THE SIGNIFICANT ROLE OF EDUCATION
FOR THE HOME IN UNDERDEVELOPED COUNTRIES

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Human Resources and National Progress

The conviction that the development of a country is directly related to the
development of its human resources is one of the reasons why the developing
countries are demonstrating an extraordinary effort in mobilizing their human
resources and in trying to convert them into a dynamic factor of self-improve­
ment, general progress, and collective improvement. It is the greatest and most
important task which faces the Latin American countries, and it is being brought
about by means of public education.

In spite of the fact that this education is free at almost all levels, and
compulsory at the primary level, the educational services in the Latin American
countries have not been sufficient to cover all the social sectors in the quality
and quantity which are needed. This is why the illiteracy that still exists is
enthusiastically being attacked. Primary education, accessible to the greatest
number of persons, is being revised in order to give to the individual a funda­
mental basis by which to meet his essential needs and those of the community
in which he lives. Secondary education is being reoriented realistically in
order that it does not continue to be only a preparation for the university.
Because only a minimum percentage of students arrive at the university, the
great majority are frustrated and without a definite orientation for other studies
not of a university nature. The universities also are breaking the stratified
patterns they have maintained for centuries and are beginning to serve their
communities and establish new career opportunities which permit them to assume
their function of scientific and professional leadership which modern society
requires.

Unfortunately the limitation of economic resources involved and the high rate
of population growth in Latin America prevent this educational reform from being
carried out with the speed, breadth, and efficiency desired.

There is, nevertheless, a hopeful sign which gives to this educational
movement an impulse greater than ever before; the state no longer is alone in this
task; private national groups and international organizations and agencies are
sharing the responsibility of preparing human beings who are both the goal of
the progress desired, and the means of achieving that goal. This conference on
international home economics is an international contribution to the developing
countries. The Overseas Education Fund of the League of Women Voters of
the United States is an example of international cooperation in the field of civic­
democratic education. We all know the magnitude of collaboration which the
United Nations offers by means of its specialized organizations, the service

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which the Organization of American States gives regionally, and that which the government of the United States gives through its international services.

But there is more: we must recognize the leadership which the international organizations, governmental or other, have provided in this vitalization of the educational process in Latin American countries. To verify this, it is enough to consider the regional centers of learning and research located throughout the entire continent, the technical assistance offered in numerous fields, the study groups at all levels which are going on continuously, the regional agreements which are made, and the financial collaboration which makes possible the adoption of new projects or the culmination or improvement of those already under way.

In its own way, private initiative is also making an effective contribution. Groups who previously were indifferent to the process of popular education have begun to give their support. Private industrial enterprises are beginning to organize centers of learning for their workers; they are offering education and are giving their cooperation to government in the founding and support of vocational and technical institutes. Churches are redoubling their educational efforts. Voluntary associations are multiplying their programs of direct instruction or are offering scholarships and, something especially important to us here, the women's groups have taken the leadership in efforts to improve the lot of women without lessening their efforts in other general interests.

This collaboration is very important since even when in principle the Latin American woman has access today to all the sources of education, there are aspects of her preparation which need to be stimulated by the women themselves because they are still not included in general education.

This emphasis on the improvement of women, all of us know today, does not imply narrow-mindedness nor egotistic interest. It means only a positive response to a negative situation: the disadvantage in which a woman finds herself in contrast to a man, no matter what the aspect analyzed -- social, economic, or cultural. Let us consider an example: when speaking of the human resources of a country, one doubtless includes the women, who constitute half of those resources; nevertheless, the governments of Latin American countries still do not consider adopting an educational policy which will make a special effort to minimize the disadvantage in which a woman finds herself as a result of having been denied educational opportunities enjoyed by men. Even considering the favorable impact which women could make in fields from which they have been excluded, efforts to widen educational training have not been successful.

