

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

*Perspectives on Family,
Work, and Education*

WOMEN IN CONTEXT: Development and Stresses

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THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE: PERSPECTIVES ON FAMILY, WORK, AND EDUCATION

Edited by Matina Horner, Carol C. Nadelson, and Malkah T. Notman

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*Perspectives on Family,
Work, and Education*

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PLENUM PRESS • NEW YORK AND LONDON

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

The Challenge of change.

(Women in context)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Women—United States—Congresses. 2. Family—United States—Congresses. 3. Women—Employment—United States—Congresses. 4. Education of women—United States—Congresses. 5. United States—Social conditions—Congresses. I. Horner, Matina. II. Nadelson, Carol C. III. Notman, Malkah T. IV. Series.

HQ1426.C454 1983

305.4'2'0973

83-8994

ISBN-13: 978-1-4613-3648-8

e-ISBN-13: 978-1-4613-3646-4

DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4613-3646-4

©1983 Plenum Press, New York

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1983

A Division of Plenum Publishing Corporation

233 Spring Street, New York, N.Y. 10013

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We dedicate this volume to
Jean Humphrey Block, Ph.D.,
whose untimely death in December 1981 deprived us of
an esteemed colleague and a dear friend.

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Preface

This book is a compilation and update of a group of provocative papers presented at the Radcliffe College invitational conference, "Perspectives on the Patterns of an Era: Family, Work, and Education." A scholarly event saluting Radcliffe's centenary, the conference examined a range of indicators of social change, particularly as they relate to women in America in the last two decades. The program was interdisciplinary, bringing together scholars from economics, history, psychology, sociology, and psychiatry.

Each conference participant was asked to explore, theoretically and empirically, the lessons of our social history and, as much as possible, to separate myth from reality with regard to recent changes in patterns of family life, work, and education. Particular emphasis was given to the examination of the rapid changes—or what have been assumed to be the rapid changes—of the last two decades. In addition, participants analyzed the perceived and actual costs and benefits associated with changing lifestyles, for women and men as individuals and for society as a whole. Finally, they considered the implications of their findings for the future and identified areas for further research.

In recent years, scholars and researchers have developed a broadened theoretical understanding of the social history of our nation. Many earlier assumptions have been challenged—perhaps none more than those assumptions about women's lives and women's participation in society. Certainly one goal of this book is the clarification of erroneous and outdated assumptions about men's and women's capacities and about the roles men and women can play in the family, the workplace, and elsewhere in society. Our more ambitious goal, however, is to stimulate the reader to consider in greater depth questions about the nature and effects of social change, and in this way to stimulate further research

efforts. In short, we hope this volume will serve as a catalyst for new ideas and as a facilitator of new learning.

The attention given by the chapters in this book to the topics of family, work, and education recognizes that these aspects of our society, each critical to the development of individual identity and self-esteem, continue to be highly interdependent. As always, any shift that occurs in the options and barriers present in any one of these areas greatly influences the nature and extent of opportunities that will be available in the others.

A number of variables have greatly influenced the roles that men and women have assumed within each of these spheres over the years. One cannot disregard these factors and their interaction and at the same time obtain an understanding of *what* has changed, what the underlying reasons for the changes have been, what consequences these changes have had, and what possibilities exist for the future. In any analysis of change, a range of political, economic, psychological, and social factors must be taken into consideration; and social change must be studied from a number of perspectives to gain a truer picture of its impact.

One theme emerges as dominant throughout the book: Change itself, especially when it is rapid, presents a society with new challenges and brings us face to face with fundamental issues that require serious reconsideration, often of our most cherished values and assumptions. Within a broad framework of shared reactions, individuals and institutions respond and adapt in unique ways to these challenges. When change proceeds slowly, both individuals and institutions have time to plan and to develop alternative ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling, as well as to find new systems of support and reinforcement for their present views of themselves and others. In times of rapid change, however, the need for immediate responses to entirely new situations often precludes the possibility of evolving satisfactory modes of adaptation. This often creates anxiety and generates conflict. Rapid change brings about the sudden loss of much of what is familiar and expected in our relationships and defined roles, often making it impossible for us to "grieve" over the loss of previously dependable sources of support.

At such times of transition, few guidelines and reference points seem consistently applicable. It is as though the generation gap assumes qualitatively different proportions. What was meaningful to previous generations, or even to one's own generation a decade ago, is no longer entirely relevant, not only because of individual development or age differences but because so much has changed. When there is little applicable antecedent history and an absence of a shared societal vision of reality, it is difficult to plan for change or even to assess its impact.

The new options and alternative lifestyles available to women, and

especially to educated women today, have had an exhilarating and positive effect on our society. Extending the horizon of women's expression and achievement has great benefits for all.

