

# NEW OUTLOOK

FEBRUARY, 1934: P. 17

## WOMEN of the OTHER NATION

by C. Hartley Grattan

*Women and children represent two-thirds of our relief population. Mr. Grattan examines the plight of these dependents in that "nation" created by Relief.*

A DISTINGUISHED Senator was recently heard to comment on the startling contrast between the condition of the general population, in spite of its troubles with reduced incomes and all, and the relief population. "It's like having two nations," he concluded, "one able to enjoy our civilization, the other, often intimately related to the first by blood and previous history, suddenly cut off from it. It's terribly confusing. It cannot go on. I wonder at the forbearance of those who are being deprived."

Two nations! A hundred years ago Benjamin Disraeli, Queen Victoria's spectacular Prime Minister, wrote a book about "two nations." He tried to show how a nation of poor and a nation of rich existed in England and raised many disturbing questions about that condition. No one answered those questions. Today we in the United States have them thrust on our attention once more—and more insistently than ever before. At the present time we have a vast overlying population which continues to exist much as it always has, perhaps with a little less income, fewer luxuries and smaller savings, but still with adequate food, clothing and shelter, some luxuries and some savings. Set apart from these we have a large unemployed population, a considerable proportion of which is still self-supporting and hoping for reemployment, and a group of 18,300,000 persons who are receiving relief—who have sunk into a state of destitution.

It is with this vast population that we are concerned here. It is a complex nation within the nation, an underlying population which thus far, in most places, has lived quietly, giving little trouble, making no organized protest about its condition. It is the "relief problem" but it is not primarily a problem of statistics and finance—it is first and foremost a *human* problem, which we cannot



*Women on Relief*

much longer continue to ignore. So let us first try to get an idea of how many 18,300,000 people are. Take down any book giving population statistics and you will be startled to find that there are but twelve out of sixty-one sovereign nations with populations of over 18,300,000. Of the forty-nine countries with populations of less than 18,300,000 many are known to everybody and are frequently thought of as very considerable nations. So they are, but not in numerical terms. It is illuminating to realize that more persons are receiving relief in the United States than there are individuals in such well-known countries as Roumania (18,000,000), Mexico (16,500,000), Czechoslovakia (14,800,000), and Yugoslavia (14,000,000); over twice as many as in Belgium (8,000,000) and Holland (7,920,000); about three times as many as in Sweden (6,140,000); and, to cut these comparisons short, almost seven times as many as in all of Norway (2,800,000). Clearly it is not in the least inaccurate to speak of the relief population of the United States as a great nation within a nation. To deal with it raised problems as large as, though different in character from, those faced by men who govern sovereign nations and think themselves harassed and overburdened.

Americans have a way of saying, upon the discovery of a bad situation, that it is hard enough for men to have to endure it but intolerable that women and children should have to suffer such conditions. Yet, being on relief, being a member of the relief nation, is quite as bad a situation as exists in the United States today.

If we separate all the women and children from the many individuals receiving relief in September, 1934, we get a picture that shows some rather startling but none the less entirely accurate statistics. Women and children, it will first be observed, comprise as much as two thirds of the relief population.

Girls under 16 . . . . .	3,600,000
Boys under 16 . . . . .	4,086,000
Total children ..	<u>7,686,000</u>
Women 16-64 . . . . .	4,865,000
Women over 65 . . . . .	325,000
Total women . . .	<u>5,190,000</u>
Grand total . . . . .	12,876,000



Women and children, notice again, account for two thirds. Women and children, notice again, account for two thirds.

One outstanding reason for the presence of so many children on the relief rolls is the fact that large families are very common in the relief population, 70 per cent including three or more, over two fifths including from four to

seven, which means that seventy out of every hundred families receiving relief have children and that forty out of every hundred have from two to five children. There were 4,070,000 families receiving relief in September, four fifths of which were unbroken, untouched by widowhood, divorce, separation, or any other similar disaster. They consisted

## *Women on Relief*

of husband and wife only, or, as was true of the seven tenths mentioned above, husband, wife and children. This makes entirely clear, I hope, that the relief nation has a serious problem with regard to women and children.

What kind of homes are chiefly represented? In the cities, where three fifths of the relief people live, it is the low wage occupations that are followed by those who now find themselves in need of aid because of unemployment. About two thirds of the relief people ordinarily derive their support from unskilled and semi-skilled occupations; one fifth from skilled occupations; a slightly lesser portion from clerical work; and but tiny minorities from such relatively well-paid occupations as are classified as "proprietary" (small storekeepers, etc.) and "professional," a self-explanatory term.

