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The Issues of Today with
Regard to Women's Concerns

by Liselotte N o l d

By Choosing the subject of these common days we did not put ourselves an easy task. The subject in itself is complex enough. The point is to conceive the burning topical questions of our time, and in this connection especially women's concerns as a challenge of women's responsibility. I can only make the attempt of raising these questions, and I hope that enough points of discussion and fixing of tasks will result from them.

- I. On considering with this subject women's grouping and organisations within the Church or Christian Women's organisations respectively - we are principally confronted with the questions of the place and the responsibility of women within the Church as part of the whole laity. The posed question is not less complicated by the fact that the liaison group has various connections - first combined with its own development and also by its responsibility towards the Joint Working Group. Considering the work of WCC we have to keep in mind especially the study of "Conscientious Living"; the fact that, in the future, the questions of education will have to play a greater part in the Division of Ecumenical Action and also that the Department of Cooperation is part of this division. In my opinion our questions are also related to the study "Humanum".

At the same time the answers to the circular of October 1969 will show how manifold is the network on an international, regional and local base within which the questions must be seen. And this network which after all is the base of our work does not simplify the reflections by its variety.

By sending the thesises to Geneva I tried as a preliminary consideration of our subject to indicate the following points:

All attempts to achieve a greater unity and community are accompanied by two reflections. First by the question: Is man actually able to create unity or is it his task to put into practice the community already endowed by God? If this is the case, does it not mean that much more community ought to be risked and realized or that community ought to be anticipated despite existing differences? I want to point out emphatically that one of the tasks of our group could be to consider where we can reasonably and constructively lessen the differences or even level them to help that the community endowed by God in Jesus Christ may come true. This would, however, mean that we are constantly aware that on the one hand we must not eliminate certain distinctions but that on the other hand the differences are also entangled with guilt, sin, and arbitrariness. A sober consideration of distinctions

would show that after all the community is uncontested and that by activating it we would become richer and more truthful and could take over our duty in the present world with more energy and constructive ideas. This does not mean that it would not represent a task to take the differences in dogma, in adoration, in ways of faith and life seriously, to be interested in them and to discuss them constructively.

In this connection we - as women's groups - are also indirectly asked for cooperation, for community between men and women, in the family, in the world, in church, in society. It seems to me that also in this connection we have arrived at a point which necessitates the common work and the common thinking of men and women in a way much more systematical and at the same time more natural than it has hitherto been realized. With this the question is put for a justification of a Women's Liaison Group.

By these remarks I only wanted to point out that both spheres, that of cooperation and community of churches and that of cooperation between men and women, imply various tasks, tasks which are dealing with conscious and unconscious ideals with the problem of daring new communities, to find modes of action, to reduce prejudices. This implies the inevitable task of elucidation, of creative imagination of confidence, of love, of reflection, and of action. Whenever the subject of "Community" is being discussed, there is an imminent danger of clinging to the problems of differences, to the attempt of making one diagnosis after the other, to lay bare one allergy and recklessness after the other. There is an imminent danger of clinging to oneself, because one is familiar with this situation. One avoids the risk that implies any common action and any further step. That, nevertheless, we must and will take a step forward, is indicated in our subject.

II. The subject "The Issues of Today with Regard to Women's Concerns" comprises the following key-words:

1. "Today" - in all its meanings.

May I remind that it is characteristic for the world of today that it is a world of constant transformations. Neither in the Church, nor within Christianity, nor the tasks arising in the frame of family and society, it has hitherto been realized that we are living in a world of constant transformation. After all we have not yet had the courage of really confronting ourselves with change, of asking ourselves what must, in any case, be conserved and what can be abandoned in the course of transformation?

Another point is that of the so-called "One" world. The interdependence has much increased, we have approached one another. These characteristics are causing possibilities and burdens not having existed as yet.