Fortunately the knowledge of this official neglect is helping to create in women the awareness of their own power to promote action which will accelerate their entry into fields and activities in which they did not have access and, what is more important, which will permit them to revise their own attitudes in respect to their traditional functions.
Preparing Latin American Women for Leadership

One can say definitely that in all the Latin American countries there is a growing interest among women in making a contribution in such fields and activities. But in order to unite and orient women, leaders are necessary. So we believe that leadership is their most pressing need and that efforts must be focused first on the task of finding or preparing leaders.

It is not difficult to find women leaders now that the period is past when the education of women was suspected of being a move to replace men. No one doubts today that the interest of women in the life of the community is a social responsibility as well as the exercise of a legitimate right, and that the temporal emphasis which is placed on their education has its origin in the conviction that educated women can educate mankind.

In my opinion, there are three situations in which the Latin American woman most needs preparation for leadership: her role as a citizen, as a member of voluntary associations, and as the center of the family.

Because of the new status which she enjoys, now that her political rights are recognized, she can exercise her rights and fulfill her new responsibilities and at the same time continue performing her traditional functions.

The delay in recognizing woman's political rights was based for a long time on the fear that the exercise of such rights might alienate her or jeopardize the important responsibilities which she fulfills within the family. For this reason it should be recognized that her new condition as a citizen permits her to make ample and creative use of her political rights to promote interests which have always been within her sphere of operation, for instance the education of her children and the protection of their health, safety, and well-being. These activities have passed from domestic jurisdiction to that of the community, which now offers them as public services. Thus woman ought to function as an effective member of this community.

In this era of cooperation, in which the influence of individuals is multiplied and made more effective when they work with others who share the same aspirations, the woman needs to act appropriately within the voluntary associations to which she belongs, which constitute a valuable instrument of social action.

Democratic education ought to be systematically promoted in Latin American countries which have adopted the democratic political system. Thus voluntary associations, besides being schools with social responsibilities, can be used as excellent laboratories for development of democratic institutions if properly oriented to serve this purpose.

With leadership, the women's associations (which are growing in greater proportion than those of men) as well as the mixed associations in which women function, will be able to have a positive influence in the development of Latin Americans.
As the center of the family woman can offer her most valuable social collaboration. Whether because of biological determinism or spiritual vocation, she is and will continue being the center of the family, that institution which, in spite of all crises and changes, can never be replaced successfully. She performs the role by protecting, caring for, educating, and orienting human beings. It is in this aspect that home economics education can play its most significant role in Latin America.

**Helping Women to Realize Their Full Potential**

Speaking in general terms, woman ought to be helped to validate herself. She needs basically to recognize her innate potentiality and the possibilities of developing it and applying it for her own and collective good.

While there are in all countries numerous advanced groups of women who know and take advantage fully of their capacities, there exist also many more who do not know their own potential for contributing to society and the value and necessity of this collaboration. They keep performing their traditional tasks with a passive and sometimes resigned attitude. They can do very little in a world in which they have been assigned routine and menial tasks in the home, tasks too modest or futile even to demand remuneration.

The woman knows the economic value of her personal work only when she engages in activities outside the home or, even in the home, in tasks which are not her own. And in a time in which the efficiency of the individual is usually judged according to earnings or salary, the woman must feel herself held down because upon crossing the boundaries of home to venture into the labor market, often without adequate preparation, she obtains only meager compensation for what she judges to be her own worth.

This first phase of work with woman gives home economics an excellent opportunity to collaborate significantly in countries under development. More specifically improvement of manual skills, wise use of the family income, care of the health, preparation of foods, improvement of the home and, above all, education of the children, can be considered not only as goals in themselves but at the same time as instruments or means which home economic educators may use in order to change the attitudes of the woman, helping her to liberate herself and apply her hidden potentialities to the collective good.

So long as we do not broaden the horizon of the woman, showing her the social perspective of the tasks which she performs, she will continue functioning without the pride and satisfaction which are provided by a job known to be important, creative, and transcendent.

In order to help woman to find herself and to value the activities which she develops, it is necessary to know thoroughly what fundamental changes have come about in the woman's situation in general, and those which have taken place in the local or national community to which she belongs. This knowledge
will permit her to interpret, in the light of such changes, the new responsibilities which the present life imposes on her, not only as a consequence of the breaking of barriers which limited her participation in numerous activities, but as a consequence also of the great changes which are taking place in those so-called transi-tional societies.

