

Women and Public Work.

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The present moment seems especially opportune to draw attention to a matter which is becoming of grave importance, but which, so far, has received but very scanty consideration. For some years past, women in various ranks of society have taken a more prominent part in public affairs than they have ever done before. This fact has been very variously explained, and there are undoubtedly many who regard it merely as an evanescent effervescence of energy on the part of a few active-minded women. Those who have watched the movement carefully, however, are aware that it is only part of a great uprising which has been exhibited amongst women for the last quarter of a century; that it signifies a desire for a wider and larger sphere of work and usefulness on the part of some who would, in former generations, have wasted their lives in frivolous or inane pursuits. In fact, the movement is probably the outcome of the higher education of women of the upper and middle classes which has, within the last few years, achieved academic triumphs at Oxford and Cambridge which have compelled the admiration of the most pessimistic critics. If this be so, the movement is based on evolutionary laws, and must be expected to increase rather than diminish as time goes on; so that the broadening influence of extended education will inevitably lead women to undertake new and wider fields of work than those in which they have hitherto engaged. Viewed from this standpoint, it might be argued incidentally, that opposition to such progress on the part of women must be as futile as the efforts of Mrs. Partington to keep back the Atlantic with her domestic broom; and that the waves of progress must advance irresistibly even if they seem to recoil now and then in order to gather increased force. In this connection, recent events in Parliament, for example, become of deeper interest to the theorist, as tending to show that the under-current is gaining unexpected strength. As women, only ten years ago, were excluded from County Councils, it represents a marked advance in their public influence that the House of Commons should now consider them eligible to act as Councillors and Aldermen of the new municipalities. The trend of public opinion is undoubtedly increasing in favour of giving women

the same civic rights as those accorded to men; while the demand for the suffrage must be accepted as evidence of a deeper feeling of national duty and responsibility on the part of women of the present day than were experienced, or at least evinced, by their predecessors.

It being assumed, then, if only for the sake of argument, that women will, in future, to an increasing extent engage in public work, two questions arise which are of very considerable importance, both to the nation and to those women themselves. Firstly, what is, and will be, the influence of women on public work? Secondly, what are, and will be, the effects of public work upon women?

It will probably be admitted that women have been in all ages, better fitted than men for the management of the household. Their capacity for dealing with matters relating to women and children and to the domestic details of institutions must be also greater than that possessed by men. When it is realised how largely the management of the Poor Law, and of public Institutions, is concerned with such matters, the only reason for surprise is that the assistance of women in the control of such Institutions has not been eagerly sought and welcomed, rather than opposed. The work that women have accomplished as Guardians of the Poor, on School Boards, and on Hospital Committees, has proved beyond all dispute, their powers of organization, and the incalculable value of their practical experience and aid.

This is so far acknowledged that it is difficult to understand the reasoning which seeks to limit the usefulness of women's work in public affairs to those fields which have already been successfully occupied by them. Judging by analogy, one would be rather inclined to concede that women's work might be equally valuable in public departments in which it has not hitherto been utilised.

There is no question that all women will not, and can not, be equally successful in public work. Some will succeed and others fail, just as men will do under similar circumstances. But on broad grounds, the usefulness of women in public work which they individually understand, and are prepared to devote their energies and abilities to, must be regarded as definitely proved by practical experience during the past twenty years. So it is a legitimate inference that if more women in future undertake such work, their influence must be for

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