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FAMILY LIMITATION AND WOMEN'S  
ORGANISATIONS

By MARY D. STOCKS, B.Sc.

*Resolution passed at the N.U.S.E.C. Council, March, 1923:—*

“That Birth Control being a subject now widely discussed, and one which very specially affects women, as well as the general welfare of the community, the N.U.S.E.C. resolves to promote the study of this question, and recommends such study to its Societies.”

*Resolution passed at the N.U.S.E.C. Council, March, 1925:—*

“That this Council calls upon the Ministry of Health to allow information with respect to methods of Birth Control to be given by Medical Officers at Maternity and Child Welfare Clinics in receipt of Government Grants, in cases in which either a mother asks for such information or in which, in the opinion of the Medical Officer, the health of the parents renders it desirable.”

The feminist of to-day is asking for something more than identity of treatment in a world designed by men to reflect their own experiences and fulfil their own needs. She is asking for a proportionate share in the ordering of that world and the adjustment of its moral, social and economic values, in such a manner that her own peculiar experiences may be reflected, her own peculiar needs fulfilled. It is for this reason that organised women are expanding their old demand for equality of treatment in those spheres of life where women compete directly with men, and are focussing their attention upon an occupation which is inevitably and exclusively their own: the occupation of motherhood. It is after all an occupation in which the great majority of women are at some time in their lives engaged, and at the same time one whose fortunes and misfortunes affect in a multitude of indirect ways the economic and social position of women in alternative occupations. It is therefore impossible to conceive of any satisfactory outcome to feminist endeavour which fails to secure for this great and nationally important occupation of motherhood such direct control over the necessities of life, and such social consideration as men are accustomed to demand for occupations in which they themselves are engaged.

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It is along such a line of reasoning that Family Endowment and Widows' Pensions fall into their place as feminist reforms. And it is along such a line that the feminist *qua* feminist approaches the question of family limitation.

In past times our forefathers have tolerated a method of limitation which may be described in the language of industry as indiscriminate production tempered by a wasteful use of the product. We refer of course to the combination of an unrestricted birth-rate and a high infant death-rate. The seeds of life were sown recklessly, and those which fell on inhospitable ground were allowed to die untended. These conditions have been modified by the progress of medical knowledge and the more careful ordering of social conditions. They have been modified too by the widespread growth, especially in our industrial areas, of methods of birth control which involve the use of abortifacient drugs and practices, which are effective in varying degrees, and in varying degrees undermine the health of mothers and children alike.

To-day women are asking whether it is compatible with the dignity of motherhood that the reasoned limitation of families—since it is generally agreed that some limitation there must be to the full exercise of human fecundity—should be achieved in this haphazard and wasteful manner. The N.U.S.E.C. has answered this question in the negative. Women are also asking whether individual “self-determination” and the “right to strike” against intolerable conditions are not as essential to the maintenance of a professional standard in the case of mothers as in the case of economically employed men workers. This question the N.U.S.E.C. has answered in the affirmative. “Every man has a property in his own person,” a great philosopher has told us: “this nobody has any right to but himself.” Recognition of this right is the first condition of personal dignity and economic independence. Women demand it for the mother in the home, as for the man in the workshop.

It is at this point that the N.U.S.E.C. policy as determined at its 1925 Council meeting may involve a separation from those persons, including a minority of its own members, who admit the need for “self-determination” in motherhood and a reasoned limitation of the family, but who would tolerate only one method of achieving it: the complete suspension of marital relations during such time as children are not desired. Such persons, believing all other methods to be morally inadmissible, are naturally desirous of closing all possible avenues of propaganda concerning them, irrespective of whether they involve actual

destruction of pre-natal life or merely the avoidance by contraceptive practices of that life's generation. In sharp conflict with this body of opinion there exists, it may confidently be surmised, a much larger body, which believes that such separation of married persons as is necessary for effective limitation is not merely unpractical for large sections of the population, but is itself undesirable. It may be argued in favour of this belief that the functions of marriage as cited in the Anglican Prayer Book are not one but three, and that among those functions the “mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other” as well as the “avoidance of fornication” are given equal weight with the “procreation of children.” It is certainly difficult to suppose that the compilers of the Prayer Book used the word “matrimony” in any sense other than the maintenance, with mutual consideration and respect, of intimate relations between man and wife. Thus, persons who hold this view, though they unite with the first-mentioned group in their detestation of abortifacient practices, admit as ethically justifiable and socially necessary the use of contraceptive methods which allow of family limitation without the complete suspension of marital relations. And it is on behalf of such persons that the N.U.S.E.C. demands freedom of opportunity and access to knowledge. For well-to-do women such access is easy enough. It can be obtained through the medium of a private practitioner. To the poor and uninformed married working woman it is not, however, easily accessible. She is at present, and to a disastrous extent, the prey of ignorant report, of the abortionist, and of the commercial agency which purveys its wares to married and unmarried alike. Therefore, in claiming freedom of opportunity for mothers to decide between suspension of marital relations and contraceptive methods according to the dictates of their consciences and the necessities of their environment, the N.U.S.E.C. focusses its claim on the concrete demand that the Ministry of Health shall allow Birth Control information to be given to those who desire it by the Medical Officers of Infant and Maternity Welfare Centres. In so doing it is in effect demanding that expert and disinterested information shall be made available for those who have a legitimate reason for desiring it, at places where such persons, and such persons only, normally resort. And it is incidentally demanding that the question of family limitation shall be viewed in its right perspective, as part and parcel of the greater question of maternity and child welfare.

To this end the N.U.S.E.C. urges all bodies of organised women—and men—to bring pressure to bear on their local Members of Parliament, and on the Ministry of Health, in order that when its policy comes under consideration in the House of Commons, the views here expressed may be adequately reflected.

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