Women: Re-Entry and Challenge

Lita Linzer Schwartz
Pennsylvania State University, Ogontz

WOMEN: RE-ENTRY AND CHALLENGE

Lita Linzer Schwartz

The Pennsylvania State University, Ogontz Campus

Women are turning or returning to the world outside the home in ever-increasing numbers, partly due to the economic crisis of recent years and partly in response to the "consciousness-raising" and self-actualization aspects of the women's liberation and humanistic movements. When a woman re-enters the workaday or educational world, she meets a variety of challenges. Some she may have anticipated; others may come as a surprise - or a shock.

"Challenge" is used here in two ways. The clearly positive challenges are those career or academic tasks that invite the woman to use her abilities and potential in constructive ways. These are the opportunities that make re-entry attractive to her. There are also challenges, however, that "dare" her to succeed, in that they are roadblocks or potential inhibitors of achievement. These can be negative influences, resulting in submissiveness and lack of self-actualization, or more positive because they stimulate the woman to take the dare and "overcome" it. Although both types of challenge are encountered by any woman re-entering the classroom or the labor market, they are far more complex for the married woman than the unmarried. Therefore, the discussion in this paper will stress primarily the challenges that face the married woman who chooses to extend her horizons and thereby complicate her domestic life.

Horner posed the problem well when she wrote that "... while society has been legally opening its doors to women and decrying the loss of female potential, it has been teaching them to fail outside the home. No one ever seriously objects to a woman's education or intellectual development, provided its objective is to make her a more entertaining companion and a more enlightened, and thus better, wife and mother. Only when her objective is an independent personal career does a problem arise." (1970, p.56) The conflict about woman's role and "place" persists despite all the legal, judicial, and consciousness-raising activities of the past decade. This is a challenge with negative potential. Let us assume that the wife and mother resolves her internal conflict and moves into the world outside her home. What lies ahead? The answer may be found in a multitude of questions.

At home, the woman may encounter some of the following problems. If she achieves success, whether academic, financial, or in professional recognition, does this pose a threat to her husband's ego? If her star is rising while his hangs by a thread, is at a plateau, or is falling, does he resent the situation? Does he perceive her activity as competition with him? Can he rejoice with her when she attains a goal? Much, of course, depends on his maturity, self-concept, and respect for his wife as an individual. His response will also be colored by the

manner in which the wife presents her success and the level of interest she maintains in his activities. Does she provoke a competitive spirit? Is her elation excessive or prolonged? If she cares about the maintenance of an harmonious marriage, the handling of this situation provides a test of her powers of sensitivity and tactfulness.

If our woman is also a mother, the question arises as to the nature of the model she provides her children. Can they accept her in multiple roles? Are they resentful of the external demands on their mother's time and attention? Are they proud of or overwhelmed by her achievements? What effect do her achievements have on their school or work efforts? It takes judicious planning to combine motherhood and career (or studies) without jeopardizing the respect and affection of one's children. Indeed, self-discipline and effective management techniques become the keys to meeting family needs and responsibilities while making progress in personal development. Time must be apportioned to domestic tasks. Energy must be shared among emotional demands, physical jobs, and motivational desires. What our achieving woman needs is cooperation within her family and a balanced perspective on her own priorities. (Schwartz, 1975)

It is interesting that the family woman's ability to be effective as wife, mother, and "worker" is the basis for another challenge - on the job. If the woman is an executive or professional, male colleagues frequently find her all-around competence devastating to their own self-concept and status. There are numerous references in the literature to the fact that a female has to be more capable and more persistent than a male to be accepted to graduate school or supervisory positions. (Harris, 1970; Rossi, 1971) This combination of characteristics poses sufficient rivalry for the male. That she may also be a devoted and successful wife and mother can overwhelm him. The single, divorced, or widowed woman may similarly be meeting a number of family responsibilities well, but the absence of a husband makes her appear to have fewer conflicting demands with the job. If she apparently has fewer roles in which she exhibits success, she is perceived as less of a threat.

A second problem in the job market is well-documented also - salary discrimination. "Equal pay for equal work" may be the law of the land, but it is not the practice. In academic life in 1975-76, there was a $4900 differential in the salary paid across all ranks at the university level, in favor of men. (Chronicle of Higher Education, June 28,1976, p.8) In industry, the reports are similar, although jobs may be re-titled to evade anti-discrimination suits. Married women tend to receive lower salaries than unmarried women on the grounds that theirs is a supplementary, and by inference unnecessary, income. (Harris, 1970) This salary problem poses a negative challenge that is not easily resolved. It is an employer's market today with little latitude for individual bargaining, especially for married women who have little geographical mobility and more time constraints. Suing for equal pay can win the salary adjustment, but may lead to covert discrimination tactics by supervisors, non-acceptance from colleagues, and severance from the job or non-promotion in the future. (Note: Part-time employment opportunities with pro-rated fringe benefits are still rare. These positions,

sometimes more appropriate to the married woman's needs, present many of the same problems being discussed here.)

