Hilde Walter, “Twilight for Women?” (1931)

Abstract

Journalist Hilde Walter (1895–1976) was a social worker until 1918; later, she studied literature and art history and became a journalist after World War I. She wrote articles for *Die Weltbühne*, a bourgeois, left-wing weekly published by Carl von Ossietzky between 1927 and 1933. In this text, which was published in *Die Weltbühne* in July 1931, Walter takes stock of women in the work force. She does so in an unvarnished manner that clearly departs from the optimistically propagated ideal of the “New Woman” – an ideal that was attainable only for upper-class women. Walter also testifies to the fact that working women faced increasing criticism not just from conservative circles; on the whole, the criticism against them had grown louder, especially during the Depression. Thus, the regression of women’s equality and independence which became part of National Socialist policy was already foreshadowed in the late phase of the Weimar Republic. In November 1933, Walter, who was Jewish, escaped first to France and later to the United States, having obtained an emergency visa in 1941. In 1952, she returned to her hometown of Berlin, where she continued her work as a journalist. She was awarded the Federal Order of Merit 1st Class in 1965.

Source

Twilight for Women

Women have become unpopular. That is not good news because it touches on things that cannot be explained by reason alone. An uncomfortable atmosphere is gathering around all working women. A perhaps unorganized but very powerful countermovement is taking aim at all of them; individual women will be feeling its effects sooner or later.

Along the entire spectrum from left to right the meaning of women’s employment and their right to it are suddenly being questioned, more or less directly. At the moment it is not even the old discussion over so-called “equal rights,” over “equal pay for equal work” that occupies the foreground. Suddenly we are obliged to counter the most primitive arguments against the gainful employment of women.

We are unfortunately not entirely blameless for the strength of this new wave of hostility: the phenomenon of working women in general is being twisted to meet the needs of a variety of propagandistic goals. Perhaps only the hard-working proletarian woman, whose way of life is subject to no optimistic renderings of any kind, is being exempted from the general rage for falsification and rosy distortions. When people speak of “women’s work,” they are not usually thinking of the figures in Käthe Kollwitz’s pictures. For years now it has been much more the case that every type of women’s work has been proclaimed, photographed, and trivialized as an “accomplishment,” has been drenched in the sweet sauce of the eternal march of prosperity. The victory cry of the unlimited potential of women’s “abilities,” of the steady conquest of new positions in the work force, has issued in part from the representatives of newly-acquired female professions. Anxiety and fear has gripped male colleagues who have necessarily experienced the brilliant sheen of the new and unusual, possibly intensified by feminine charms, as unfair competition.

In addition, all the consumer-goods industries geared to female customers were very quick to recognize the attractiveness of such catchwords and make full use of them in their advertisements. Even the most poorly paid saleswoman or typist is an effective billboard; in a provocative get-up she becomes the very emblem of endless weekend amusements and the eternal freshness of youth. Women’s moderate

professional successes, often deficiently compensated, are glorified in annuals and wall calendars, if possible under the heading “Women for Women.” When was a machinist, ranking tenth on the income scale, ever portrayed to the world building a locomotive for his dear gender compatriots?

In the long run, that had to get on men’s nerves. Only on such a basis could the superstition have developed that the exclusion of women from the work place would remedy mass unemployment. To argue against this objectively is like whistling into the wind. In vain has nearly every newspaper left of the D. A. Z. [*Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*]—in the service of clarification and instruction—published the familiar figures from the occupational census proving without a doubt that the elimination of married women, for example, from the labor market would accomplish nothing. Fruitlessly have the independent trade unions repeatedly declared that the overwhelming majority of the 11.5 million working women are employed to mass produce those consumer goods that were produced in earlier times by women in the household; that 2.5 million married women work in family-owned agricultural and commercial enterprises; and that two million women of marriageable age would be left altogether unprovided for were they to be without work.

A mass psychosis cannot be exorcized by such reasonable, sober arguments, nor can they now stamp out the nearly mythical idea of the economic detriment caused by working women. Psychologists must discover the sources from which this male emotional disturbance is constantly renewed. They could perhaps investigate the extent to which an unknown sexual fear prevents the majority of men from seeing economic facts objectively and clearly. An elucidation of the misrepresented social state of affairs, however, can only be accomplished by women themselves if they resolve to speak just as openly about their occupational fate as they do about their love life.

There is the successful upper stratum of our much-celebrated pioneers who, as representatives and higher civil servants, as leaders of large occupational groups, can count on an economically secure old age. They might wish to report on how old they were when they entered the economic competition, how much money had to be invested in their rise until, in the critical years, they were no longer dependent on superiors and co-workers who refused employment to every woman getting on in years. There are the young academicians, who got their positions as research assistants only because they could also type. The host of female white-collar workers who, to keep their positions, have to maintain a standard of living corresponding to 250 marks a month on an income of 150. Additional duties in some form or other are usually an implicit part of their job.

Working women in general are also blamed quite often for accidents in the work place. If the daily rhythm of work is ever broken by the time-consuming effects of affairs of the heart, it seems to scream for the elimination of the disturbing female element. As if private emotional complications are not equally capable of interfering with male performance at work. Unfortunately, management science has not yet ascertained how much working women can enhance productivity by combining profession and love.

The truth about the living and working conditions of the contemporary woman is to be found in part in the publications of occupational associations. A new survey entitled *Working on Typewriters* determined that most stenographers and typists are completely exhausted after ten or fifteen years in the profession. But the best studies and most valuable monographs do not receive as much publicity as the eternal optimism that is always gushing forth from prominent positions in the name of the gender as a whole. When, for example, the public-speaking trainees of Madame von Kardorff take the stage as the new female youth to rediscover “women’s grand political mission,” then the appropriate male reaction can scarcely come as any surprise.

It is high time to do away with the fiction of the united front of all working women. All the propaganda for the vague concept of women’s work as such is distressingly mixed up with the victory cry for gains long

since accomplished and works only to destroy the good will of the other side. If women would quietly invest the same intensity in encouraging their colleagues of both genders within individual occupations, better working conditions could probably be achieved for everyone.

Source: Hilde Walter, “Twilight for Women?” (1931), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. © 1994 Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press, pp. 210–11. Reprinted with permission of the University of California Press.

Source of original German text: Hilde Walter, “Frauendämmerung?,” *Die Weltbühne* 27 (July 7, 1931), pp. 24–26.

Recommended Citation: Hilde Walter, “Twilight for Women?” (1931), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-3894> [March 16, 2026].