The subject of "Emancipation", seemingly dealt with, is becoming topical again. The reasons why this subject was considered as settled are very contrary: One speaks of

an unfinished or failed emancipation which is not worth while observing, or one declares emancipation as performed (equal wages for equal work, possibilities of education, and so on). The question for the place, the status of the woman, for the common forms of living within the family and for the integrations of the family in the society rises anew by the experience that family life under the form of a nucleus family is not easily practicable, that tasks having been uncontested as parent's tasks, cannot, even with a maximum of goodwill be achieved by one man and one woman only, that is to say by such a small and at the same time isolated number of persons. Symptoms for this are the problems of life in family-groups or in a group-marriage, symptoms we should not do away with too easily. The present confrontation between the traditions of the northern with those of the southern world raises the question whether by ideology, by ethics of a greater family, of the clan, something could be done towards the solution of the problem of the nucleus family. It is to be asked whether in the future the form of the nucleus family should simply be taken up by the countries of the southern world, in the same way as already many things have been conveyed much too unconsiderately. It could be a task of women's organisations and of women as a whole, to discover and fix the questions arising by this confrontation: For instance the question of the equilibrium between personal life, development of personality, individuality and common life, development of a person within and for a common life, social identity. In dealing with these questions the cultural and historical backgrounds on either side ought to be brought into focus as differentiatedly as possible, and from there enter into discussion.

I should like to illustrate my idea by an example from the western world: In Germany the image of the family arose fundamentally from a middle-class (bourgeois) society, not having existed for a very long time and - according to the opinion of modern sociologists - being characterized by having servants. Part of the demands of this ideal is still being passed over without reflection to the nucleus family of our days. This passing over affects the wife and mother extremely, e.g. in the way that she is almost exclusively occupied with educational duties.

These problems indicated do not only mean: what can the family achieve or not achieve, but they mean at the same time: which kind of tasks, ideology, ethics, image of family life would correspond with our modern reality and therefore be practicable and realizable? There is always at the same time the question for the parts of husband and wife, for identity, for the relations between men and women within and outside the family, for openness in marriage and family, openness towards society and vice versa. If this openness existed, everything imaginable would be activated for instance in order to find professional possibilities for married women to enable mothers with little children to maintain professional contacts, to create the possibility of continued education for women with short professional, but good life experience, thus enabling them to make good

for both etc. Cities and multi-storey buildings would be otherwise constructed than they are presently built, namely supporting community instead of isolation, enlarging the room to move and thus enabling human beings to escape over adaptation to their surrounding and to be really themselves. By regarding these points, a distribution of tasks corresponding to our modern reality and our sense of life would be possible between society and family, between man and woman, between married and unmarried, and between the generations.

Undoubtedly the success of engaging men in these problems has hitherto only been limited. We may ask whose fault it is:

1. of the man who might - consciously or unconsciously - be inclined to cling to his paternal part;
2. of the woman who has gained her new identity only as far as she knows what she wants to defend herself against, where changes ought to take place.

But after all, the old image having its provenance from former marriage and family and not being able for instance to give an image for the non-married is still in force; women are inclined to perceive their situation as a destiny rather than as a part consciously shaped. The problem has partly arisen by the fact that up till now the question of sexuality has not been considered. This may be a heritage of feminist movement. In these days I read in a habilitation treatise about a certain women's organisation that sexuality was there only cited in connection with prostitution, and that religions and moral renewal of life was considered as one of the main tasks. But otherwise the ideal was, even for the women pleading for emancipation, the motherly task, namely again the conveying of an ideal into fields where "motherly" in its original sense is not realizable at all. If, in any case, one wanted to outline women's tasks by the term of "motherly" one ought to get a new sense of it. The resuming question is this:
Is there not an urgent need to deal consequently with these problems?

- a) By studies in connection with global studies, for instance within the WCC studies on "Conscientious Living" and "Humanum"?

This could be done by conferring different tasks on certain groups and that in the northern and southern world likewise, in order to get a spectrum as large as possible. In any case it seems to me out of question that the Liaison Group itself takes over this task. The Group's assignment would be coordination, also in the sense of inviting groups to inform themselves about existing material etc.