### **Farmers on Relief**

There are, too, a large number of farm homes. Fifty per cent of the farmers on relief own their own places, though this is far from implying that they own valuable properties, for most of them are marginal producers. They own less land, poorer land, have less livestock and live in poorer houses than their neighbors who are not on relief. The women and children of farm owners have, then, suffered from poverty even before driven to relief. Large numbers of the rural relief families ordinarily earn their livings by renting farms and, especially in the South, "share croppers" are on the rolls in large numbers. These two groups have, on the whole, a lower economic status than the owners. Finally we find in rural areas the farm laborers and their families, servants (especially among the Negroes of the South), employees of various stores and service agencies in the rural villages and groups of workers in non-agricultural industries carried on in country areas, like miners and lumbermen. Large incomes are not at all common in these occupations even in normal times.

Taken all in all, then, the women and children on relief, in so far as they are supported by husbands and fathers, have always had to live on very little. Now that they lack even that little, they are trying to live on relief.

### **Joint Breadwinners**

But of course not all workers are men and it is extremely common in these low-income families for both husband and wife to work, to say nothing of the children, as they become old enough. Almost 30 per cent of all women working are married women. Why do married women work? The reasons are effectively summed up by Grace Hutchins in her valuable book *Women Who Work*: "Married women take jobs outside the home because they have to help support the family. Their reasons for working are given variously as 'to keep the home and family together' because of the husband's inadequate wage, his illness or incapacity; to raise the family's standard of living to the 'health and decency' basis; to give the children a better education; to buy home or household equipment; to pay off doctor's or hospital bills; to support elderly parents or other relatives; to save for a 'rainy day.'"

This makes it clear that the basic reason is economic necessity. Unmarried, widowed, divorced and separated women have an even more immediate reason, when they are not included in family groups but are living alone: the necessity of earning all the food, clothing and shelter they have.

What do women ordinarily do and how are these

## *Women on Relief*

What do women ordinarily do and how are these occupations affected by unemployment? In April, 1930, when the last census was taken, 10,752,116 women told the census enumerator that they ordinarily worked for wages. This represented a large increase over 1920, both in number and percentage of women working. It is important to realize that



the Depression came at a time when the rise in the number of working women had outstripped the growth in the female population of the United States. The chief occupations followed by these women are, in the order of their importance on the basis of numbers employed, domestic and personal service, clerical, manufacturing and mechanical industries, and professional service (60 per cent school teachers). These classifications account for four fifths of all women employed. Over half of the women do unskilled or semi-skilled work. The great majority average \$12 a week. The trend of women's wages, as in the case of all wages, has been downward since the Depression.

The effect of unemployment on the several occupations followed by women is not exactly known; but reasoning from the incidence of unemployment among all persons normally working, it is possible to draw some fairly sound conclusions. We know that unskilled and semi-skilled workers make up the bulk of those unemployed *and on relief*. It is precisely in these broad classifications that most of the working women fall. Reviewing the principal occupations of women in order, the following can be said: That women ordinarily in domestic and personal service are hardest hit and have come on relief in vast numbers; that clerical workers have not been so hard hit—there are fewer in the relief population in proportion to the total than in the general population as of 1930; that since, by presumption, most women are in the light, so-called, consumption goods industries, those employed in manufacturing and mechanical industries have been hard hit in certain lines at certain times: textiles and

clothing showed large declines in employment in September. Many manufacturing industries employing large numbers of women operate on a seasonal basis—canning and clothing for example—and pay low wages. The women who work in them, therefore, come on and go off relief as they are employed and discharged. Professional workers, however, have survived the Depression fairly well, for they have made but a small contribution to the relief population (about 2 per cent of the total). However, since professional workers constituted 6 per cent of the general population in 1930 and women professional workers were 14 per cent of all women employed, the women professionals may well be harder hit, proportionately, than the men.



### **Fifty-Fifty**

The preceding paragraph may have been rather rough going for those unaccustomed to reading the cold-blooded analyses of acute social problems produced by case-hardened or unimaginative professional students. It means, summed up, that the women have faced about the same difficulties as the

## *Women on Relief*

men in parallel or exactly similar occupations. There is only one factor operating in the opposite direction. Many manufacturers and other employers may be slowly replacing men workers with women workers to take advantage of lower wages paid to women. This would keep more women employed. No one knows, however, what part this factor plays in the general picture of conditions in our "Other Nation." The safest conclusion to draw is that the working women have suffered equally with men from unemployment.

