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## MAKALAH UTAMA

## SEEKING THE FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF MOTHERHOOD IN AMERICAN WOMEN DURING THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

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### Abstract

*In the turn of the nineteenth century, when immigrants and industrialization were headlines in most American daily papers, fundamental changes on American women roles as well as new opportunities were promoted. Some said that 'home was no longer the focus of American women' for more and more women were going to college to get them educated, "pink collars" jobs were more available for women, and suffrage was central to woman suffragists during that time. Liberty, social activity, and economic independence were encouraged by many activists, assuring that these will let women be a happier and fulfilled human being. Implementing historical study, this presentation explains why the issue on womanhood in America during the Progressive Era is worth attention.*

*Key words: womanhood, working-class housewives, feminism, progressive era.*

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## INTRODUCTION

"There is a word sweeter than mother, home, or heaven. That word is liberty."

- Matilda Joslyn Gage (in Matthews, 2003; 68).

Progressive Era initiated a new concept of motherhood to America that despite the fact that a woman is a wife who devoted her life to her husband and a mother who devoted her life to her family, she is too, a human a human being wanting for the right for herself. A brief conversation between two characters, Torvald Helmer and his wife Nora, in a drama entitled *A Doll's House* (1879) shall give us description on how the concept of womanhood was perceived during the era.

Helmer : 'Before all else, you are a wife and mother.'

Nora : 'That I no longer believe. I believe that before all else I am a human being.'  
(Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House* in Margolis, 1984).

The excerpt above gives us a clear hint that the concept of motherhood was starting to be questioned by American women of that time. It had been centuries since women hold domestic responsibilities and excluded from the 'world outside'.

Along with the new concept of womanhood being promoted, disputes and tensions were unavoidable especially when it concerns the topic of women, more specifically; working class women. Low wages and lengthy working hours made it impossible for them to live the new womanly world concept. When it comes to housewifery, it would make no difference whether a woman is a full time mother or a working mother. What mattered was that keeping the house warm, cooking and preparing for meals, doing the laundry, scrubbing the floor, washing the dishes, and some other long lists of housework were inevitable no matter how many hours she spent outside.

With an emphasis on the historical context, this paper will try to find out how the concept of motherhood was interpreted during the Progressive Era, together with difficulties encountered and ideas to better the situation.

### PROGRESSIVISM IN AMERICA DURING 1890's – 1920's

Anyone who is trying to understand the complex domestic issues of America after 1960's will turn first to an understanding of the Progressive Era. This paper will start by giving a brief description of the definition of the Progressive Era. Progressive Era is the era lasted from 1890 to 1924 in the United State. It embraced a wide range of social and economic programs, including women's suffrage, trust-busting, shorter work hours, elimination of child labor, adoption of social welfare programs, adoption of graduated income tax; conservation of natural resources, and adoption of popular voting measures of initiative, and referendum (Britannica Student Library; 2008). Some also said that this period belongs to Industrialization Era, but as I read several different sources, I consider the term 'progressive' will fit best here as a big umbrella under which smaller topics were covered, not isolated 'industry' and 'industrialization' out of discussion.

The Progressive Era presents us multi-faceted situation. On one hand, signs of progress were in every corner. On the other hand, discontent with the result had produced criticism and reform from those who were progressive. To call someone progressive during the Progressive years meant to label him/her a reformer, someone who determined to improve his/her society, revised its laws, purified its politics and enlivened its moral (Pease, 1962:3). Progressive Era was time when women and women organizations were shouting for their concerns as well as ambitions. It was not the time which brought women liberty or full social and political equality, but it was time when numbers of women began to find paths to power and fulfillment and was the time when some more powerful, highly competent, and independent women, known as 'new women' were born (Smith in Cott, 2000: 338).

### WOMEN (DIS)OBEDIENCE AND THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

In a general outline, there are several notable events happened in the United States during the Progressive Era. In the years following the Civil War, the United States became the destination for European immigrants. Europeans rejoiced in American freedom and in turn made great contributions to the labor force in the massive industrialization that

took place in the United States in the decades after 1865. United States was soon becoming a nation of growing cities, busy with manufacturing and commerce. As stated in Pease (1962: 4), beginning in the 1880's the proportion of city dwellers had raised from 20 to 45 per cent while the proportion of big city dwellers rose even faster.