The home economics educator needs to be in a position effectively to orient the woman in this process of self-evaluation. Woman should be helped to adapt herself to the contemporary world and to assume with skill and confidence the new responsibilities which her present status imposes on her.

In my experience with groups of women with whom we have tried this re-evaluation, it has always seemed as if some of them emerged for the first time into a new world, a world which transmits to them an interior force which fills them with pride and which adds a new significance to their lives. I remember the first comment of one of these women; "My goodness, and I have spent more than 40 years of my life ignorant of the fact that I am worth so much."

From this appraisal, the woman can go on to a re-evaluation of her functions within the family, functions which acquire a growing importance while new investigations of psychology, sociology, and education corroborate the decisive influence which the mother has over the development of the personality of her children and the formation of their character as a consequence of her close association with them.

While the attentions of the mother are focused on the physical care and the material well-being of her children, she will be performing an important task. But if, besides, she knows the formative value of the bio-psychic and social process which operate within her family and she tries to orient her family favorably, then she will be fulfilling a transcendental mission which will result in benefit to her children and to society in general.

This is the most significant contribution which home economics can offer to the Latin American countries. This profession relies upon attractive means to get close to the family, whose well-being is its specific goal. It is in the best position to provide orientation for the performance of the greatest of human responsibilities, the education of children, which figures so superficially in the general programs of instruction.

I want to mention as an interesting fact in this respect, a publication of the Parent-Teachers Association which cited the book, *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical* written more than one hundred years ago by Herbert Spencer, the famous English philosopher. Spencer marvelled that even though the life or death of a child, his moral well-being or ruin depends on the parents' treatment, there was not a single word of instruction given to those who were to be parents. And he considered it monstrous that the destiny of a new generation was left to the mercy of irrational custom, impulse, or imagination.

Even in our days this adequate preparation for parenthood and family life does not have the priority which it deserves. But it can be provided by home
economists as "in-service training" to all members of the family, an approach which will certainly make this type of education more interesting, practical, and effective.

Re-evaluating the traditional tasks of the woman as the center of the family, one notes another phase of work which has a great social potential. This is to strengthen the family and prepare it to function as a dynamic unit of social action.

The Problem of Paternal Irresponsibility

In Latin American countries characterized by strong feelings and family ties, a paradoxical situation exists which deserves mention because it constitutes a grave social illness. I refer to paternal irresponsibility, which in some areas, as in Central America, acquires alarming proportions among the weakest social, cultural, and economic groups.

Even when the family is based juridically on matrimony, free unions are so frequent that in some countries they are recognized as legal. If it were only a problem of the absence of legal ties and the family remained together, the problem would be only one of form.

The alarming thing is the number of children born outside of marriage who are registered without knowing the identity of the father from whom, for that reason, they cannot demand the rights which the law establishes in their favor.

The mother for this reason carries the weight of family life. In a high percentage of families she is the only one who cares for and provides for the necessities of her children. This situation exists more often in lower socio-economic groups. Thus children are often born with every type of limitation especially where they are deprived of a father as a moral, social, and economic support. This situation is so general that we have developed a dangerous attitude of tolerance and indifference to it.

Instead of continuing to praise the self-denial of the single mother, it is necessary to unite all efforts to initiate a social action which will restore to the family its unity, which by defection of the father is reduced to the mother-son relationship.

The Dynamic Concept of the Family

With regard to the preparation of the family as a dynamic unit of social action there is another task which home economists can assume. Ordinarily the family is considered as the passive object of the attention and interest of those who in one way or another collaborate for its well-being. The family needs to be conceived in its dynamic sense, as the bio-psychic cell of society, as a vital unit whose numerous and complex functions influence directly and indirectly the community. It is enough to cite its reproductive function from which is derived, at the same time, the most important function of all -- caring for,
feeding and educating the children. Socially speaking, this means the formation and education of communities. But the family is also a cooperative unit, the spiritual and affectional center where each one of the members who form the unit finds corresponding vital interests, the security of reciprocal help and solidarity and, in short, the natural route for linking and sustaining generations.

