taken to point out the difficulties with which these women have to contend—the low payment which is often their lot, and the lack of opportunity to enjoy the same training and advancement as that available to men.

Up to the present time no country has seriously considered the position of woman as wife, mother and home-maker. Organised women have neglected a scientific study of her working conditions nor has legislation paid her any sympathetic attention. And yet working housewives form the most numerous class of women. So it is only fitting that in an age when the status of women is receiving international attention, the home-worker should on no account be overlooked.

“Status of Women”—the position of women—in all the Member States of the League of Nations, first came to be discussed at the Assembly in 1935 and again in 1937. The mass of information supplied by Governments and women's organisations revealed how many disabilities women suffer through the unjust legislation of their countries.

The reports show that in certain countries a woman can still be bought and sold, can be legally physically chastised by her husband and it is not murder if he punish her adultery with death. A wife can never divorce her husband though he can divorce her at will, she is not entitled to her own property, cannot be the guardian of her own children, and cannot control her nationality or her place of domicile. While incurring by marriage an equal liability for maintenance of spouse and children, she is heavily restricted in the channels through which she might earn their aliment. In common with other women she is still denied political rights in many countries and thus lacks the means of achieving reforms in these matters.

All of these disabilities seriously affect the women in the home. The Equal Rights International felt it would be doing a great service to women the world over, if it set out to clarify the position of this class of women, in order to point out the unregulated conditions of her service, and her insecurity both in youth and old age. A man's first impression of the *value* of

a woman's service is gained in his own home, amongst those who minister to his daily needs. Since the status of these is not covered by law, since they are not entitled to any monetary remuneration for home service, the idea becomes prevalent that women's service is of little, if any, *monetary* value. This idea, gathered in the home, is then carried into the business and professional world and certainly tends to lower the status of all earning women. Any steps, therefore, that can raise the position of the home-maker will automatically benefit all women.

The Position of Woman as Wife, Mother and Home-maker.

Woman as Wife, Mother and Home-maker, is a category of worker invariably overlooked in legislation. Her economic position in many countries is unstable to an alarming degree. She is entitled neither to salary nor wages but has definite duties to perform; in some countries she can be deprived of her earnings, her savings and of her income; in others it is possible for her husband, no matter how wealthy, to leave her destitute at his death and she has no legal redress.

In 1937 the Equal Rights International sent a report on this subject to the League of Nations Assembly. The information contained therein was gathered from replies received to a questionnaire sent by them to Governments in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas, Australia and New Zealand. From these replies one fact stood out most clearly, that in a great number of countries a married woman's financial position, as regards cash payments from her husband, is better if living apart from him. To quote merely one reply: "A wife is not entitled to a share of her husband's income, unless she has obtained an order for maintenance or alimony following desertion, separation or divorce." Surely it is a disastrous state of affairs to make a broken marriage more satisfactory financially than a united one.

Another outstanding example of the appalling insecurity of woman as wife, mother and home-maker is that in England and Wales a man can bequeath everything he has away from his family and leave his wife and children entirely unprovided for, and thus even the widows and orphans of wealthy men can become a charge upon the state.

In the majority of marriages, the woman before marriage has been a wage-earner; she has been accustomed to the handling and spending of her own money. To-day Governmental pressure (with the mistaken idea of reducing unemployment amongst men), the wishes of the husbands, maternity and other circumstances combine to remove the majority of women from the labour market on marriage. These women give up their power of earning in order to become wives, mothers and home-makers.

Let us consider the case of the woman who devotes the whole of her time to home-management and child-rearing, a work which is arduous and constant and which carries with it no right to any remuneration at all.

What are the tasks required of a housewife?

A housewife is expected to have a knowledge of:

Dietary and food purchase.

Cooking.

Hygiene and household cleaning.

Dressmaking and mending.

Laundry work.

Sick nursing.

Infant rearing.

Education of infants up to five years.

Household accounts.

Minor household repairs and decorating.

In agricultural districts—poultry-keeping, dairying and gardening.

To be an expert in each and all of these requires a very wide technical knowledge and skill and versatile talents. It is realised that all wives are not experts in all these branches but a few years' experience is usually sufficient to enable them to reach as high a standard as the conditions of their homes make possible.

If we compare the working conditions of the individual workers in those spheres, we shall find that the general level enjoyed by the specialist is infinitely higher than that enjoyed by the housewife.

For example, in countries priding themselves on their standard of living, it is not customary for domestic servants to be employed for more than ten hours a day. They can claim one half-day a week, and in the majority of cases are free on two half-days. One full day a month and a week's holiday are the minimum recognised as due. Two weeks' holiday is generally given. Workers in other spheres have rather more leisure time. In what country does the mother of a working-class family enjoy so much? In many countries housewives work eighteen hours a day.