During the early years of the 1900s growth and change brought problems as well as prosperity. America was in the middle of mechanization, the country witnessed the invention of automobile, airplane, wireless radio, and moving picture. Despite the fact that the nation enjoyed a great business boom, working and living conditions and wages were low in many cases. In political sphere, most political leaders believed that the right to vote should not be extended to all adults because not all of them could be counted upon to use their votes wisely and responsibly. This fact made fight for suffrage the peak goal for some women organizations. One of which, the most memorable and well known women organization was National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). By 19<sup>th</sup> century it had become clear to many that the women movement was entering a new phase broadened aims and growing public acceptance. Matthew (2003: 33) argued that the movement was endowed with a complex woman issues such as male dominance and women obedience. Gradually, women expanded their arguments to include participation in full political and social activities alongside with men. The long fight for suffrage ended in 1920 as the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote.

### AMERICAN WOMEN ON WOMENHOOD AND THEIR WOMANLY WORLD

This sub chapter will describe how womanly world was experienced by different women in America from diverse backgrounds. In order to avoid a drawn out elaboration, discussion in this paper will narrowed down into two topics; middle class and working class women. This categorization was following Pease's who stated in *The Progressive Years* (1962: 6) that '... urban American in 1900's was divided into two classes; the wealthy, the educated, the politically adept, on the one hand; the unschooled, the wage-enclaved, the politically impotent, on the other.' To begin with, below is the description of

American woman who played double role as laborer and at the same time, a housewife.

#### Working Class Housewives

Karen Manners Smith in her essay *New Paths for Power* (1994) explained that "in fact, a white American woman in 1980 was just likely to be a working class woman ... working in small, privately owned workshops where men and women sewed clothing together piece by piece, usually long hours at low wages (Smith in Cott, 2000: 359). In addition, Smith adds that in the same year, statistic showed 40% of all white women were in labor force; 60% of non white women and 70% of foreign born women.

In Eastern states, where most people still engaged in agriculture, 98% of married women did not work for pay outside of her home. Besides doing house keeping, cooking, and child care, these women performed a great deal of farm labor and may have sold eggs and butters to make a little cash (Smith in Cott, 2000: 359). Meanwhile, most Southern working class women sought jobs in cotton mills although they had to face the poor working condition and low wages. Often, these women were in danger of factory toxic and unheated building, paid no more than six dollar a week with ten to fourteen hours a day work and fined for lateness or unscheduled breaks.

So little time was allowed for meals that the mill women raced from the humid weaving room to their houses, gulped down their main meals of the day, and ran back to the mill in terror of being fined if they were late. In summer, poor sanitations led to dysentery. Tuberculosis was with them every season (Davis, 1981: 54).

Compared to women in Southern states, women in Western states lived a life full of opportunity and relative freedom. Homestead Acts of 1862 enabled the head of any family to claim and work 160 acres of western land. Women and widows took this chance to become landowners and hence, financially independent. But some who were not as lucky as these landowners needed to struggle in the middle of opportunities surrounded them. Some started to run small business such as hotel or restaurants but those who were less fortunate (which

unfortunately majorities in Western states) had limited choice than to take endless job with small earning as domestic servants. Making no difference with their factory labors counterparts, these maids (mostly African American or white women who could not find another job) were doing fourteen tiring hours doing domestic jobs a day.

'Mrs. Jones,' said I, 'how many hours a day does your maid stand upon her feet?'

'Why, I don't know,' she gasped, 'five or six I suppose.'

'At what time does she rise?'

'At six'

'And at what hours does she finish generally?'

'Oh, about eight, I think, generally.'

'That makes fourteen hours.'

'She can often sit down at her work.'

'At what work? Sweeping? Making beds? Cooking? Making dishes? I think the only time your maid sits is when she's at her meal and preparing vegetables.' (A conversation of between a feminist activist with an employer in Davis, 1981:96-97).

