

The Overburdened Rural Woman (1934)

Abstract

Agricultural labor was critically important in the Third Reich. According to National Socialist ideology, “German” racial heritage was linked, in both real and symbolic ways, to the physical landscapes comprising the “greater Reich.” In the interwar period, farming was incredibly labor intensive and often dangerous. To make matters worse, ongoing economic insecurity in 1920s Germany had led not only to rising unemployment, since many full-time laborers were laid off when families could no longer afford to pay them, but also, paradoxically, to labor shortages, since family members were often forced to take on paid labor themselves.

These changes to the rural economy meant that all family members, including women, needed to participate in farm work in order to survive. Women had already entered into the rural workforce before the Nazis came to power, and they remained in place out of necessity, especially once young German men were called to service in the armed forces. The regime monitored this situation closely, not least because of the crucial importance of agricultural production. Likewise, observers paid special attention to the social effects of shifts in agricultural labour practices. This excerpt from the “Racial Hygiene” supplement to the *Völkischer Beobachter* (the official NSDAP newspaper) shows the regime’s concern that strenuous agricultural labor would negatively affect women’s fertility and hinder their ability to raise children in accordance with official expectations.

Source

The rural woman, whether she is a laborer or a farmer’s wife, helps to carry the very heavy burden of agricultural work. Her day begins at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning and does not end until 9 or 10 o'clock at night. Apart from all the housework, she looks after animals on the farm and also has to work in the fields, because the number of employed laborers has to be kept to a minimum. In smaller concerns, the farmer’s wife normally participates in work in the fields; in larger ones, she is less likely to do so but then there is that much more work for her in a large house and estate. The female agricultural worker, by contrast, usually performs the same work as the man. She normally spends only a few hours each day in the house.

For all rural dwellers, the entire burden of work has increased considerably since the [1914-18] war, with the economic crisis forcing them to reduce the number of full-time employed laborers and to take on the extra work themselves. And this extra burden has in far the greatest measure fallen on the shoulders of the rural woman.

It is easy to see the consequences for the health of women and their offspring. A woman who has to perform hard physical labor from her fifteenth year is old and exhausted by the time she is forty. Under these circumstances, the number of children she has will be small, because she has neither the time to bring up many children nor the strength or the desire to do so. The children she has cannot be raised and supervised in the way that they should be; they are left to their own devices or locked up in the house until their mother comes home. This is one reason for the continuing high level of childhood mortality in rural areas.

Source of English translation: Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 152-53. With edits by GHI staff.

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