

A Conservative Folklorist on Social Class and Gender Roles (1852)

Abstract

Remarkably, the conservative folklorist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823–1897) was skeptical of any artificial separation of gender spheres according to which men were active in public life and women stayed at home with the children. Drawing on observations from his travels across Germany, Riehl argued in *The Family* (1852) that the ideal of separate spheres may have been a reality for the upper classes, but was certainly not the case for the lower classes and the rural population.

Source

[...]

Among the people, the commercial occupation of woman is also still completely identical to that of the man. By contrast, as occupational circles presuppose greater wealth and education, woman is granted less participation in the man's vocation.

Among peasant wage-laborers and poor cow farmers, a woman does exactly the same as a man. The level of intellectual education of the two is also entirely the same. Both work in the field, guide the plough and wagon together, sow, harvest, and sell things together or by taking turns at random. Work in the house is only an occasional addition for the woman. Indeed, male and female occupations are often found to be interchangeable, just like the words cap and bonnet. For example, the herder may knit socks as he watches the herd, while his wife walks behind the plough. In fact, it is often as though the Old Testament curse that woman shall give birth in pain has been lifted from these women; for they give birth "behind the bushes," pick up the poor new-born child, carry him home an hour's walk, and three days later are back at their accustomed work. It is precisely pregnancy and childbed which, in other circles, make it impossible for women to engage continually in an external occupation like the man, who is always master of his body.

In a rich and flourishing peasant population that is located along major roads, a woman no longer exchanges her work so consistently with that of the man. There the woman would, as a rule, consider it rather unseemly to guide the horses or simply to steer a boat; she would be laughed at if she walked behind the plough, and the man if he knitted socks. In the more developed strata of the peasantry, the chief activity of the woman is already limited more immediately to the house; moreover, the differentiation of male and female dress and customs is usually far more highly developed among flourishing peasant populations than it is among wretched and backward ones. But at least part of the agricultural work is done by man and woman without distinction everywhere in the countryside.

Something similar holds true among proletarians performing manual labor. Male and female day laborers for the most part engage in the same occupation. Among factory workers, men and women, children and old people often perform the same work.

Only among highway robbers and common thieves does the wife help in the business; among refined crooks, the man usually pursues his occupation alone.

Here it should also be noted that the distinction between occupations becomes increasingly blurred not only by sex, but also by age, the lower down we go to the poor and uneducated strata of the population.

Among poor small farmers, the schoolboy already has to take over half of the work from the father. The work of the wife, of adolescent children, and of domestics is one and the same. In the cities, children have their own unique dress until they have grown to be young men and women. In the villages, the five-year old boy is already dressed in miniature water boots and his father's miniature frock. In this droll dwarfish masquerade, he calls to mind the old truth of natural history that only the highest forms of organic life contain within themselves the most varied and most defined subdivisions. The undifferentiated occupation of the sexes is a sad legacy of poor and wretched folk, and we do not wish to vie with the worms and the mollusks for undifferentiated, abstract citizenship.

The differentiation of the two sexes in their occupation, which has already begun in the more developed peasant societies, continues in stages among urban dwellers. For the cobbler, the tailor, and the tavern-keeper—for the small trades as such—the wife is still a full-fledged journeyman in the business. But in the larger trades, and fully so in the intellectual professions, this female participation ceases entirely. The government minister's wife can no longer help out in the cabinet as the shopkeeper's wife can in the store. The higher the professional category, the more separated is the activity of man and woman.

[...]

Source: Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Die Familie*, 2nd ed. Stuttgart and Augsburg: J. G. Cotta, 1852, pp. 29–31.

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