

Fact and Fiction About Women and Work

by Roberta J. Moore

According to the United States Department of Labor, half of today's women marry by the time they are 21; they have their last child by the age of 30. When this youngster starts school, the mother still has 30 or more years of active life ahead of her.¹ Some choose to spend those years at home; others want to get at least part-time work, often to help meet family expenses; still others work because of the challenge they find in the job.

"I had my work done by 10:30 almost every morning," one woman told me. "Then I was free until the children came home from school at 3:30." She added, "With tuition running \$150 a month, can't you see why I wanted a job?"

Moreover, 23 percent of the women now working in the United States are single and another 21 percent widowed, divorced or separated.² I have a friend whose husband died 12 years ago, leaving her with a son to rear; another friend, mother of two teenagers, not long ago gave her husband the divorce he wanted so that he could marry his secretary. Of necessity, both these women work.

In the United States, as a matter of fact, about 2.5 million women workers, like my two friends, are heads of families; most of them must work to support themselves and children.³ I

have tried unsuccessfully to get comparable figures for denominational workers: apparently, no one knows even how many women the church employs, let alone how many are single, married, or the heads of families.

Too often, however, those who speak for the church put all women into the same pigeonhole. This is a form of what we call stereotyping. It appears in books and papers which the church publishes. It surfaces in interviews with denominational leaders and with both men and women at every level of church work. It crops up in discussions with young people.

A secretary, fortyish and unmarried, says wryly, "I'm tired of hearing that a woman's place is in the home; we just don't all fit into that picture."

In its stereotyping, the church sometimes forgets its women members who have never married or those who married but are now widowed or divorced. It ignores the fact that there are many women who must work to feed and clothe their children or to keep them in church school. It shakes its head over those who cannot get inspired by a sinkful of dirty dishes or a stack of ironing, as though they are somehow unnatural.

Saying that a woman's place is in the home suggests that all of us are alike—that a woman exists solely to marry and to bear children and that having borne them, she must forever tend the nest in which she cradled them. It is like saying that all men, because they are men, belong on the farm.

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In the summer and fall of 1971, roused by articles such as "Women and the Church: Poor Psychology, Worse Theology," in *The Christian Century*,⁴ Susan Berger⁵ and I did exhaustive reading in books her youngest children were reading in church school and in periodicals the Sabbath School gave them.

We found sex stereotyping in much of the output of Seventh-day Adventist publishing houses, both books and periodicals.

Almost invariably stories picture boys as doing things and girls who merely *are*. Boys not only are more active than girls; they come through as more alert and intelligent. Girls in the stories often need help and appeal to boys for it; boys give it. Boys appear as dominant characters more than twice as often as girls. Interestingly enough, authors are usually women.

The picture of mothers and fathers is also a stereotype. Mother is getting a meal in the kitchen, or washing dishes, or ironing. In other words, she appears always in what psychologists call her role as "nurturer."

Father, on the other hand, comes home at the end of the day, carrying his briefcase. While Mother and Jane get supper, Father and Dick play football on the lawn. Stories consistently show fathers coming home from work and then playing with children, not helping mothers or working around the house.

Mrs. Berger and I found a real dearth of books about women or girls. Most mission stories deal with men doctors, preachers and teachers. Asked about biographies of women, one librarian replied that there were very few. Then she explained, "Famous people are usually men, you know."

Librarians and teachers told us that stories must deal with boys in order to interest boys; girls, they said, will read stories about boys. This may be true. One might well ask, however, what girls would like to read; our libraries do not contain enough stories about girls to give them any choice.

Would anyone want to say that the stories children read and the pictures they see have no influence on what they think? If stories and pictures in any way shape a child's thinking, what about the psychological damage of sex stereotyping on boys and girls whose parents do not match the roles in which books and Sabbath

School papers cast them? Some children, for example, have fathers who are plumbers, taxi drivers and farmers. Storybook fathers, on the other hand, work in offices and schools; in illustrations they come home wearing dark business suits and ties. Some children, too, have mothers who work outside their homes, either from choice or necessity, instead of making cookies and gingerbread. Do these boys and girls think, perhaps, that their mothers and fathers are not proper parents? Do they feel cheated?