For working class families, decision to send woman to work depended on her husband's economic level. Working class women worked either to help husbands supporting the family or to increase the living standard of her family. But still, their other task remained: child care, meal preparation, household maintenance (Margolis, 1984: 110). As it was common for a working class woman to work a fourteen-hour stretch for three days and then had no work or working short time works for the rest of the week, her daily routine was organized around the task she performed. She worked longer or shorter hours depending on whether or not she was doing laundry on that day. Angela Davis (1981: 232) puts this situation in this way, '... working class sisters are carrying double burden of working for a living and servicing husbands and children.'

All in all, I can say that working class women were doing family-oriented jobs. Working was not interpreted as self fulfillment as women do nowadays. Even though they worked outside and earn her

own dollars, all were spent to support her family to provide her husband and children a better meal or finer clothes. In other words, family was the supreme significance in a women's life, more than her own.

#### Middle Class Housewives

Lives of the middle class women were different from their working class counterparts. Smith's elaboration in *No Small Courage* provides us a portrait of the life of women who belonged to that class.

Most white middle class women still believed in paramount importance of their function as mothers and home makers. Women were responsible for the health and the spiritual well being of their families and that families are ... the principal adornment of Christian civilization and the bedrock upon society rested (Smith in Cott, 2000: 360).

For most of the nineteenth century the social doctrine of separate world made women unable to escape from the belief that only men were strong enough to be the bread winner and therefore,

... home was a sanctuary form from the outside world, where wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters were safely distant from the cash economy and where world weary men might find peace and a renewed sense of honor in the love and sympathy of dispensed by the women of their families (Smith in Cott, 2000: 365).

From the above quotation we can see well that purity, piety and submissiveness were attributes of American women during 18<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most middle-class women in America were housewives who spent their days at home engaged in child care and housework, usually assisted by one or more servants (Smith in Cott, 2000: 360). As mothers of middle class families were commonly assisted in doing daily housework such as house cleaning or laundry, their spare time would mostly used for minding herself in home decorating and child care. Interior decorator was designing kitchen with mosaic murals and original painting for kitchen was the center of her life. They did not leave her house often though, except to shop, chauffeur her children, or attend social engagement with her husband (Frieda, 1963: 15). By the

1890's, middle-class women had learned to relive the isolation of long days at home with visiting and shopping expeditions and membership in women's club. As an illustration, Southern white women of middle and upper classes remained homebound, trapped by the well-mannered Southern lady hood and by which man assumed total control of women's lives in exchange for 'protection' of their supposed fragility and sexual purity.

As home organization and family hygiene were essential to women of middle class families, household and child care manuals were very popular among them. Magazines and newspaper provided spaces discussing tips and again, instruction manual escorting these women to perfectly do their housework. In fact, there was a kind of standard in making good house keeping. Maria Parloa in *The American Home* (In Handlin, 1979: 414) mentioned that there were at least ten things women should understand to make good house keeping; (1) Make the fires and air the dining room and hall (2) Prepare the breakfast and set the table (3) Put the bedroom to air while the family is at breakfast (4) Remove the dishes after the breakfast, sort the dishes and put soak all dishes and utensils that have food in them which would likely to stick (5) Arrange the dining room and sitting room well (6) Wash the dishes while cooking for supper and put the kitchen and pantry in order (7) Make the beds and put bed room and bath room in order (8) Trim the lamps (9) Dust the hall and stairs (10) Do special works of the day.

Despite the fact that more and more women pursued a better job and enjoy social activities, still the 1920 census reported that more than 75 percent of adult American women (white, non-white, and foreign born) function exclusively wives, mothers, and housekeepers in their own homes.

The discussions on working class and middle class women drawn me into assumption that Progressive Era mother serve mainly as mothers as well as wives who were expected to do housework on relatively high standard. Even for women whose financial circumstances required them to work for wages in factories or shops, domestic ideal had still inseparable from American women. As workers they were worst paid and least able to control their work conditions; as mothers they had to cope with problems of urban slum and caring for their

children with adequate resources (Matthews, 2003: 52). With the high standard required to take a family daycare and double responsibility to perform worker-mother tasks (for some women), it is no surprise that drudgery and lack of self appreciation were becoming burden for American women. These two topics will be the main subject on the next sub chapter.

