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# The Swiss Observer

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## Comment

### HOW TO ESCAPE FROM A MAN'S WORLD

A movement called the "Gesellschaft gegen die Verblödung der Frau" has won quite a local reputation in Basle. Its impact, membership and importance in Swiss affairs may be limited, but the virulence of its official designation obviously points to a problem. Although the name of this society may have something to do with the Swiss way of putting things bluntly, one must accept that the alleged "Verblödung" of women is causing concern to some circles.

Since "verblöden" means to "make stupid" or "stultify" the complaint is largely of an intellectual nature. The Basle group obviously believes that the present order of things prevents women from achieving intellectual fulfillment. The "Verblödung" process is probably catalysed by the principle that married women should be committed to "Kinder, Küche und Kirche".

The existence of this problem is certainly linked with "men's world" in which we live. But that is not the only cause. There are two other considerations to bear in mind. The first is that, however liberated women may be, mothers will be necessary until we all decide to live in a communalist society where everything, including mothers and children is shared. Not only are mothers still necessary, but we cannot dispense with some division of labour within the household. There are tasks which are usually better performed by the husband, others which belong to the wife. The second point is that "Verblödung" of women is not only a result of male "bossiness" but also of the set of modern values which they, the women, help to protect. In a conformist society with a fetish for cleanliness, orderliness and obedience to the letter of the law, housewives can be fettered to the broomstick without having a valid chance to blame their condition on male supremacy. Also, many married women refrain from working because it is against the dignity of their particular milieu to do so. There again, the condition of

women will be determined by a set of values to which *both* sexes are submitted.

Still, many of the complaints by dissatisfied women or groups of women are tied to the particular relationship obtaining between Swiss men and women. In the USA, liberationists aim their campaign against the myth of the strongly heterosexual man blessed by success and a host of male attributes. It is in order to uphold this image that so many middle-class American wives condemn their husbands to premature deaths by driving them to a tireless struggle for promotion and more income. In Switzerland, this pattern is only emerging. The more traditional complaint would centre on the patriarchal authority of the Swiss family man, his frequent snugginess and lack of concern for the secret desires of his wife. The picture is changing fast, but a great number of Swiss households still offer the picture of a comfortable and secure husband running the family with the consent of his obedient and appropriately trained wife.

This pattern naturally supports the image of Swiss women as being "kitchen-bound" and deprived of all interest towards the outside world. One historical fact certainly presents a paradox. How is it that, when the puritanical and stifling pattern of family life had reached its peak, when women were more than ever trained to know their place, that a group of women in Zurich fighting under the banner of the *Frauenverein* not only opened a chain of non-alcoholic restaurants in the town but played an important role in its welfare as well? Later, the *Frauenverein* instigated a midnight "Polizeistunde" so that their husbands would be compelled to return home reasonably sober and at respectable hours.

The existence of the *Frauenverein* showed that Swiss women were not subdued, even in the days when the "Kirche, Kinder Küche" principle was sacrosanct. The *Frauenverein* and other similar charitable organisations enabled women to express their identity and their need to contribute actively to the community. But this opportunity was exercised *in line* with the system and was not aimed against male supremacy. The midnight drinking-up time was rather

intended to enable men to live up the status conferred upon them by a system with which bourgeois women were in the main content. The truth of this statement is backed by the number of posters which sprang up in Zurich at the time *against* giving women the right to vote. The posters hit out at the "Totale Verpolitisierung unseres Leben".

Being confined to a house and one's children didn't therefore necessarily mean total submission and passivity for many women. Today, one is surprised by the number of Swiss womens' organisations of all kinds — social and political. Women are continuing to be active in *Frauenvereine* fashion and are beginning to question the existing order of things. They have for example been at the spearhead of the campaign in favour of legal abortion.