Night Work.

Except in the case of nurses, women are not, as a rule, employed at night and they may not be employed in shops and factories in England and other countries which have ratified the night-work convention of the I.L.O. between the hours of 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. or 11 p.m. and 6 a.m.

When persons are employed at night the hours are generally subject to limitation and the work usually commands higher rates of pay. With reasonable safeguards, and for limited periods, night-work need not be injurious though it is desirable it should be abolished for men and women workers wherever possible. Night work, however, without equivalent time of rest and recreation in the following day, as is the lot of many wives and mothers when sickness strikes the home or there are young babies to rear, cannot be defended and would not be tolerated by paid employees.

The worker in the commercial world has many safeguards not possessed by the housewife, such as restrictions against being overburdened with heavy weights, the right to claim compensation for injury, etc. The former, while hampering the woman in her search for work because they are applied to women only, would be of benefit if applied more widely to men and women workers equally. The housewife is in need of such protection no less than are commercial workers.

There are millions of women the world over, doing a hard day's work in the home; yet these housewives are not regarded as workers, but in the census of most countries are described as "dependants" of some male worker. They are really employees, but have no rights as such, no regulations as to hours, no provisions for holidays and no guarantee of remuneration. *In no country have we been able to discover the provision of a STATE health insurance for housewives, as such, even when there is a health service for the majority of classes of workers.*

The questionnaire sent to many countries revealed the fact that *in no country at all (except Norway and Sweden) was a woman entitled by law to a share of her husband's income* in return for her services to the family as mother, nurse, cook, cleaner, laundress, dressmaker, etc.

When we compare the legislation of diverse countries, we note that many laws state that the husband and wife are joint owners of certain properties, but in practically every case the management of the property is entirely in the hands of the husband, who can act without his wife's consent. Further, property acquired by the wife's thrift and often by her own hard work, together with that of her husband, is absolutely in the husband's control.

Some countries' laws, while assuring the wife a share of the family income—on paper—have little value, for a woman cannot be considered economically independent if she cannot handle or spend her money. The man who controls a woman's purse, controls her actions.

The need for a stable family life is one recognised by all and although the wife and mother in industrial communities is no longer responsible for producing all the goods required by the family, yet her work is vital to the life of the nation; and to-day, women, aware of their financial insecurity in marriage, ask how they can do this vital work in conditions so uncertain and with the prospect of a living so precarious?

Other handicaps suffered by the married woman because of the discrimination against her in the laws of almost all countries, are the denial of her right to independent nationality, to separate taxation of her income, to her own legal domicile, to her right to enter into contracts. This lack of freedom to take independent action prevents a wife, whose conditions of service to her husband are unsatisfactory, from providing an income for herself by her own efforts.

Rewards of a Housewife's Labour.

It is a common belief that "a man has to keep his wife" and in marrying, many women believe that they have secured a certainty of maintenance for life. This is a fallacy.

At present in all countries (except Scandinavia) all that the law demands that a man shall provide for his wife is food, clothing and shelter—the necessaries of life; and the standard of each is left entirely to the goodwill of the husband. A husband need not give a wife coin of any kind with the result that a wife can be placed in the unenviable position of having no spending money at all, of being unable to pay for recreation, medical attendance, for a holiday or for domestic help to do her work while ill or on holiday. Her contribution to national life is considered as valueless from a monetary point of view, indeed so little value is placed upon her work, that in many countries parents are expected to give their daughters a dowry on marriage, which then becomes the property of her husband.

It has already been mentioned that if a wife leaves her husband and seeks divorce or legal separation the Court may grant alimony or maintenance. But it is common knowledge that this is often very difficult for the wife to collect. It invariably depends upon the husband's willingness to pay. Legislation is vitally necessary to protect the interests of the divorced or separated wife and also the interests of children of a first marriage. We recommend that some form of international co-operation be devised whereby assistance would be rendered in the collection of alimony or maintenance dues.

Poor as is the financial security of most of the workers, it is at least more secure than the wife's, and when the day's work has been done, the worker knows and can count on what is due. The

fact that the majority of wives are cared for to the best of a husband's capacity must not blind one to this absolute lack of specific claim which could protect the minority who find themselves victims and who suffer exploitation. The case of the wife of a bad husband is a dire one even if such cases are in a small minority.

Maternity Bonus.

Australia is the only country in which *the State* provides a Bonus for Maternity. There, £5 is payable to the mother in respect of each confinement at which a living or viable child is born, provided the total income of the claimant and her husband for the period of twelve months preceding the date of birth did not exceed £299. In Sweden, a maternity bonus of 75 Kroner is given to all families with a taxable income of less than 3,000 Kroner. This would probably apply to 92% of all childbirths.

