

Issued by **THE SIX POINT GROUP,**
92, Victoria Street, S.W. 1.

The Unmarried Mother.

By MRS. H. A. L. FISHER.

(Reprinted from "Time & Tide" of January 21, 1921.)

The question is old, and should be familiar. But, for various reasons, it is one about which there is certainly a good deal of sheer ignorance, and still more, perhaps, a good deal of very confused thinking. Our laws, and to a considerable extent, our administration and our thought, or rather our sentiments, have been based on the plan of laying practically all the responsibility, the burden, and the expense upon that one of the two parents who, in any case, must bear the brunt physically. We have, indeed, made it possible for her to obtain some financial support from the father of her child, but while it is possible, it is anything but easy, and those who are familiar with the workings of the Affiliation Laws feel that they are apt to fail in the cases where their help is most needed. Moreover, the amount payable by the father is limited to 10s. weekly (maximum not minimum) and may thus bear no sort of relation to the needs of the child and its mother, or to the financial position of the father. Not to put too fine a point upon it, the laws, having been evolved entirely by men, are inevitably a little one-sided. Men naturally see the problem mainly from their own point of view, and their point of view is, of course, important, but no problem which deals with the relations of man and woman will ever be solved by the unaided efforts of man. Women feel very strongly upon this question, as is shewn by the fact that almost every important body of organised women has passed resolutions in favour of amending the present laws.

Illegitimate children owe their existence, like other children, to both their parents, not to one only, and both their parents must share the responsibility for their upbringing. The plan of leaving practically the whole charge of the illegitimate child upon the mother has not succeeded in checking illegitimacy. The number of illegitimate births remained approximately stationary for a

346.
017
FIS

Pamphlet

346-017 FIS

considerable number of years (during which the number of legitimate births was diminishing) and has lately increased. Deterrence, as applied to the mother, and the absence of responsibility, as applied to the father, has not worked well. It has necessarily led to an amount of suffering among the innocent victims of their parents' want of control which is little short of appalling. The death-rate among illegitimate children is at least double that of the legitimate; when all allowances are made it is probably considerably more than double. There are a good many fairly obvious reasons for this, but the outstanding and, surely the most obvious, is that no ordinary human mother is likely to make a very great success of the business of bearing, nursing, and rearing a child if she is obliged at the same time, and all the time, to earn its living and her own, and, if also the fact that her child exists, or is going to exist, makes it unusually difficult for her to obtain any employment, let alone well paid employment. That is, however, the task which usually falls upon the unmarried mother, and we can scarcely wonder at the death-rate, and the still heavier damage rate of illegitimate children, when we reflect a little upon what that task means.

From two separate directions, then, we arrive at the need for making an adequate share of the responsibility for the child rest upon its father. In the first place, many experienced people hold strongly the view that the irresponsibility of men is one of the main causes of the trouble. No one will deny that girls are irresponsible and foolish, but, in any case, they, if they become mothers, must undergo suffering and trouble of a very real and considerable nature, and nothing that we can do can remove most of that. No one can say exactly who are the fathers of illegitimate children, but there seems a good deal of evidence to suggest that many of them are quite young, mere lads, more or less certain that whatever happens they will not suffer. The most important thing of all is, of course, an improved standard of sexual morality among girls and lads alike, a livelier conscience as to the responsibilities of parenthood. But many who have had good reason to be heard believe that the man's knowledge that unless the woman applies for, and succeeds in getting an Affiliation Order, he need bear no share of the burden of his child does tend to increase irresponsibility and laxness among young men.

The lads are not the only unmarried fathers. It seems to be the experience of all who are connected with this work, that many unmarried mothers have been more or less preyed upon by men quite old enough to know better,

men in some cases with wives of their own, men of sufficient knowledge to guard themselves against any risks. The fact that the law definitely placed some part of the cost of the child's upbringing upon its father, and the presence of some one whose business it was to see that he did not escape that part would, undoubtedly, act as a deterrent to this group of men. In the absence of any exact statistics as to illegitimacy, it is not possible to say what proportion would be affected, but that some young women would be protected, and that fewer illegitimate children would be born, seems highly probable.

Thus, then, for these two reasons, there has come to be a very wide measure of agreement upon the urgent need for placing the responsibility for the maintenance of the illegitimate child upon both parents. In the first place, it is believed that an increase of the father's responsibility would do something, perhaps much, to diminish illegitimate births; in the second, it is felt to be the only way in which we can make it possible for the children born out of wedlock to have anything like a chance of growing up. Nothing can make their position equal to that of the legitimate child of the same walk in life. Let us at least give them a chance of being maintained, as are their more fortunate fellows, by their fathers, that their mothers may feed them and tend them. How many of the horrors of baby farming are due to the fact that the mother must leave her child in order to maintain it, and that the unmarried mother and her helpless child are peculiarly the prey of the unscrupulous?

The necessary legislation is not very difficult, for the excellent reason that other countries have acted as pioneers in this field and that, therefore, we have a good deal of experience to guide us. There is now a considerable body of legislation, both in the newer countries and in Scandinavia, and, as far as we can yet tell, the results are likely to be good. The essential is that there should be some person or body whose business it is to see that the mother of an illegitimate child receives an adequate sum for its maintenance from its father. This is where that alarming being, the Collecting Officer, comes in. If he, or perhaps she, were a person of skill and experience, it is reasonable to suppose that only in exceptional cases would difficulties arise. Men are terrified about blackmail, but the unscrupulous woman can practise her nefarious arts under the present Affiliation Laws, and no responsible person suggests that the unconfirmed statement of an unmarried mother is to fasten a life-long burden round any man's neck. The process of obtaining an order, where an

3800156943

amicable arrangement had not already been made, would be the same as at present, and public opinion is hardly such that man need feel unduly anxious. For some time to come probably most magistrates, for instance, will be men. The change will be, or should be, that it will be regarded as normal, not abnormal, for the father of an illegitimate child to support it, just as it would have seemed normal if that child had been legitimate.

The matter cannot rest as it is. People feel strongly about questions which affect children, and the amount of unnecessary suffering, death and disablement endured by these unhappy children does not bear contemplation. No one supposes that legislation is going to solve the whole problem. A vast amount of educational and constructive work must be done before sexual morality is upon a satisfactory basis. But this is one of the cases where legislation not only can help, but is sorely needed, and where, though there may be variance as to details, there is a wide measure of agreement as to the main principles. Let us do what we can to press on so desirable and urgent a change in the law, in the interests of morality, of social health, and most of all, in those of suffering little children.