

The Changing Status of Women: Economic Realities

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Mary Potter Rowe is Special Assistant to the President and Chancellor for Women and Work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she is involved in a review of work structures and processes, teaching, research and writing. Along with her tasks as an "Institute ombudsperson," Ms. Rowe serves as a consultant to women's groups and institutions and agencies concerned with local and national problems of women and men and work.

Ms. Rowe, who received her B.A. from Swarthmore and her Ph.D. in economics from Columbia University, has directed programs for the Massachusetts Early Education Project and the Center for Educational Policy Research. In addition to her recent directorship of a Carnegie Corporation grant to the Radcliffe Institute, in which she designed a program to help women faculty members and students, Ms. Rowe has consulted with numerous private businesses on child care and equal employment opportunity, and has conducted field work with 170 Nigerian industrialists. In the late 50's, before becoming an economist for the Governor's Planning Board in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Ms. Rowe worked in Salzburg and Vienna integrating refugees into the local economy. She has published a multitude of articles on child care and mothers in paid employment.

Ms. Rowe's article is excerpted from the talk she gave at Wheaton on February 28. Hers was the third lecture in the 11-week Forum on Women.

The kind of economics I want to talk about this afternoon is a kind in which we are all expert—the economics of women's lives. When I talk about women in economics, most people think right away about paid jobs. But there is also a huge section of unpaid work in our economy. You know—the situation where I meet a former roommate of mine on the street 15 years after college, and I say, "Are you working?" And she says, "Well, no, I have five children, and I run the P.T.A. I do all my husband's business entertaining. We've moved 11 times. I run the Red Cross outfit in our town, but I'm not working. I'm just a housewife."

Let's consider a typical young woman who is now teenaged. I'll call her Margaret. If she's a statistically typical child, she will have been one of three children living in a two-generational home; that is, with just her brother, her sister and her parents. Her mother and father have been together for a long time; her mother was 20 and her father 21 when they married. If Margaret's mother is statistically typical, she will have moved from her parents' home at 20 into her married home, never having lived alone.

Margaret herself probably will marry, although a tenth of her friends will not. She's more likely to be 21 or 22 at marriage. She will have left home when she was 15, 16, 17, 18 or 19, and she will, thus, probably live alone, with friends or with a man for two to five years before she sets up any kind of permanent home. She has a one-third chance of divorcing and 93 chances out of 100 of living alone for five to 10 years at the end of her life. Thus our Margaret, as distinguished from her mother, may spend 5, 10, 15, 20 or 25 years living by herself, as her mother would not have done.



As Margaret, now 17 or 18, considers further education and a job, she's reckoning on a nine out of 10 chance of being in the paid labor force regularly for some period. Because of divorce, widowhood, recession and other calamities, Margaret has a one in two chance of being the chief wage earner for at least some significant period of time. If she has no children, she'll be in paid employment for 45 years; if she has one child, about 25 years; and if she has the statistically likely two children, she would expect to be in paid employment 22 years of her adult life. She knows that, until very recently at least, the wage gap between men and women has been widening at every educational level. One of the reasons for this is that women traditionally get less education than men. Another is that women drop out of the labor force to have children, and for other reasons. Two additional factors are discrimination against women in paid employment and women's lack of access to good jobs, either because of discrimination or because of lack of mobility: "My husband is teaching here, therefore I cannot go to Indiana for the job I'm being offered there . . ."

Margaret is determined, knowing these statistics, to get an education. Her sisters with a college degree will be paid, on the average, only as much as men with a junior high school education, so Margaret determines to go on as far as she can. If it does turn out that she has to be paid less than a man, she'd at least like it to be at a higher level. Whether or not she finds a job that she likes and her prospects for a good salary and advancement at that job are very much tied to the field she chooses and to

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