The realities of the condition of women in Switzerland contradict the images conjured up by its cosy society and the fact that women weren't allowed to vote until recently. There were no suffragettes, but this historical blank is compensated today by the militancy and number of women's organisations. If one tried to compare the situation of women in Switzerland and Britain, one would arrive at practically the same conclusions. Attitudes and lifestyles may be different, but in both cases it is a "man's world". Britain has been advantaged in this respect by the war, which has brought men and women close together professionally and given the latter much increased responsibilities. This has helped to change male attitude to women's professional prospects, but both countries had until recently the same tradition of not sending girls from good homes to university. In fact, they were backward compared with France, although there had always been a handful of prominent women of achievement helped by their background and their exceptional personalities. The success of these few women does not alter the fact that we still live in a man's world where men nearly always rise faster and higher, and earn more.

The areas where women can make the grade are virtually the same in both countries. These are mainly teaching, the medical profession (nursing and general practice), the retail trade, the social services, fashion, cosmetics and related journalism, certain areas of the "tertiary" sector such as data processing and advertising, a few independent professions such as acting and photography, and female glamour jobs like modelling.

It should be noted that the few women general managers to be found in both countries run shops. Many department stores are managed by women and Denner AG, one of the major Swiss chain of supermarket stores, has a woman managing director.

On the other hand, vast areas are virtually closed to women in both countries. Women can hardly expect to become anything else than a secretary in

fields such as industrial management, banking, insurance, public administration, trade, transport, stock-broking and international organisations. In the rare cases where a woman reaches an executive position in a large organisation she is likely to be a spinster, a graceless, ambitious woman disliked by most of those who work under her or with her. Such is the price of professional success for women in a man's world.

The Head of the Personnel Chief of the Federal Administration recently explained on Swiss television that if a man and a woman appeared as candidates for a vacancy, the man would almost automatically be selected. He said this in a matter-of-fact way adding that women had children to look after and were consequently not reliable staff. These and other arguments are standard in large organisations. They are not always unjustified, but show that a great amount of mental adaptation will be necessary to open executive positions to women in large administrations.

The situation is more likely to cause suffering and frustration to women expecting more out of life than non-responsible tasks or plain domestic existence, because of their particular upbringing and personality.

There will always be a fraction of bored or unsatisfied housewives. The proportion appears to be pretty high in Switzerland. A kind of McKinsey report published by the Sociological Institute of the University of Zurich under the auspices of UNESCO showed the

appalling situation of so many Swiss marriages. This report was in fact criticised by women's organisations for the way it portrayed Swiss married women.

However, the problems of the home are likely to be aggravated in those social categories where it is almost impossible for women to find a professional outlet. In the working classes the problem is solved by an abundant supply of labour in industry and in offices. In the middle classes, several situations can arise. In many cases wives will find satisfactory jobs as school teachers or secretaries. Among some elderly, middle-class households, the husband will not allow his wife to work. It is probably in the higher reaches, where a housewife needn't work to bring in money and cannot accept any "small" job. Women of that category often have none of the training required by the higher job market. They may have a law or arts degree which can't usually fructify because they are out of touch with their specialisation by the time their children no longer need their immediate care. Many women in that category take refuge in an elaborate social life or become hinged to their husband's concerns and career.

The present establishment is certainly not designed to help women of a certain age, social and educational background. The women who are most to pity are unhappy married women who fail to find an adequate way of otherwise using their potentialities, or the

unmarried women prevented by a man's world from making a career.

P.M.B.

## SWISS EVENTS

**The average Swiss works 44.2 hours a week**

The average working week throughout Swiss industry and business was 44.2 hours in 1973. A report by an employers' association showed that the working week was only 6 minutes shorter in 1973 than the year before. 19.4 per cent of all workers still put up weeks of 46 hours and over (as against 20.3 per cent in 1972). 17 per cent of all workers and employees work less than 44 hours a week (15.4 per cent in 1972) but only 3.9 per cent (3.5 in 1972) work less than forty hours a week.

It can therefore be seen that the Swiss have a longer working week than elsewhere, and in particular than in Britain, but as overtime is unknown the actual time spent at the work bench is shorter. Swiss workers generally refuse to work overtime. This requires that they

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