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## ROYAL COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 1985

Essentially, what the statement "A woman's place is in the home" means, is that women should remain in the home, attending to the needs of the household; she should not venture into the work force. In order to judge the validity or practicality of the statement, it is important to realize that the Commonwealth of Nations is comprised of very different cultures, and the practicality of the statement will differ from nation to nation.

In more industrialized countries, such as Canada, women have left the home to join the work force in greater numbers than ever before. Whereas not too many years ago, women were considered unintelligent life forms whose sole purpose was to stay in the home and do housework, attitudes have gradually changed. Today's woman is highly educated and eager to join the work force. Society encourages greater independence for women, urging them to make their presence felt in a predominantly male society. Feminists and women's liberationists have come to the forefront in recent years, and women have gained recognition in society.

The participation of women in the work force has become essential to the economies of developed Commonwealth nations. Many businesses and professions now depend upon women workers, as an increasing number of women take a prominent



place in law, medicine, politics, business, and finance. Women heads of state, such as Margaret Thatcher and Indira Ghandi, are accorded respect equal to their male counterparts. The suggestion that women confine themselves to the home would surely produce an angry outcry from feminists, sociologists, politicians, and the majority of the population of the industrialized Commonwealth nations. Women have earned their present position through proven competence. Surely, all areas of society would suffer without the valuable contributions of women workers. The confinement of women to the home would be a major setback to the industrialized societies of the Commonwealth, and threaten the well-being of countries such as Canada that depend upon their contribution to the work force.

Many feel, however, that women's leaving home, and perhaps family, to join the work force has created as many problems for society as it has solved. A large number of divorces are the result of the financial independence of women, both directly and indirectly. As women ventured out of the home to join the work force, an unmistakable new breed of woman emerged - an independent, professional woman, who could not reconcile the subservient status of women with new-found financial independence. Many of these women sought emotional independence to change this undesirable situation, resulting in divorce and children raised in single parent homes. An article in the Awake! magazine of January 8, 1985, entitled "Family communication - Why the breakdown?",

suggests that lack of communication is one of the major divisive forces within the family arrangement today. It further suggests that communication breakdown is largely due to both parents or adults working outside the home.

There are further distressing consequences of women moving out of the home and into the work force. Working parents have created a phenomenon unique to modern industrialized nations - the "Latchkey" child. These are children who regularly come home to an empty house and are left to fend for themselves, because their parents are both at work. While these children may be provided for physically, even to the point of being abundantly supplied with material possessions, the working parents may lack the time to provide the love and attention necessary for the child's emotional well-being. This deficiency of parental attention may be manifest in the increase of teenage suicides, delinquency, alcoholism, and drug abuse.

A psychologist meeting with concerned parents in Victoria, British Columbia, to discuss the problem of teenage suicide highlighted two "missing links" leading to this tragic occurrence. He pointed to poor communication and a feeling of loss of love on the part of the child as the contributing factors, both of which may have their origins in insufficient time spent with the young person to give him a feeling of worth. The same feelings may find a different



expression when children turn to delinquency, drug abuse or alcoholism.

In spite of many negative consequences to women leaving the home, it is not always possible for women to remain at home. Because of a sagging world economy and skyrocketing inflation rates, families are frequently struggling with financial burdens. High unemployment among males and greater availability of jobs for women have placed women in the role of provider in many families. These situations make the idea of a woman's place being in the home idealistic rather than practical in many more developed Commonwealth nations.

Women in less-developed Commonwealth nations are also part of the work force, yet they are not forced to be separated from their families. In these undeveloped nations "work" is more or less a family affair - everyone takes part. Women integrate work with family responsibilities, without neglecting the children. In countries such as Tanzania, where most are farmers or fishermen, women are valuable workers. They may help with the planting, the harvest, or the preparation of goods, which she then sells at the local market. Most importantly however, they achieve a happy balance between family commitments and work. Often, if the mother is out in the fields, the child may be right there with her, enabling her to attend to the needs of her child. She may take time off work to console the child, and thus

both the physical and emotional needs of the child are provided for.

There are few industrialized nations in the Commonwealth. Because of a radically different social structure, the people of many Commonwealth nations do not grant women the independence they have in Canada, nor do they choose to pursue it. The fact remains, however, that women have a great deal to offer society, and along with industrialization will come a whole new attitude towards women, and they will play an entirely different role in society. Nevertheless, the family arrangement should never be neglected because of this new-found freedom that women may gain.

While the factors that brought women of the industrialized nations into the work force cannot be reversed, steps could be taken to reduce the negative consequences of women's appearance in the work force. The education of today's women is very important. They must be taught that the home and family are important, as is the role of wife and mother. Women should never undermine the importance of their task, nor its significance, realizing that their contribution within the home is a great one. Women should be taught to realize their capabilities, and live up to them. Remaining in the home does not entail subjecting one's self to the stereotyped image of an unintelligent housewife. Rather, it includes the direction



of valuable contributions to the well-being of the family, not only by working, but by spending the necessary time with family members.

Even though the influence of women in the work force is essential, and to confine them to the home would be futile, perhaps women of developed Commonwealth nations can take a lesson from those of the undeveloped nations. The family arrangement must not be neglected, so women should try to attain an integration of family and work. The ultimate Capitalist ideal of individual self-sufficiency provides the best opportunity for this integration, but is, for the most part, idealistic rather than practical. Just as African women, perhaps, had the children alongside them as they worked, it would be ideal for the child to accompany a mother to work, rather than becoming a "Latch Key child". More businesses must pursue the course taken by several large corporations, providing office day-care centres for working mothers, in order for this integration to become practical or feasible. Such a situation would enable mothers to provide for children physically and emotionally, strengthening the family arrangement, and ultimately, the entire Commonwealth.

It now seems clear that "A woman's place is in the home" is an idealized policy that is no longer applicable in the industrialized societies of the Commonwealth. Rather than producing regression by limiting them to the home, it would be preferable to help women achieve a balance between family

commitments and secular activity. This would allow women to provide for their families in both a material and emotional sense. Women must come to recognize that taking care of a home and family is a worthwhile profession, one that will ultimately contribute to the well-being of the entire Commonwealth of Nations.



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