And what about the effect of stories about boys who are always doing things—usually with a fair degree of success—and about girls who simply are? Since the stereotyping remains more or less constant from first grade on into academy, would it be any wonder if little girls sometimes wish they were boys?⁶

"Every human being," Ellen White wrote, "is endowed with . . . power to think and to do."⁷ Stereotyping gives Dick the power to think and to do; Jane can only be. If she wants to do something, of course she can always appeal to Dick for help, but is this what Mrs. White had in mind?

"In these early years," says Bruno Bettelheim, "it is rare indeed for girls to hear the slightest suggestion that they might one day do the interesting work of this world quite as well as many men, or even better."⁸ Children's literature included in this study does nothing to show girls that there is any place for them except on the sidelines, watching Dick and Mike.

Several years ago I attended a Missionary Volunteer investiture, in which 18 boys and girls, all in uniform, told what they planned to be: the boys wanted to be doctors and ministers, the girls, teachers and nurses. Some specified that they wanted to be missionary doctors and nurses. Their leader smiled, obviously pleased. As I listened, I wondered how Paul would have fitted into that group: would the leader have smiled at a boy who wanted to be a tentmaker?

Still thinking about tentmaking and similar careers, I suddenly realized that no boy planned to be a teacher and no girl a doctor. These boys and girls had accepted their sex roles without question. The girls' answers, however, suggested problems to come, because if no girl spoke of her wish to be a doctor, neither did one see

herself as a housewife and mother. I'll come back to that. For the moment, what about her dream of a career?

All the girls in that investiture group, remember, wanted to be teachers and nurses. As they grew older, and one voiced an interest in becoming a doctor, what encouragement would she get from her parents, her teachers, her guidance counselor?

A few days after the investiture, a college girl came to see me. She was listless when I asked about her major. As we talked, I began to see why.

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Back in academy, she had decided she wanted to study medicine. Her parents were doubtful. “Why don't you take nursing?” they asked.

Her teachers said the same. “Medicine is a man's field,” said the science teacher, “but you could be a nurse.” The Bible teacher who doubled as guidance counselor pulled her folder from his files and looked at the scores she had made on college entrance tests just a few weeks earlier. “You've got the ability,” he said, “but I would suggest you consider nursing. You want to get married, don't you?”

Too often we draw lines for reasons that are purely sexist. Boys can be doctors; girls should be nurses. According to the American Nurses' Association, 99 percent of registered nurses are women.⁹

This has not always been the situation. The National Commission for the Study of Nursing and Nursing Education points out that, in fact, through some periods of history nursing has been viewed as a male occupation, as for example, the era in which military orders of hospital knights flourished.¹⁰

What about other professions, which are dominated by either sex?

Teachers in office administration say that so

far, changing their department's name from secretarial science has not attracted men students.

“In national professional meetings, we go on talking about how we can change our image,” one teacher told me, “but apparently to men secretarial is still a woman's field.”

The reason? As she sees it, men think of secretaries as people who take orders. “Men want to give orders,” she explained.

A look at lists of alumni from our colleges, incidentally, shows that before 1930 several men finished a “secretarial” course. For several years, also, men came to college to take nursing.

Elementary teaching, like nursing and office administration, has traditionally been a woman's field. In recent years, however, men have begun to show more interest in it. In 1959-60, for example, 13.7 percent of all elementary teachers were men; ten years later, the total had increased to 15.4.¹¹ In Seventh-day Adventist elementary schools, 42 percent of the teachers are men.

“I think you'll find men teaching the upper grades and serving as principals,” says a teacher in one education department, “even though in some cases the man who is principal has less training and experience than a woman who works under him.”

The same teacher adds, however, that some men students are now interested in kindergarten and nursery school training, “and we would like to see more. Men who like small children aren't necessarily womanish.”

The fields of engineering, mathematics and the sciences are still predominantly male. Most science teachers are men, one reason perhaps that so few girls major in these fields.

