

Career complications

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Two years ago a widow, the mother of six children, walked into Dr. Doris Donnelly's office and said she wanted to return to college and finish her degree.

Ms. Donnelly, a theologian who is now a professor at St. John's University in New York, said she was tempted to say, "Forget it, the deck is stacked against you." She didn't, and the woman went on to say, "I've run my family ever since my husband died and I know I can do it."

The theologian told that story to show how women view themselves today. "In just five years I've seen a change. Women are far more confident about what they can do today," Ms. Donnelly said.

The change is especially striking in women's attitude toward failure, Ms. Donnelly thinks.

"Formerly failure would destroy women," she said. Today they pick themselves up and push on.

"When they look at their lives, women today have more freedom and lots of rich possibilities" for careers as well as family life, said Dr. Elizabeth Dreyer, a professor teaching at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.

But the changing times make for a great deal of confusion, the theologians agreed, especially in male-female relationships. "Until the dust settles" and we develop new patterns, it's bound to be

confusing, she added.

"Struggling" is the word used by Ms. Donnelly to describe couples where both wife and husband are intently pursuing careers. She went further, adding that she personally doesn't know any women, with children under 15, who find it easy to successfully combine marriage, parenting and an absorbing career.

Both theologians stressed they see a negative and a positive side in the current situation.

On the positive side, women with careers generally are understanding of their husbands' problems — for instance, the need for quiet time when mates first come home from work, Ms. Donnelly said. These wives "see how hard it is to switch gears."

And sometimes husbands, who today may be more intimately involved in family life, appreciate what a homemaker's day looks like as well, Ms. Donnelly said.

To demonstrate the demands and adjustments couples frequently face today, Ms. Dreyer told of a Minnesota colleague.

After several years away from work her colleague became a counselor, skilled at conducting support groups. This woman found a great deal of satisfaction in her new career. But, the woman's husband found himself feeling "very threatened" by her new found need for an absorbing interest and friends outside their married life.

The couple did not want to lose their marriage. But they had to work hard to rescue it. For example, to better understand what his wife was doing, Ms. Dreyer said, the husband decided to find out more about his wife's work by taking a workshop similar to those she conducted.

During the workshop he came into contact with other men and was able to build a supportive group of friends for himself. He continued to meet with this group for some time, Ms. Dreyer added, and this helped take some of the pressure off the marriage.

Both Ms. Donnelly and Ms. Dreyer said all these social developments are making an impact on college-age women, who today face an uncertain picture of the future. These young women "have no map to follow" and often feel torn between marriage and children and careers — wondering whether and how to have all three, said Ms. Donnelly.

College women don't know "what their lives will look like" a few years down the line, she said.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

FOOD...

...for thought

What will the future be like for girls growing up in today's society?

Today children realize that the name Sally Ride is etched in history alongside those of other astronauts who discovered firsthand what space exploration is all about.

Children learn in school of Indira Gandhi's role as prime minister of India and Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's U.S. Supreme Court post.

Women in society serve as nuclear physicists, film directors, surgeons, corporation heads and university presidents.

Children naturally are aware of the many positions women hold.

They also are accustomed to seeing a significant percentage of the adult women in their communities go off to work each morning...

...The fact that so many women work outside the home and that more and more women hold leadership positions in society represents a change.

—This change influences the workplace and community life.

—Even the use of leisure time is influenced as more women use portions of their free time to take career-related classes.

—And life at home is influenced if men's or women's roles change. Families are challenged in new ways by old questions: What is a husband's role or a wife's role? How are the demands of parenthood met?

What does the word "home" mean? How are the tasks of homemaking arranged?...

...The issue of women in society is complex.

First it concerns women's rights — recognition of women as full persons.

This also is an issue about roles and responsibilities in the workplace or at home or in public life.

And the issue is about the vocation of Christians in the world — about the ways women use the gifts they possess from God. Pope John Paul II spoke about this during his visit this fall to Canada.

Urging women to bring their gifts to bear at home and in society, "according to your vocation in the plan of God," the pope said: "The Lord counts on you so that human relations may be permeated with the love that God desires..."

What young girls today expect from the future may differ from what their parents and grandparents expected years ago. As a result, some people are more optimistic about society's direction, others are more apprehensive, worried.

If people tend to feel strongly about this social change, it is probably because somehow it influences them directly. Perhaps they wonder how best to relate past values to present realities and future possibilities.

...for discussion

1. How would you speak with a child or teen-ager about the roles of women in society?

2. Has your life been affected by social changes in the roles of women or men? How?

3. After reading Cindy Liebhart's article about television and its images of women, what are your comments on some of your favorite TV characters? Are they interesting characterizations of real women? Does it matter? Why?

4. What about women who choose to remain at home today as full-time homemakers? Do you think society demeans their role? What value do you find in their decision?

SECOND HELPINGS

An easy-to-read book that might be called a spirituality for times of social change is "Coping With a Gentle God," by Father John Powers, CP. The author explores many of the feelings people experience and proposes goals they might pursue in coping with the stresses, pressures, opposites and conflicts of everyday life. The recognition of human dignity and the expression of it on the part of both women and men is discussed by the author who writes: "There is, then, a basic dignity in being human, in being created 'little less than angels' (Ps. 8:5-6). It is a dignity we all too often forget or allow to be overpowered by unrealistic negativity about ourselves and the human family." (Michael Glazier Inc., 1723 Delaware Ave., Wilmington, Del. 19806. Paperback, \$5.95.)