#### MOTHERHOOD PROBLEM; A PROBLEM WITHOUT NAME

Prior to the progressive years, flood of manuals and periodical articles gave advice on the maternal role, exulted in the joys of motherhood and told women that good mothering was not only the key to their own and their children's happiness but to the nation's as well (Margolis, 1984: 28). Apparently, this feminine mystique survived up to mid 1800's continues to the early 1900's. In mid nineteenth century, one of the most discussed features in these manuals was child-rearing advice making parental responsibility shifted into maternal responsibility. This makes mother, and mother alone, was responsible to the moral and intellectual development of her children. Motherhood, says Margolis (1984:34), was a full time occupation demanding time-consuming unpaid labor. Guides to child care came increasingly under professional control from 1870s on. The result was the 'professionalization of motherhood'. Women were no longer fit for motherhood simply because of their maternal instinct, they were to study the role and be trained for it. Maxine L. Margolis understand this 'scientific motherhood' as '... a chance to provide women with plethora of further advice on how to keep busy in the ever narrowing domestic sphere (1984: 42).'

It was true that during industrialization era, American women witnessed the invention of the automobile, airplane, radio, and the moving picture. Several other inventions meant to improve the quality of living of many American families. More and more people using refrigerator replacing the old heavy ice box so that food did not spoil, gas were channeled through pipes making hot water available at any time for doing laundry and dish washing. Margolis (1984: 129) stated that historians of the late nineteenth century noted that this 'new appliances' produce new demands for American mothers, that is, to raise 'high quality' children and manage a 'high quality family'.

Ironically, the opportunity to improve housekeeping with new sources of energy and new appliances usually made housework more complex, multiplying some tasks while relieving the burdens of other. Hot running water meant washing and cleaning easier, but also suggested the need to take more baths or mops the floor more often. Washing machine made it possible to wash more frequently than before (Smith in Cott, 2000: 373).

Gadgets gave chance for women to enjoy some free time of their own. But for American women, home appliances could mean either of these choices; simplify housework or raise the housework standard. As Karren Smith explained, the new domestic technology did not actually liberate women from housework. Rather, it intensified the importance of the home and woman's role in it by suggesting that housework can be scientifically handled.

The new domestic technology was found mainly in the houses of upper-middle class family. Indoor plumbing, electricity and gas were still considered luxuries in the late nineteenth century that working class mothers had to do manual housework after a weary work. All the family centered life that American women lived produce a problem called 'the problem that has no name' by Betty Friedan. 'The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women (Friedan, 1963: 13). The question might be? What kind of problem was it actually? Friedan answer that it was a problem of dissatisfaction. As she make beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover materials, ate sandwich with her children, and lay beside her husband at night. The silent question was, 'is this all?'

Entering the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more and more women currently getting private psychiatric help in the United States, the married one were reported dissatisfied with their marriages. Some woman said, 'I just feel empty somehow ... incomplete' or 'I don't think that I actually exist' (Friedan, 1963: 18). Reading all the mother's confessions, I would personally assume that the problem would be the lack of self identity.



## BE A HAPPIER MOTHER; SOLUTION FOR MOTHERHOOD PROBLEMS

The womanhood problems was so far divided into two unequal parts (Mathew, 2003: 38), the majority were condemned to a soul-dreadening drudgery, either in home or in exploitative jobs available for women, while a minority lived as a petted 'butterflies' sheltered from all responsibility and important work. In his interview with a feminist, Hanrietta Rodman, George MacAdam's essays *An Interview with A Feminist* (in Sochen, 1971:47-60) provide us a vision on how American women should live the new concept of motherly world to be a happier and fulfilled women.

Rodman proposed solution to overcome the heavy burden of becoming the only one in her parental function who was responsible for child care. About child care, Rodman says that 'women must have babies for their own happiness. The real mothering is an intelligent mothering, as opposed to instinctive mothering. By real mothering did not mean washing baby's clothes, preparing its food, watching over its sleep, nursing its baby illness. All these things can be done by better experts.' Real mothering, for Rodman, means 'an intimate spiritual relation between mother and child which enables the mother to give the child all that she has gained from life, so that new generation is started in advance of the old.'