“Some men try to discourage girls from taking biology,” says a teacher in that department. “I don't know why—the few girls we have in our graduate and undergraduate degree programs are among our best students.” He goes on to say that, according to a recent study, women, contrary to the usual opinion, do superior research in science and a considerable amount of it.

A few years ago a national survey showed that seven percent of all physicians, nine percent of scientists and one percent of engineers were women.¹² If teachers in these fields know what they are talking about, percentages would cer-

tainly be no higher among graduates from Seventh-day Adventist colleges.

Theology, like science, does not open its arms to women. Even women Bible instructors are becoming rare. Teachers in one Adventist School of Theology note that the church has had some good women preachers. "I guess they work hard on a sermon," he chuckles, "because they know they've got to be good to survive. We always get good reports from churches where women students have preached."

Some teachers of theology recall Ellen White's writing to a woman, "Address the crowd whenever you can."¹³ A year later Mrs. White wrote that two women were "doing just as efficient work as the ministers." One of them, she said, took the Bible and addressed the congregation.¹⁴

The fact remains, however, that theology departments do little to attract women students and by holding out no hope for future work tend to discourage those who apply.

Bending the twig starts early; parents give their sons construction and chemistry sets and doctors' instruments and their daughters baby dolls, cooking and sewing sets and nurses' kits.

A widely known psychologist, Paul Torrance, has for more than a decade studied young children's attitudes towards toys. First-grade boys, he reports, often refuse to play with a nurse's kit; six-year-olds protest, "I'm a boy! I don't play with things like that."

Torrance says his experiments with older children and science toys show that girls are reluctant to play with this type of game; they often tell him, "I'm a girl; I'm not supposed to know things like that!" In one school, Torrance reported his findings to parents and teachers and asked them to help change the girls' attitudes. A year later he retested, using similar science toys; the girls "participated willingly and even with apparent enjoyment. And they performed as well as boys. But in one significant respect nothing had changed: The boys' contributions were more highly valued—both by other boys and by girls—than the girls' contributions, regardless of the fact that, in terms of sex, boys and girls had scored equally."¹⁵

What happens when children begin to talk

about what they want to do as grownups? I am, of course, particularly concerned with girls; that society defines the feminine role much more narrowly than the masculine I think few would deny.

To a child who says she wants to become a nurse, adults often say, "That's fine, dear, but of course you want to be a mommy, too, don't you?" As she grows older, the matter becomes serious, particularly when the girl begins to express an interest in a predominantly male profession. If an adolescent says she wants to be a doctor, she often becomes the target for pressure from parents, teachers and her peer group.

Parents, for example, try to dissuade a girl from a career such as medicine, with the explanation that "men don't like girls to be too brainy." (No one ever explains where to draw the line: what is brainy enough and what is too brainy?) Others dismiss the subject with an indulgent smile and "Why be in a hurry to decide?" If the interest persists, parents and school counselors may suggest that nursing is a better profession than medicine for a girl because she will probably get married anyway.

I myself went through a stage where I was going to be a secretary, so that—as various counselors advised me—I could earn my living while I waited for "Mr. Right" to find me. Then my family and a longtime friend who was a nurse convinced me that I should take up nursing; since there was always a dearth of nurses, they reasoned, I could surely find a job if I needed one. I was far more interested in veterinary medicine than in nursing, but I settled for two years of nursing as I had four years of secretarial science in high school.

Somewhere along the line I did a stint with two country newspapers. When those jobs had ended, my mother confessed that she had never known a good night's sleep during those months; I gathered that I had been a source of worry to her because I liked my job too much. I was 22 before I summoned the courage to announce to all concerned that I was going to finish college, even though this meant working my way—*all* my way. When I started a master's, my mother wept. "What man will ever want to marry you?" she asked. She died before I could disappoint her further; she would have been totally unable to understand my later urge to take a Ph. D. in journalism.

That the girl lives in a man's world from the time she enters ninth grade becomes evident when one realizes that 57 percent of her teachers are men. The cards are stacked; most academy vocational and guidance counselors are men and many women teachers still feel obligated to uphold the idea that a woman's place is in the home, explaining that they themselves work only to "help out."

