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Interview with Federal Councillor Ruth Dreifuss

## “To consolidate social security”

**Swiss Review:** Do you think the Swiss are living above their means today in terms of social security?

**Ruth Dreifuss:** No. I would rather say that Switzerland is below normal standards in the industrialised countries. In terms of quality, our system of social security compares perfectly well with other countries. It is neither more expensive nor too expensive.

**What do you answer to those who are expressing a desire to downscale social security with the aim of reducing labour costs and thus obtaining a more efficient economy?**

I do not share the idea that we have to demolish what we have now to provide ourselves with the means of rebuilding later. This is a prospect or rather a promise coming from people who reason in this way, and I do not believe in it. On



“Our system of social security is not too expensive.”

the contrary, I believe that we should consolidate what has already been built. We should recognise that on the whole the edifice is complete and what now has to be done is to adjust it.

**What is the project which is nearest to your heart today?**

The thing that is nearest to my heart is precisely to achieve this transition between the period of development and the period of stability towards which we are travelling. Of course I insist on the necessity of finally carrying out the promise made with respect to maternity insurance. But what interests me most is to make clearly understood the necessity of such a contract of solidarity linking at the same time healthy and sick people, the young and the old, those who have jobs and those who have lost them. At the end of the day it is this network which comprises the value of our society.

**You have promised, and the Federal Council with you, to maintain what has been achieved in social security and even to consolidate it. So what are you going to do to bring this about?**

When we say that we do not want to reduce social protection, this does not mean that everything has to stay the same in all fields. On the contrary, we must learn always to respond better to problems as they come up and not to start out from the idea that what already exists cannot be touched. Take the case of old-age and survivors' insurance. This is a contract which continues through an entire lifetime. People pay during the whole of their working lives in order to have something in the event of disability or when they reach retirement. Respect for such a contract is one of the foundation stones of our society. When the Federal Council says that what we want to do is to consolidate, precisely to ensure sustainability, it is saying nothing other than this.

**Is it not true that this consolidation is taking place to the detriment of women – with the increase in their retirement age, relaxation of the prohibition on night work and the fact that setting up maternity insurance is still being deferred?**

For a long time, social insurance has been based on paid work only. That is



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all very well, but women carry out all sorts of tasks which are useful to society and which are not paid. The social value of these contributions is starting to be recognised. It is now a matter of re-

cognising them in the social security system too. But nothing has ever been given away in this field; everything has always been conquered, and only after a hard struggle. It is the misfortune of women perhaps that their interests often



“It is the misfortune of women perhaps that their interests often come after all the others.”

come after all the others. But it is up to us to make sure that women are not the losers.

**A final word concerning the Swiss Abroad. We have spoken of consolidating social security in Switzerland. What does this mean and what will it mean in the future for the Swiss Abroad?**

There are two fields which pose problems: on the one hand sickness insurance and on the other hand old-age and survivors' insurance. As to sickness insurance, it is the introduction of the principle of territoriality which has excluded not only the Swiss Abroad, but also cross-frontier workers and all retired persons who have sought a more favourable climate for the rest of their days. The only decision that we have been able to take is to authorise the sickness funds to maintain for these insured persons the conditions which were previously theirs. As to the optional old-age and survivors' insurance scheme, this is faced with an imbalance between contributions paid and benefits provided. We are engaged in re-examining this system, using here also as a guide the rule according to which those of our compatriots abroad who need it can continue to count on support from their homeland. But we shall not change anything without turning the matter over in our minds many times.

*Interview: Ilaria Bignasci and Pierre-André Tschanz*  
*Photos: Michael Stahl*