

DE History Standard 1a and 2a

The source below comes from an article titled “Are We Ready for Equality” by Esther Westervelt published in the November 1970 edition of the American Association of University Women. The article discusses the results of a survey of over 600 women about their attitudes on women’s status.

“In terms of their proportion to the total female population of fairly educated women, the housewives have to be considered more representative of American middle class women than either the women educators or career women. Therefore, their attitudes may tell us more about the future of American women. A large proportion feared that a mother’s employment could be psychologically damaging to children and believed that a woman must plan for a career interruption for seven to fifteen years if she intends to have children. A majority believed that men should have priority over women in employment and education because men have the major responsibility for the support of families...A majority also believed that women should not assume greater leadership in politics, business, industry, the professions, and labor unions...In brief, these women tended to resist accepting greater responsibility for the support of families and for political and economic leadership and saw maternity as woman’s most important role; they did, however, desire certain services that would facilitate the mother’s working outside the home.”

1. Why is it important to consider the date (context) of this source before analyzing its meaning?

2. Are you surprised by the opinions held by 1970s housewives? Why or why not?

3. What might be some of the services that facilitate a mother’s working outside of the home?

4. Do the opinions expressed by the women in the source represent change or continuity in ideas about women’s place in society? Support your answer with specific historical information.

Answer Cues:

1. Why is it important to consider the date (context) of this source before analyzing its meaning?

- Sources reflect the time they are written in so they must be considered in that context

2. Are you surprised by the opinions held by 1970s housewives? Why or why not?

- Responses will vary

3. What might be some of the services that facilitate a mother's working outside of the home?

- Daycare, before and after care, maternity leave, employment protections

4. Do the opinions expressed by the women in the source represent change or continuity in ideas about women's place in society? Support your answer with specific historical information.

- Continuity: Women have always been divided about the goals of the women's rights movement, groups of women revere the traditional role of women in society (cult of domesticity, women against the 19th amendment, 1950s cultural conformity)

Are We Ready for Equality?

Esther M. Westervelt

□ In the letter which accompanied its report to the President on Dec. 15, 1969, the Presidential Task Force on Women's Rights and Responsibilities stated: "Women do not seek special privileges. They do seek equal rights. They do wish to assume their full responsibilities." That this statement is true of many American women is beyond doubt. But that it is true of all American women is seriously open to question. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the reluctance of a number of educated women to increase or to markedly change the sphere of their responsibilities is a greater obstacle to full equality for women than male chauvinism.

Those of us engaged, in one capacity or another, in the counseling and guidance of adult women are aware that many women who seek to enhance their personal development through continued education and new or renewed vocational activity do so with a great deal of ambivalence and conflict. Other women, who are restless and confused because they find less than full satisfaction in domestic activities, withdraw from the search for more rewarding activities before it has fairly begun. Both these groups of women appear to desire the greater freedom which goes with wider spheres of action but to resist undertaking the concomitant responsibilities. Underlying their resistance seems to be an inability to redefine their roles in terms which fit human needs in a society organized like ours.

Liberal and Conservative Attitudes

As part of a larger study, the author recently surveyed the attitudes of some 600 women as to women's status. All of the items on the survey were drawn from recent statements, pro and con, regarding women's status. The highest possible "liberal" score on the instrument would have been that of an individual who believed that men and women should have entirely equal privileges, opportunities and responsibilities; that both sexes should have equal options to choose whatever type of activity they wish to undertake regardless of family and marital status; that women should bear equal responsibility for the financial support of families. The most "conservative" score would have been received by an individual who believed that men should be the dominant sex and should have greater privileges than women in all areas of public life because they must be expected to carry the primary responsibility for supporting wife and children.

Dr. Westervelt was director of the New York State Guidance Center for Women, a two-year state-supported pilot counseling and guidance service for adult women, and was formerly adjunct associate professor in the Department of Guidance, Teachers College, Columbia University. She is presently engaged in research on factors associated with married women's career patterns.

While no individual received either the most liberal or the most conservative possible score, there were marked differences among the respondents by groups. The most liberal group was of women educators carrying major responsibility for programs of continuing education for women in various parts of the United States. The most conservative was a group of fairly well-educated housewives (some of whom were employed outside the home) in a suburban county. A third group, composed of highly achieving career women, was notably more liberal than the housewives but not as liberal as the women educators, possibly because the average age of the career women group was higher and it contained more single women. The women educators were more than five times as liberal in their attitudes toward the status of women as the housewives, and the career women were more than four times as liberal as the housewives.

In terms of their proportion to the total female population of fairly well-educated women (that is, women who have some college education or a college degree), the housewives have to be considered more representative of American middle class women than either the women educators or the career women. Therefore, their attitudes may tell us something about the future of American women. A large proportion feared that a mother's employment could be psychologically damaging to children and believed that a woman must plan for a career interruption of from seven to fifteen years if she intends to have children. A majority believed that men should have priority over women in employment and education because men have the major responsibility for the support of families. Most believed that full responsibility for the support of children should fall upon the father. On the other hand, a majority felt that more day care services should be provided for mothers who needed or wanted to work and that there should be greater income tax deductions for child care for the working mother. A majority also believed that women should not assume greater leadership in politics, business, industry, the professions and labor unions. Most believed that involuntary population control would limit woman's capacity to perform her most important role.

In brief, these women tended to resist accepting greater responsibility for the support of families and for political and economic leadership and saw maternity as woman's most important role; they did, however, desire certain services which would facilitate a mother's working outside the home.

On Being Supported by Men

Equally interesting, however, was the fact that certain changes in the patterns of women's responsibilities tended to be rejected by all three groups of respondents (the women educators, the career women and the house-

AAUW JOURNAL/NOVEMBER 1970