At the same time, we are well aware of a growing sense of alarm that the new choices open to women today will have a deleterious effect on the family as an institution and on individual family members as well. As evidence for this alarmist view, proponents point to an ever-growing list of "stress indicators": alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, suicide, family violence, marital problems, divorce. (Unfortunately, "stress" has become the catchall term used to describe problems and negative consequences associated with change. This ignores work showing the positive effects of stress for stimulating growth.) In response to the concerns expressed, intensified attention has also been directed at identifying possible new coping strategies and ways of facilitating adaptation: counseling, self-help centers, lifelong learning, day care, and support for altered roles for men within marriage and in the workplace are among the most frequently cited. These currents of thought and suggested remedies are reflected in various ways through the contributions of our authors.

Several chapters of this book deal primarily with demographic and historical facts, figures, and issues. In the past, life expectancy was low, disease was rampant, children often failed to survive to adulthood, and, even though fertility control was not possible, the world population was small and expanded slowly. Even at the beginning of this century, health care was generally poor in this country, and occupational risks were high. Here, as in all industrialized nations, population increase was considered a desirable goal. All this has changed: Life expectancy in the United States is now approaching 80 years. Serious and fatal diseases of the young are unusual; most children survive to adulthood, and fertility control is possible.

Historically, when economic resources are plentiful, social consciousness with regard to equal opportunity tends to be high, but when they are scarce, it tends to recede. Consider, for example, the events of the second quarter of the century, encompassing the Great Depression and the Second World War. This period had a tremendous impact on the professional aspirations and educational opportunities available to women. By 1930, women made up 45% of the professional and semi-professional workers in the United States. With the Depression, however, and then again following the Second World War, women—married women in particular—were discouraged from "taking jobs away from men." Their participation in graduate study similarly dwindled and the proportion of doctoral degrees awarded women fell. Only recently has it regained the level reached in the 1930s. In 1950 with the postwar surge

of demand for education, especially scientific training for men, the percentage of all degrees awarded to women, graduate and undergraduate, dropped precipitously.

At the same time the postwar era brought the baby boom, a unique, unanticipated, and wholly unprecedented population explosion that lasted 15 years and was followed immediately by 15 years of the steepest decline in the birthrate in America's history. The baby boom produced an unprecedented bulge in the American age structure which significantly altered American life, affecting the economy and workplace, the nature of competition, politics, family structure, and the expectations of the nation's people. Within a decade, the center of gravity of our population had shifted from the more traditional 35- to 40-year-olds to 17-year-olds. Those under 20 became the dominant group in society, representing about 40% of the population. American society as a whole began to assume the characteristics of a younger, more rebellious generation that stayed in school longer than any other, yet faced the chilling possibility that it might become the first downwardly mobile generation in our history.

The 1960s began as a decade of extraordinary optimism and self-confidence about the nation's capacity for social progress and it ended in tragedy, turbulence, and confusion. The 1970s continued to be a decade of social change so dramatic that it challenged fundamental habits of thought and behavior and greatly affected many of the expectations we had of one another, of our partners at home and at work, and of our cultural, educational, and other social institutions. This was a time when the search for oneself assumed such importance for so many that it also earned for the seventies the title "the Me decade." During this period the issues involved and the need for defining personal and societal limits became apparent. We are now led to ask: Where will the 1980s go? Few doubt it will be a "Decade of Hard Choices."

This extraordinary period of United States history presented a variety of new issues analyzed by the contributors to this volume, whose retrospective understanding helps illuminate our possible future direction.

As editors, we have considered the themes that emerge in the chapters of this book, and have become increasingly convinced that to understand the effects of change on individuals one must be sensitive to the wide variety of possible responses available to the challenges created. For some the challenges mobilize energy and increase motivation. For others they evoke primarily conflict and distress. For all individuals, on varying occasions, both responses are probably experienced.

From the recognition that change can have both these components and that it can be frustrating as well as fulfilling, we arrived at a number

of questions: On what basis can individuals, at a time of major social change, define and evaluate a sense of identity and self-esteem? How do individuals conceptualize and experience feelings of loss, isolation, and loneliness, which become particularly salient in the context of changing—often shrinking—networks of family relationships? How do men and women deal with the implicit tension between autonomy and commitment? How is this effort affected by the rapidly increasing array of options? How do individuals replace rejected or conflicted values and beliefs so as to retain self-esteem, commitment, meaning, and morality in their lives?

These questions about the challenge of change are but a few that we believe are addressed in the chapters that follow. We hope that our readers will have other questions and will be stimulated to seek answers both here and in their own work.

We would like to thank Mary Cox, Janet Gornick, and Hilary Evans for their sustained effort, enormous help and patience in the preparation of this book.

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