Through academy as well as church school, however, the girl must compete with boys for grades and extracurricular activities. Except for physical education and home economics courses, she takes the same classes, including mathematics and science.

But when she enrolls in college, she must put away childish things, including any ideas she may have had of competing with men.

Most girls have no question about why their parents send them to a Seventh-day Adventist college. One big object is to meet prospective husbands, and they know it.

What does this mean to a college girl?

"If you get an A on a test paper," several girls have said to me, "you mustn't let the guy next to you see it."

One dean of women says she knows college women see their A's as a threat to their boy-friends' ego. When we talked, she had in mind one couple for whom the girl's ability was a real problem. "I told her she could just listen in class," the dean said, "and pull C's. Then he wouldn't feel threatened. Otherwise she would lose him, and he meant too much to her for that."

Some girls say that insuring a steady lineup of dates is a full-time occupation. One day three girls told me they had not done an assignment because they had spent all of the preceding evening trying to decide whom to invite to their club banquet, "before all the nice guys are taken." But this wasn't the end of the matter. For the rest of the week, the three lived in a dream world, trying to arrange a meeting that would look accidental and practicing the giving of their invitations in a casual fashion, as if they had just that moment happened to think of asking the fellow to the banquet.

Before they are more than started in college, most girls have created—or have had passed on to them—a romantic view of life, which includes

school, marriage and a family, and living happily ever after. A far more accurate picture would be school, work and/or marriage, a family (sometimes continuing with a job by choice or necessity) and a return to work when the youngest child starts school.¹⁶

"I don't think most college girls really plan on getting a job," a senior told me recently. "The big push is towards marriage."

As they approach graduation, however, some girls can see that they are going to work whether they want to or not. Some are married and their husbands plan to go on to medical or graduate school. Others have begun to face the realization

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that perhaps they will not marry. In either case, the adjustment is hard. It is obviously worse for the girl who took it for granted, along with everyone else in her group, that long before this she would pace up the aisle to join some nice young man at the altar. If she has always been told that woman's place is in the home and that marriage is every woman's goal in life, her sense of personal worth plummets.

For a time, both the married and the unmarried girl are likely to think in terms of a job, rather than a career. A few, it is true, look ahead to graduate school and life as professional women, with or without marriage. Whether a woman views her work as a career or simply as a job, however, she could find in it more satisfaction and fulfillment had she looked ahead realistically to this day.

One might well ask, then—as I do—why we continue to ignore the situation that so many women face. When 23 percent do not marry, when 21 percent marry but find their marriage ending with divorce or a premature death, why can we not bring ourselves to look squarely at the subject of working women?

The church acts sometimes as if it thinks that by shutting its eyes and plugging up its ears, it will get rid of the woman question. Such an attitude is beyond understanding in an organization that numbers among its founders a woman.

Many years ago that woman wrote to other women in the Seventh-day Adventist ranks:¹⁷

We are inexcusable if we allow God-given talents to rust from inaction. Christ asks, "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" Let us consecrate all that we have and are to Him, believing in His power to save, and having confidence that He will use us as instrumentalities to do His will and glorify His name.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Since this is an excerpt from research completed in the fall and winter of 1971, some sources and information should perhaps be updated. Few, if any, will insist that the overall picture has changed significantly.

1. *Expanding Opportunities for Girls: Their Special Counseling Needs*. U. S. Department of Labor, 1967.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*

4. Sheila D. Collins, *The Christian Century*, December 30, 1970, pp. 1557-1559.
5. A 1971 Graduate of Walla Walla College with majors in journalism and psychology.
6. In one story a little girl, having concluded that "girls never had any fun," prayed that she would become a boy. See Dorothy Aitken, "Kristy's Impossible Prayer," *Guide*, July 15, 1970, pp. 2-3.
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8. "Growing Up Female," *Harper's*, October, 1962, p. 121.
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15. Florence Howe, "Sexual Stereotypes Start Early." *Saturday Review*, October 16, 1971, pp. 80-81.
16. U. S. Department of Labor, *Expanding Opportunities for Girls: Their Special Counseling Needs*. April, 1967.
17. Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 26, 1902, p. 7.