- b) Women's organisations and groups could, by choosing the right subjects for their seminaries and study groups, encourage people for today's life and also for new forms of living and point out that to exist today is always a painful process, and that it is therefore normal to suffer pains in the process of life today.

In the last effect such a forming of view would also mean relief, being able to convey the good conscience of living in the "today" of finding the respective identity.

III. Issues: "Education".

In this forum I need not point out why the subjects: education, formation, adult education and so on, nowadays play such an important part. It has, in the meantime become common knowledge, that the world of today requires, both a differentiated and individually formed school education and a continued education throughout life.

In connection with the points hitherto dealt with, education seems to be a key-word of special importance, because it will be entirely impossible for women to liberate themselves from the ideals of the past, unless they have an adequate possibility of education. An examination of elementary reading books at German schools showed that almost all the images conveyed through these books date from rural society, that in a technical society women and mothers cannot in the least do justice to these images. The educational power of women - especially of women not practising a profession - is still relatively small. This is a problem with respect to educational tasks, but even more with respect to women's social responsibility. The participation in elections, in political work and so on shows again how strong is still the effect of an ideal, conferring to the woman the "interior", the home, and to the man the "exterior", the world. It is evident that the woman taking no interest in politics but having the right of voting can influence the result of elections and thus can have a dangerous effect. Of even more importance is this responsibility of the woman for the world outside of her personal sphere, with respect to the world's growing together to one world as a whole. In this connection questions relating to political economics and to politics are arising in an eminent extent, questions which must, in any case, be dealt with.

Recent examinations have shown that the conception hitherto existing in democratic States, that the chance of equal education for all the young citizens of their country means an equal chance in life, is not realistic. It has been stated that fundamentally speaking, the forming of language of the individual takes place in his first year of life, and that his vocabulary is formed within the first four or five years. By this fact the possibility of conceiving the world and of expressing himself, and with that the chance of developing his personality and his professional success is determined by the first years in his parent's home. The question of the "barrier of language" is a problem which one has set out to examine. But it would be extremely important for certain women's organisations to deal with this problem because it plays a very important part, both with respect to each country and with respect to the question of creating educational possibilities in the southern world.

As to the question of adult education in every part of the world we should consider this:

Information only cannot help man if, during his education, he does not learn how to deal with himself and with others, to cope with aggressions, and to practise common life. That is why the forms in which adult education is achieved ought to be examined and influenced, so that social and emotional education are sufficiently taken into consideration.

IV. If you asked me where I see the task of the Liaison Group and with that the task of the women's group directly or indirectly connected with it, I could answer your question very easily. What matters is to profit by the existing great and smaller organisations as long as they will last, in order to initiate the necessary forming of opinion, the necessary changement of consciousness, which are the condition for the solving of world problems. By our groups and organisations we should have the opportunity of practising part of the forming of opinions as it is not so easily possible otherwise. We must be aware that the fact that many of these women live within families gives the possibility of multiplying. In any case racism is a problem especially concerning women and families; it implies the question whether one individual can deal with another on the base of partnership or whether, from time to time, he feels the want of suppressing the other. It would be the parents' task to live in good and unbiased relation to an entirely different human being, to familiarize the child with the other being and to let him discover the possibilities of mutual enrichment. In my opinion the women cannot dispense themselves from an exact dealing with racial problems if they want to exercise a political influence, to work as a Christian, and to facilitate the education of the following generation.

In my opinion the women's organisations would receive a large spectrum of offers, whereby there always ought to exist three main points:

1. study, that is to say the necessary elaboration of material, in order to make possible a changement of consciousness and the forming of opinions,
2. to give an initiative for pilot projects,
3. a reflection how the different elaborations could become conveyable and - through ecumenical relations comparable.

In these connections important contributions to these subjects:

"Liberation",
"Discrimination" and
"Interdependence"

would result. At the same time the groups would be able to learn how great is the mutual dependence between action and reflection, between reflection and action, and that only a steadily renewed reflection can effectuate effective control on action and vice versa.

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