

Walther von Hollander, Women's Issues – Women's Worries (1946)

Abstract

The upheavals of World War II and the immediate postwar period disrupted traditional gender roles and expectations in manifold ways. In 1946, columnist and radio host Walter von Hollander reported on the various ways in which women dealt with this experience. Their responses included positive reactions to their newly-won independence, unprocessed grief over the loss of partners, and tedious struggles against persistent workplace prejudices. Unlike conservative critics who lamented the loss of traditional womanhood in the postwar period, Hollander interpreted these stories as a welcome affirmation of women's ability to lead full and meaningful lives outside of marriage.

Source

Ever since I discussed certain marital problems on the *Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk* [Northwest German Radio], I have received letters upon letters containing the most peculiar questions; questions that no one can answer adequately without knowing the entire life situation of those asking, and yet questions that must be answered because they are general questions resulting from the general misery. Of course, there are no direct answers, no exhaustive directions to follow. Everyone must find those for himself through a tough struggle with the angel. But it might be the case that, by examining individual questions, we discover typical, binding situations, on the basis of which at least some kind of clarification and elucidation are possible.

One woman writes from the industrial region: We got married in 1934. My husband was an engineer in an airplane engine plant, a man highly talented in his field and utterly committed to his work. He had a good income. We had a small house in the Sauerland, an hour's drive from the city; we had a car. Very soon we had two children. I saw my husband for an hour in the evening, when he came home from work dead tired. When he occasionally came earlier, he would sit at his drawing table half the night, brooding, and from my bed, I heard him talking to himself and cursing. He was a tough man in every regard. At least that's what those under him said, and his superiors didn't like him because he advocated his views brusquely and told everyone his opinion, even if it was unsolicited; I myself did not suffer from his gruffness. Toward me he was always consistently nice. But never affectionate, and he had no strong bonds with the children. How could he? He hardly ever saw them. Everything got worse during the war. He came out once a week, at most. Since he was working on mysterious weapons and there was nothing in his life other than his work, he became almost mute. Therefore, I don't know what kind of trouble there was in his factory. In any case, he was suddenly drafted into the army, even though he was completely indispensable. As a veteran, he was deployed immediately and was soon killed in action. My life changed little because of it. That may sound harsh, but that's the way it was. We had saved quite a bit. The house is rented out. We are living on the top floor, and I have a job as a secretary in the neighboring town. Everything could be fine. But a man has appeared. Again, a very capable man, an architect who is well employed and full of ideas that will surely lead to an excellent position soon. He loves me and wants to marry me. You are now going to say: Well, then! What good luck for this woman! My mother and girlfriends are saying the same. But I don't want to get married. Or, if I were to marry again, then it would be to a gentle person who needs me, whom I can guide and protect. For where did the men lead us? First, it was bleak working life – and now? Don't you think that the men have done a lot of stupid things and can't find their way out? And here I'm supposed to marry another man like that? Must I do that?

A second letter: my husband has been dead for two years. I can't forget him. I have had two relationships with men. But those were relationships out of desperation. Nothing could come of that. A month, two months . . . then I was so bitter that I called it quits. I have to compare everyone to a dead man. Other women can forget. Why can't I? For me, love is a punishment. The person who has loved once must forever be lonely.

And from a third letter: I am thirty-five. I met him in 1944. My parents had already been bombed out of their apartment. I lived very far outside . . . alone for the first time. He came every evening. A wonderful time. Then he left to look for his wife, who fled from East Prussia at the beginning of 1945. Yes . . . he was married. I knew that. But I didn't care. He wrote one time. Since then he has disappeared. I am waiting for him. What nonsense, I've told myself. But is there anything one can do about it? The worst is: my life is passing with the waiting. Every day I wait, and I do nothing other than wait.

Fourth letter: I am neither ugly nor pretty, and since I have calculated that now there are about 100 men for every 150 women, I gave up from the start. It was not very difficult for me. Given the sorts of marriages I see among my acquaintances, it's not like one should go to great lengths to be married. And the men, they way they generally are . . . no thank you! I want to study, then. I am very much interested in medicine. But it will be very difficult there, too. Men do not want women to study medicine. They would like it best if women as such were prohibited from studying. I am thus supposed to have neither a husband, nor, if men had their way, a profession. That is really unfair. [...]

[...]

I could go on quoting for an hour and present you with a vast number of women's portraits and women's fates. Women who on their own fight for the hearts of men, women who are fighting for men to conquer the world through them, women who had given up, and, above all, women who deplore the fate they believe men have created for them. Add to this the women who are determined henceforth to increase the womanly influence on world history, and to gain, through the establishment of women's organizations and women's parties, a power that will allow them to save the world from the disastrous, unilateral decisions by men.

[...]

And the women who have lost their husbands and cannot forget, the women who are waiting for the missing and for whom life seems to pass by without any apparent meaning? – Many women will be and remain alone. Many hearts will hold a vigil at unknown graves, before rubble, and at horrible execution sites. Endless is the number of victims, and very large the mass of those one must honestly mourn for! The women will be alone, and no one can spare them this curse. They must make a home in this loneliness, and it is an inhospitable home. And many will also have to mourn a lost homeland, made poorer by memories than those who never had anything. A great wave of sadness and loneliness will wash over the world. The only thing one can tell these women as consolation is that they should try to understand their fate as an example that should be given to many women. As an example, namely, that women, regardless of what men think, are capable of being and living alone and can still make something of their lives. That will not be possible without tears and without pain. But what could come out of this would be something very beautiful. Namely, the first step toward genuine independence for women, the proof that woman is a self-contained being even without a man, just as a man can lead a self-contained life without a woman.

[...]

Source: Walther von Hollander, *Nordwestdeutsche Hefte*, 2 (1946), p. 21 ff; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung: Deutsche Geschichte 1945–1955*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986, pp. 367–69.

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