Child Endowment.

New South Wales (Australia) is the only *State*, as far as can be ascertained, that provides a child endowment, although certain private industries in Belgium, Czecho-Slovakia, France and England do so.

New South Wales pays a parent on the basic wage, 5s. per week for each child under the age of 14, except for the first child.

Russia provides cash payments for mothers nursing their infants and also an allowance for mothers of large families.

Proposals to Improve the Status of the Housewife.

We do not intend here to discuss the pros and cons of all the proposals advanced for the purpose of improving the status of the housewife but merely list a number, in the hope that Governments, organisations and societies and the housewives themselves will give to each due consideration so that eventually a satisfactory solution may be found for this urgent problem.

Some of the proposals which have been put forward are :

1. Wages for wives.
2. Legal claim to proportion of husband's earnings.
3. Joint liability for family expenses.
4. Community of goods.
5. Family allowances.
6. State endowment of motherhood.
7. Extended widows' pensions.
8. State medical service for married women.

9. Improved maternity services.
10. Special grants for pregnant and nursing mothers for food, etc.
11. Inheritance reform.
12. Removal of many discriminations in the law as between married women and other citizens.

A Wife's Claim on her Husband.

A woman's contribution in labour to the maintenance of the house and the rearing and care of the family logically implies that wives are partners of husbands in the home. They marry for mutual benefit; they have a common home, common responsibilities but no common right to the spending of the family income or the handling of the family property. Since marriage is a partnership, an idea worthy of consideration is that the wife be entitled while she is living with her husband to an equal share of the family joint income with an equivalent joint liability for family expenses. If at the time of marriage mutual agreements were arrived at by financial arrangements being made on this basis, many of the confusions and anomalies that now exist would be avoided. In certain parts of the world a wife may pledge her husband's credit, but credit is useless for purposes of transport, amusement, miscellaneous shopping—for these a wife must have cash and, under the law as it stands to-day in most countries, she cannot enforce any claim to cash.

A practical recognition of the money value of the work done by wives must be accorded. No widower or single man expects to get these services by offering board and lodging only in return. Such recognition will make for more stable and happier marriage, a wife will feel that her immense contribution has some monetary value if, amongst other things, she receives payment through a recognised share of the family joint income; thus she will find her status considerably improved, her happiness increased, her security strengthened, and the relationship of husband and wife the equal partnership it should be.

Pension Rights.

In the best classes of employment it is nowadays assumed that a worker will have a right to some pension when his days of service are over. Provision for a housewife's old age ought to be no less generous than that made for other workers.

When a wife survives her husband, she should be able to claim a proportion of his estate. No spouse should be able to bequeath the whole of the estate away from the surviving spouse.

A Mother's Claim on the State.

In the first place the State ought to recognise that the housewives, the most numerous class of workers, are by no means the least important to the nation's life and should make provision for the preservation of the health of wives and mothers to at least as great an extent as is made for various other classes of workers. In countries where a National Health Service exists we find that the housewife is excluded from its benefits in most cases.

Pregnancy is viewed from a wrong angle. For the employed woman it is looked upon as detrimental and is hedged around with restrictions, consequently it is generally accompanied by hardships. In the interests of the race, the mother should be in at least as good a financial position at the time of the birth of her child as she is at other times.

As the nutrition and health of the young children are primarily her concern, we advocate that she should in her own right have a claim upon the State for the means of rearing the children where it is not forthcoming through the family income and that her rights in this respect should include a right to her own means of subsistence while she is performing the public service of child rearing, where other sources of income are non-existent or are below a reasonable standard. With the father she should be the recognised co-guardian of the children.

The work of the homemaker needs to be recognised as of equal value with other professions and all those engaged therein must be entitled to benefit by the advantages which the laws of the various countries confer upon other professional workers.

The guarantees of remuneration, security in employment, medical service, old age provision provided in the most advanced nations can, by international action, be extended universally and in all these matters the welfare of wife, mother and homemaker must henceforth be regarded first and not last, as has been the case up to the present.

The Equal Rights International is striving to bring about an alliance of women throughout the world and particularly of wives and mothers for the purpose of achieving through international action an honoured recognition of the work of the homemakers. Then as an equal, rather than as a legally inferior being, the wives and mothers will help to build the world of the future where all will be equally free and each serve more usefully the Community of which he or she is a part.

EQUAL RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL

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OBJECT

To work for the establishment of an Equal Rights Treaty of which the following is adopted as the model of the major Clause:—

“The contracting states agree that upon the ratification of this Treaty, men and women shall have equal rights throughout territories subject to their respective jurisdictions.”

The Equal Rights International, having as its Aim the equality of the sexes before the law throughout the world, shall work for international agreements, which embody the principle of this equality.

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