The dynamic conception of the family brings about a change in attitude in those who work with it. Upon considering it as an active unit, perfectable through education, they will look for possibilities of orienting the family, especially in two dynamic aspects -- first, as a self-oriented unit influencing its members and performing for their benefit, and second, as a social unit influencing decisively the life and conduct of the group.

To study the other fields in which a family action can be developed and the means by which that action can be aided is a task which is worth the effort of undertaking. It is a task in which the home economists can lend valuable assistance.

In passing I shall point out that among those fields of family action is civic-democratic education. We believe that the family can be oriented and prepared to function as a school of democratic living and as a vital laboratory for the exercise of the social responsibility of its members.

The Challenge for Home Economics

All that has been said about the assistance which home economics can offer to the Latin American countries suggest an analysis programs of study, of the preparation given to students and how they perform as professionals. This test would also throw light on the erroneous interpretation which one has of this profession, which, even worse, is identified with some of the domestic skills which it teaches.

A standard which could help this evaluation of education for the home is its degree of "humanism." To what degree do the preparation and exercise of this profession give the human beings which form the family a sense of the prime importance that they have? Which materials and to what depth do they include knowledge which will enable the home economics educator to work with the family in the human dimension to which I refer? Do the home economics educators consider themselves agents of change capable of promoting the social evolution which the times demand? Are the programs of study and work of the home economics educators revised periodically in an effort to determine if they are adequate in their content and application for the changing situation in which people must operate?

This "humanization" to which I refer seems to be reflected in the changes in the name by which this profession is known in Latin America. It has evolved from the restricted concept of "domestic economy," which is associated with manual skills and domestic jobs, to that of "education for the home," which introduces the idea of human development within the family, and finally to "family education" in some countries, a term which puts the emphasis on the development of the members who constitute the family.
The evolution of the terminology represents an evolution in the image the objectives of this profession. But the problem is something more than the name; it is in the very conception of its objectives in the adequate preparation of its professionals, and in the capacity, extent, and imagination with which home economists give fulfillment to those objectives.

Another aspect which would be useful to analyze for those who have the job of formation of home economists is the definite disinterest in Latin America in this profession in spite of the need there is for it. Because home economics is relatively new as a profession, one of the questions which ought to be considered is the strategy of its development.

Are the schools of home economics producing leaders who can at the same time share in this development? Or, on the contrary, has it been considered more useful to produce professionals who must work directly or individually with the families? Or are the schools preparing professionals of different levels, simultaneously in order that all of the needs of the profession will be covered?

It is evident that in the Latin American countries we need all types of home economists -- those who will work in rural areas, those who will serve in primary and secondary schools, those who will have charge of direct functions of planning and of the formation of the professionals in that discipline. Because home economics in its humanistic sense is the art and the science aimed at securing the well-being of the family and its preparation for social responsibility, it ought not to be reserved for the weakest economic groups. It ought to be extended to all the social groups which have need of its orientation.

We have indicated that in the Latin American countries, family education, in spite of the immense need we long have had for it, is only beginning. Thus the obvious conclusion is that this education ought to be placed within reach of all. But to achieve this stage requires planning and the establishment of priorities. Thus one of the first steps will be to determine the standards which will be used for the selection of the groups who ought to be covered and for the fixing of goals which must be reached successively.

Since international collaboration can have a determining influence, it could be useful to formulate the following questions:

Whady type of professional is needed for the development of international cooperation in this field? Don't we need professionals of a high level who can collaborate in the establishment or development of new schools of home economics, in the planning of new projects, in the direction and supervision of those who already are on their way?

Will teaching personnel have charge of the professional guidance and instruction of the different levels of home economists?

Do the concept and objectives of home economics in the United States correspond to the necessities of the underdeveloped countries?

In the Latin American countries it is of vital importance that home economics programs undertaken under international collaboration be pushed with a missionary spirit in order that, for its part, the family can be converted into a vigorous unit serving as a dynamic agent of general progress and social improvement.