

Renate Mayntz on What Motivates Women to Pursue a Career (1955)

Abstract

Sociologist Renate Mayntz argued that women's interest in gainful employment did not arise primarily from acute economic necessity; rather, in the case of married women, it arose from a desire for greater independence, and, in the case of single, divorced, or widowed women, from an interest in material security. Added to this was the need for intellectual stimulation and social experiences that were no longer available at home due to the conditions of the modern nuclear family.

Source

Today it has become almost a matter of course that a girl learns a profession. Here it is primarily a practical necessity that asserts itself. Since the family today is small and fairly disconnected from the solid kinship unit, a woman who is single, widowed, or the wife of someone out of work cannot rely on care and support from parents, siblings, or other relatives. Vocational training is supposed to give a woman, even when she is unmarried, the chance to retain her independence and the ability to support herself. It should likewise enable her to support herself and possibly her children as a widow or divorced woman. In addition, marriage today is often marked by the establishment of a shared livelihood, where the woman as partner contributes her share through her own earnings. For this, too, she needs to be working. This practical reason, which necessitates vocational training for women, is joined by other factors that prompt and promote women's quest for a working life. First, a woman today enjoys largely the same education as a man. This education is focused on performance. Performance in school, performance in job training, and, finally, performance in the pursuit of a profession are rewarded with recognition. This recognition, along with the growing self-confidence that arises from it, has become a basic need, especially for people today. Just like a man, the single woman strives for accomplishments, which she can attain above all by pursuing a profession.

A person's own occupation largely satisfies the need for independence that is emphasized everywhere today and is also at work among women. Added to this is another personal need that may be even more significant than those just mentioned, and which also pushes women toward an occupation. Life in public and in the working world is a source of continual mental stimulation, a source of ever-new social experiences. While it is possible to give up independence and recognized accomplishments for an emotionally satisfying bond to husband and children, it is much less possible in the small circle of today's families – in a sphere of familial and domestic work that has become much narrower – to find a replacement for the constant stimulation, for the variety and new experiences of life outside the family. It is only through an occupation that is continued also during marriage, and possibly also as a mother, that some women feel able to assume a role of equality – in intellectual terms – vis-à-vis their husbands, which is the precondition for a companionate marriage.

In opposition, one could argue that work in an occupation is for many women one-sided and monotonous, and that it is carried out in dependent jobs and within an impersonal environment. One can say that important psychological, mental, and emotional needs of women must remain unmet with this kind of work, and that it is precisely this fact that makes it easier for them to give up working for the more meaningful task as mother, for the emotionally more satisfying bond to the husband, and for the often greater freedom of work related to the family. Without a doubt, there are many women to whom this argument applies. One need only think of the workers on the assembly line, or of a woman who fills

fish-paste into cans or who wraps condensers eight hours a day. However, it is not only the doctor and the lawyer, the teacher and the journalist, but also the saleswoman, secretary, or factory worker who can achieve in her job a degree of satisfaction that her work in the home as such cannot provide her.

Source: Renate Mayntz, *Die moderne Familie*. Stuttgart, 1955, p. 56 f.; reprinted in Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, ed., *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945–1963*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1988, pp. 208–10.

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