Generations of well-educated women have been plagued by a third challenge at work - sex-role stereotyping. "Can you type?" is the question first asked in industry. "You're too pretty to be a ..." is another frequent comment. The female employee is too often regarded initially as a sex object, and perhaps never perceived without sexual undertones. In a society with loosening moral values, married women are no longer exempt from these stereotyped expectations and inferences. One such inference is the notion that a successful woman has achieved her status through an exchange of sexual favors for promotions, salary raises, or other benefits. This viewpoint has truth as a base in some instances to be sure, and has been the basis of novels and movie plots, but is hardly accurate with respect to all women, married or not. The never-married woman, from her late 20's on, is often perceived as a "swinger" or a lesbian, again a sexual evaluation that has nothing to do with her competence at work. It is apparently difficult for men to dissassociate females from sex, to accept their serious commitment to a job, or to regard women as anything but dilettantes in the world of work. This unfortunate circumstance is cited throughout the growing women's literature in journals such as this one, Signs, Sex Roles, and Psychology of Women Quarterly.

A fourth problem occurs where the female is an authority figure. Although there are certainly individual differences in handling authority-subordinate relations, there are also stereotyped views of women as "bosses." The extreme in chauvinistic opinion is perhaps best represented by opposition to the election of a woman president. Great anxiety is expressed that her physiological and emotional cycles would influence her responses to national and international events with disastrous consequences. On the industrial or academic scene, the same generalization prevails although on a lesser scale of implications for the fate of humanity. A second stereotype presents the female manager or supervisor as hyper-masculinized, meaning that she has repressed her qualities of sensitivity and affective responsiveness in favor of a tough, hard-nosed, all-business approach to people. Some women, indeed, have developed such behaviors either to overcome the view of women as emotion-dominated or to "prove" their ability to function well in the male-dominated executive suite. Their female subordinates dislike such a cold relationship, and male subordinates resent the woman's authority and business-like personality, characterizing her as "too aggressive for a woman " (and therefore castrating in their view). If, by contrast, the female executive asks a secretary to take care of some personal chore, just as many a male executive does, she is perceived as less devoted to her job than her male counterpart. The soft-spoken, caring female authority figure is considered to be too gentle to be effective. These extremes present a "no-win" dilemma for the woman in an authority position.

Many women who never entered college or who dropped out before graduation are now re-entering the academic world as students. What are the problems they face? Some of the basic challenges that confront them

have been discussed in other publications and need not be repeated here. (cf, School Review, 1972) Two specific problems claim our attention in this paper. One is the obstacle course of being admitted as a student. There is sometimes the reaction that investing in the education of a mature woman is unwise because she has too few productive years remaining. This obstacle is being reduced by society itself as the movement for life-long learning and credit for life experience takes hold across the country. Career changes in the middle years are becoming more commonplace, among men as well as women. Furthermore, activists in the senior citizens' groups are demonstrating that they still have contributions to make to society after age sixty-five, extending productivity for more years than was true a decade ago.

Once admitted, the older woman may encounter two extremes of faculty reaction. Some faculty members welcome the mature point of view that the adult brings to the classroom. Others feel undermined because the mature woman asks too many penetrating questions or can present a logical counter-argument to the instructor's flat assertions. Also, she doesn't engage in the ego-flattery used by her younger sisters; from her, a compliment must be well-earned. It is also anticipated by some young instructors that anyone over thirty will be inflexible. Anxious about their status and success these women may be, but they are not inflexible. Unless the instructor is rigid himself (or herself), a few weeks of observation and interaction will modify the previous misconceptions. Of course, the woman herself will have to overcome her own anxieties about sitting in a classroom with students half her age, diffidence in the face of overbearing instructors, and doubts about her motivation for re-entering the cloistered halls. Not one of this last group of obstacles is insuperable.

In summary, the ways in which the woman perceives the challenges posed by her return to school or work determine whether or not she handles the opportunity successfully. She has more alternative paths to follow today than she did only a few years ago. She also has more groups and agencies supporting her right to choose among the options than did any earlier generation of women. She can face those who "dare" her with strength and dignity. She can see herself in the process of becoming an individual as she masters tasks, solves problems, demonstrates competence in several roles, and enjoys a new and variegated existence. With increasing self-confidence, she can look at the world and throw out a few challenges of her own. Is society, particularly the male segment, ready to accept the challenge she poses?

References

1. Chronicle of Higher Education, 1976 (June 28), 12 (16), p.8.
2. Harris, A. S. The second sex in academe. AAUP Bulletin, 1970, 56 (3).
3. Horner, M. S. Femininity and successful achievement: a basic inconsistency. In Bardwick, J.S., Douvan, E., Horner, M.B., and Gutmann, D. (Eds.), Feminine Personality and Conflict. Belmont, Calif.: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1970.
4. Rossi, A. Discrimination and demography restrict opportunities for academic women. In Stacey, J., Béreaud, S., and Daniels, J. (Eds.), And Jill came Tumbling After. New York: Dell Publishing, 1974.

5.School Review, 1972, 80 (2). (Special Issue: Women and Education)
6.Schwartz, L. L. Women and their achievement motivation. Pennsylvania
  Personnel and Guidance Journal, 1975, 11-16.