

You Cannot Set the Clock Back

The Women's Liberation Movement has invaded almost all the countries of the world but in a highly uneven proportion. The volume of material published about women's status and needs in the principal languages of humankind is really amazing. It covers developing as well as developed areas. In Algeria, Woman's Day, (the 8th of March), was celebrated for the second time in 1982 while in France it was celebrated only for the first time on that same date. In both countries, the women's movement seems to have had a simultaneous start. Though Simone de Beauvoir's «Le Deuxième Sexe», was published in the forties, feminist activity among French women assumed a serious role only 15 years ago. But while results are very slow to appear in undeveloped countries like Algeria, they are obtainable at a much faster rate in developed countries like France.

In an inquiry made by the journalist Sylviane Stein and published in "L'Express", 19 March 1982, French women have succeeded, within the last ten years, in obtaining the same right to work as men (1972), the right to abortion and to the use of contraceptives (1974), and the right to raise a suit against a rapist (1979). Also they enjoy the freedom of joining together marriage, maternity and work. Work for them is not a pastime or an outlet to the outside world but mainly a source of livelihood and a means of increasing the family income. Under the new socialist régime, additional gains may be obtained but women will not be satisfied with mere hopes and promises. They have moved from the stage of theorizing and arguing to that of the practical questions of every-day life. Their claims are based on figures and statistics. These claims revolve around the right to occupy leading positions, to have equal pay for equal work and an equal right to promotion. Andrée Michel, a sociologist at the National Center of Scientific Research, declares that women are underpaid, overworked and exploited. They perform 75% of housework activities and 34% of remunerated work, while men perform 66% of remunerated work and an insignificant share in housework.

In Lebanon, which may be taken as a specimen of Third World developing countries, women's problems are much more complicated when compared with those of the First World. First and foremost, there is the question of secularizing and unifying the laws of personal status which are still subordinated to the legislation of religious authorities. The confessional distribution of political and administrative functions is another obstacle in the way of women's involvement in politics.

Another difference between developed and developing countries is that the latter still have a class of privileged, idle women who are waited upon by maids, while, in developed countries, housemaids are a rarity. On the other hand, housemaids in Third World countries are more available to working women. Other work problems are about the same for women in both groups. They are all seeking the facilities that would alleviate their double burden and, for housewives, the right to social and old age securities.

This brief comparison will perhaps show that the struggle is more tough, more complex and of a longer span for Third World women who are still short of studies and statistics that could support their claims and convince their countries of the authenticity of their needs. It seems clear, however, that both groups are intent on continuing the struggle in spite of huge difficulties, for it is impossible to set the clock back. The achievements realized by women of the first group within the last 15 years serve as encouragement and spur the women of the second group to walk in their sisters' steps.