

## Women and Public Work.

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THE simple fact is that the nervous system, which dominates the physical condition, of women, is in essential particulars different from that of men. It is idle to contend that as it appears to be similarly constituted under the microscope, it is in any way identical. Their special nervous organization, moreover, implies special complexity; and it is an aphorism that the more delicate a machine is, the more easily can its mechanism become deranged. Women, consequently, enter public life considerably handicapped; because, in this country, as in every other, public work involves more friction, more contest, more rough and tumble controversy than home life ever induces. And it is just this friction which must be regarded as possessing the most detrimental effect upon the nervous system of all public workers, and as, being, in a special degree, harmful to the nervous system of women. Men, as a general rule, from their physical constitution, and still more from their school education, become, so to speak, case-hardened to opposition, whether this be based on jealousy or on principle. And the more philosophical amongst them come to accept depreciation and abuse not only as a necessary part of their work, but even as a conclusive proof of the success which they have achieved. But it is rarely, if ever, that such equanimity is found amongst women.

They feel, and feel deeply, the rubs and jars of the political machine; and the result is a more or less severe disturbance of their nervous system. This might be admitted as probable in theory. The thoughtful might perchance have predicted, from a knowledge of the feminine organization, that such a result would follow the descent of highly educated and refined gentlewomen into the arena where the most reckless, and often the most unscrupulous, competitor often proves to be the most successful.

But the movement has now been in progress sufficiently long for practical results to be shown, and for theories to be tested. And those who have had much experience of women, who have been engaged in public work of any sort, must have recognised certain definite facts concerning them. Sooner or later, the nervous system of such women exhibits evidence of

the conflict. Many, indeed, continue for a longer or shorter period to carry on their work, without any outward manifestation of the injuries they are sustaining. Some are placed in pleasanter positions, and less subject to active opposition; some have greater assistance afforded to them than others, in their work; some acquire a happy philosophy, and make the evil of each day sufficient to its time. But the great majority sooner or later show evidences of exhausted nervous energy which cannot be mistaken. And so the question arises whether the good to the State accomplished by such women so greatly outweighs the harm to the individual, that women should be encouraged to engage in, and persevere with, public duties. Unfortunately, hitherto the matter has been too much regarded solely from the point of view of a sex question, and the fate of the individual has perhaps been lost sight of, in the assertion of the justice of granting to both sexes equality of opportunity.

It may be, however, that the ill results so far exhibited, have been, to some extent, due to the fact that the women so affected, have been pioneers, and have therefore suffered hardships which all those who first explore untrodden ground naturally experience. There is no doubt that some allowance must be made for this, and that their successors may find the work more easy and better defined; while their help will be more cordially welcomed, and the feeling of chivalry aroused by the pioneers' work will make it, perhaps, easier for other women to carry out the same duties, in time to come. But, under any conditions, however favourable, it may be regarded as certain that women who engage in public work must possess special qualities of body, as well as of mind, if they are to fulfil their task without the most serious detriment to their own health—leaving altogether on one side the question of the value of their work to the commonwealth.

It should, therefore, be impressed upon them that, in order to attain success in their work, a strong and healthy body is essential. In fact, athletic exercises which are the best corrective to brain work, should be made a definite part of the life's work of a woman engaged in public duties. Riding, golfing, and bicycling are within the reach of most, if not all, of such women; and they would find that nothing so steadies the nervous system, and would therefore so facilitate the performance of their duties, as such regular outdoor exercises. The matter may seem a small one, but if women are to do

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