More time for fatherhood is also promoted by Rodman who said that every child has the right to a real father. By doing his paternal role, a husband who at the same time a father will take away the heavy burden of maternal responsibility as a sole individual who responsible for child moral and intellectual development. In addition, Rodman comments that 'enjoying of baby is one of the most important points of mother of the future. The babies love to be enjoyed. But mothers of the past had been so busy doing so many things that she has not had time to enjoy them. The point is not how long but how intense a mother does it' (MacAdam in Sochen, 1971: 54). Certainly,

On pursuit of self identity, Betty Friedan suggested that women should; First, '... she must say 'no' to the housewife image. This does not mean that she must divorce her husband, abandon her children, or give up home. It merely takes a new life plan on becoming a whole life

as woman (Friedan, 1963: 317).' The first step to be done, she adds, is to '... see housework for what it is. It is to see womanhood as it really is, brushing aside the veil of glorification imposed by motherhood.'

'... neither women nor men should waste precious hours of their lives on work that is neither stimulating, creative nor productive. In other words, housework need no longer be considered necessarily and unalterably private in character' (Davis, 1981: 223).

Housework is not a career. It is something that needs to be done as quickly and as effective as possible. Once a woman stops regarding washing, ironing, cleaning, etc. as everything in her life, she can start to say 'no' to those mass daydreams of women's magazine, 'no' to manipulators to anything that might run her life.' By doing so, for Friedan (1963: 318), means that women can start simplify housework. For example, instead of cooking dozens of different kind of food, woman can cook several creative food combinations. Consequently, American mothers would have more free time to do activities of their own. Activities that would enable them to feel complete for being productive or useful to the community and others.

If a job is to be the way out of the trap for a woman, it must be a job that she can take seriously as part of a life plan, work in which she can grow as part of the society. But such work is not necessarily a job. Women can start art centers or day camps. Even if these works were not considered a job, it was often so important to the various communities that professionals are now being paid for it (Friedan, 1963: 320).

Jane Adam's Hull House (1889) was an example of progress movements that middle class women would like to work on. Hull House was a place that provided an exciting intellectual life, a place to discuss social and philosophical issues, and an experimental station where efforts to bridge the gaps between classes were not only talked about, but were put into practice (Smith in Cott, 2000: 390). The Hull House community offered an array of services from English classes to various kinds of adult education. It is a facilitator and educators for communities

toward active reform efforts. The women in Hull House who worked for the growing number of reform organizations and social agencies, were carving out a new careers for themselves as professional social workers, investigators and reformers (Mathew, 2003: 53).

All the suggested solutions sound reasonable for middle class women (except in the housework solution part). But for working class women, the very first problem to overcome dealt with their financial difficulties and condition of their jobs. In response for this situation, upper- and middle class women began to take on the role of protector of working class mothers and girls (Matthew, 2003: 57). Feminist ideas on the new motherhood slowly transform the traditional mothering into social and professional mothering. Women's involvement in public world was increasing and gave women a claim on public power. One influential upper-middle class organization was National Consumers' League (1898). Outraged at the long hours and terrible working conditions, this league forced factory and store owner to improve working conditions by bringing to bear moral power of women as citizen.

A legislated reduction in hours was proposed in order to preserve the health of the mothers and potential mother of future citizens, prohibitions on night work for women were wide spread. But this means that the working class women would work in less hours that they would paid less. Women reformers realized this and attempted to lobby for minimum-wage laws for women known as 'family wage'. This 'family wage' idea worked against the women wage earner, since the assumption that a normal woman was part of a family, as either wife or daughter, in which she would be supported by 'family wage' earned by breadwinner father or husband.

#### CONCLUSION

To sum up, American mothers had been trapped in the feminine mystique of purity in motherhood and womanhood making them feeling empty inside for the drudgery and loneliness was the atmosphere of American homes. Problems need to be solved. These unhappy housewives must live a new concept of motherhood to become fulfilled. Women activist promoted a new point of view in translating motherhood

concept. They said that women must no longer see housework; sweeping, mopping, child caring, ironing, etc. as far more important than doing creative and productive activities that will enliven them. Middle class housewives started to stand against 'the new form of slavery' in factories which made women working fourteen straight hours. It was hoped that by contributing some important thing to society and others, American women will be able to live a qualified life and consequently, be a happier mother and fulfilled human being.

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