The Breakup of the Sex-Role Caste System

The ancient system of sex roles, under which men were assigned a monopoly of access to money and the public sphere, and mature women were restricted to the home, came under severe attack over the course of the last century and a half in most developed countries. The social and economic forces behind the release of women from obligatory domesticity are far from spent; they continue to reinforce each other and grow stronger. An economic cataclysm or a wave of religious fanaticism such as occurred in Iran and Afghanistan could bring a regression, but barring such upheavals, women will not retreat back into domesticity. On the contrary, the emergence of women into the money economy and into larger roles in the society will probably go further, both in the developed and in the developing countries.

The worldwide liberation of women from a dependence on men for money to live on, and the opening of opportunities to lead whatever lives their talents and inclinations permit deserves recognition as a revolution in human affairs. As an extension of freedom to people who previously had little or none, it surely ranks with the French or American revolutions in historic importance. Not everyone welcomes the changes that revolution has wrought. Some despair at what they see as the ruination of a system that provided a warm and comfortable home life. They mourn the passing of the sheltered existence that most women and children had. But many women and young girls relish their freedoms and opportunities. Many mothers and fathers are delighted that their daughters have a chance to express their talents and will be able, if they wish, to avoid complete dependence on the goodwill of a “breadwinner.”

A majority of women in the developed countries have by now emerged from the home, but many habits, policies, and institutions survive from the era when all mature women were expected to be lifelong housewives, and all male workers were expected by their employers to have the services of a full-time housewife at home. The reduced supply of “caring labor” contributed by family members—child care and elder care—has yet to be addressed by public policy. Many husbands of employed women still expect to be waited on at home as before. Domestic violence continues to be a severe problem.
As women’s behavior and positions have changed, men’s have too. More men are taking an active part in the daily care of their children. But the share of men’s financial resources that are devoted to the support of children has decreased. An increasing proportion of men are abdicating entirely their traditional role of provider for the children they have sired. About 30 percent of children in the United States live apart from their fathers, and in a majority of such cases the father contributes little or nothing toward the child’s expenses.¹

Progress has been made in the labor market. The gap between men’s and women’s average pay has narrowed significantly, and women’s presence in the professional and managerial ranks has increased markedly. Yet men still retain a highly disproportionate share of the best jobs. Occupational segregation by sex and the discriminatory treatment that causes it remain prevalent, particularly in the kinds of jobs filled by people who have not gone on to higher education.

The new conditions require new habits, policies, and institutions. We need to complete the task of driving sex discrimination and race discrimination from the workplace. This will enable women to earn enough, not just to keep out of poverty, but to achieve a comfortable lifestyle whether or not they have a man in their household. We have to find and implement a way of helping single parents live decently. We need a system under which single parents will be earners, but will have government guarantees of child support payments, health care, and high-quality child care. We need new rules and facilities that will help working people, with no full-time homemaker to depend on, to carry on their home lives and raise their children with less strain—shorter work weeks, no compulsory overtime, a ban on discrimination against part-timers, “service-mall” apartment complexes.

The Long Transition from Domesticity

In 1870 only 14 percent of working-age women in the United States were employed, most as servants. In subsequent decades, the percentage of women in the job market rose slowly but quite steadily. In 2001, 60 percent were participating, as compared with 74 percent of men.² Women’s ongoing emergence into the money economy went largely unnoticed until the late 1970s, when the labor force participation rate of American women with children under 18 passed the 50 percent mark.³ This was the start of an era in which a woman who was working for pay could see herself as part of a majority. The employed woman was now comfortably within the mainstream. By the same token, the 1970s marked the start of minority status for the woman devoted exclusively to domestic service at home for her husband and children. After that, the housewife could not have the same assurance as before that the place she occupied was the only right and honorable one.

The changes in women’s economic role have been unfolding gradually for a long time, as a result of long-standing tendencies in the economy and society. Records on U.S. employment for the last 13 decades show a steady