A word about Negro women. Of Negro females 10 years of age and over, 39 in every 100 work for wages, 90 per cent in agriculture (in the cotton fields of the South), and domestic and personal service. They have always earned less than white women. The wage progression is downward as follows: white men, Negro men, white women, Negro women. Yet even extremely low wages have not kept Negro women off relief. The depression in cotton is of long standing and has reduced the Negroes of the South, women and men, to pitifully low levels of living—if one can call it that. Moreover, the first economy many households effect, when income declines, is by discharging servants and carrying on many "services" like laundering inside the home instead of sending it out. This accounts for the presence of thousands of Negro women, who are ordinarily gainful workers, on the relief rolls, especially in the South.

### **Mother's Pay Check**

The fact that almost 30 per cent of all women workers are married means that if married women lose their jobs the family income declines sharply. If both husband and wife have become unemployed either at the same time or in the long run of the Depression, then the family, once resources are exhausted, goes on relief. Since 70 per cent of the families on relief have children, the children also take part in this downward trek to destitution.

It is one of the inadequacies of current research that we know so little about what happens to families from the time they lose their incomes to the time they appear on the relief rolls. Certain evidence is available, however, and the story runs like this: the income stops and economies must be made. No new clothing is purchased (recall the effect of this on women in the clothing industry). The food budget is cut down and those things disappear from the diet which are most necessary to growing children and to the health of adults—meat, milk, eggs and butter. The next step is to cease keeping up a "front" and move to cheaper quarters, if the family lives in a rented house. As this downward revision of spending is made, reserves are progressively exhausted. All the family savings are withdrawn from the bank. Insurance policies are borrowed on until nothing more can be had and then dropped. Partially paid for furniture being purchased on instalments is returned to the store, and any valuable property owned outright is sold at a fraction of its worth, or pawned.

The family automobile, if perchance there ever was one, is "laid up" early in the story and eventually sold. As resources are exhausted bills begin to mount. The doctor and the dentist go unpaid first, followed by the grocer with whom credit is protected as



## *Women on Relief*

long as possible. Finally no more money can be borrowed from friends and relatives and loan "sharks" smell decay. If relatives cannot "take in" the family, the only resort is to relief. The time the process takes, in many cases, goes far toward explaining why the relief rolls are still rising today.

The disintegrative effect of this long dismal process on children should be obvious. It may have been noticed that economy in food is resorted to very early. Unbalanced diets result. The kind of food eaten is as important as quantity—and frequently "filling" foods take the place of healthful foods in times of stress. Children in such households suffer generally from malnutrition.

When the family finally goes on relief they do not go as a strong man to run a race. Their endurance has been undermined. But they—the children also—are all too frequently subjected to a restricted diet for long periods of time. Why? Because not enough money is available to provide "adequate" diets to the entire relief population. That is the final answer to those who cry that relief is too expensive today: the relief people—women and children along with the men—are not getting enough to eat. Neither are they adequately housed and clothed. It costs a tremendous amount to support the relief population today at the current low standards. It would cost far more to support it adequately. And it should not be forgotten that there are 7,686,000 children under 16 and 5,190,000 women over 16 being subjected to these conditions.



We have yet to discuss, ever so briefly, those women now in the relief population who have dependents—women who are the support of others, not, as in the case of married women, contributors to family support. Such women are called "female heads of households" by the research experts. In perhaps 7 to 8 per cent of the relief households in cities the only person who is able to work is a woman with dependent children. This does not necessarily mean the absence of a husband but it does mean that he is incapacitated and cannot work.

### **Women Who Carry On**

To understand the situation of such women let us glance at a table entitled, "Female Heads of White Relief Families Classified by Marital Status and Number of Dependents under 16." Puzzling over it we discover that in the cities:

*Single women* in 70 per cent of the cases are without dependents under 16, while the balance have from 1 to 3.

*Married women*, however, have no dependents under 16 in 43 per cent of the cases, the balance having from 1 to 6, mostly, however, 1 or 2.

*Widowed women* have no dependents under 16 in 64 per cent of the cases, the balance having from 1 to 5.

*Separated women* have no dependents under 16 in 24 per cent of the cases, 1 or 2 in most cases, but up to 6.

*Divorced women* have no dependents under 16 in 41 per cent of the cases, usually 1 or 2, but up to 6.

This gives a general view of the situation. These

## *Women on Relief*

women are charged with the support of young children and have fallen on relief. Now for three revealing points about them: In three cases out of four a woman with dependents who is on relief is over 35; in one case of every three the earning woman is over 54. Most of these women are servants, semi-skilled workers in manufacturing, clerks and women who have "no usual occupation"—low paid workers all.

It is, therefore, the older and underpaid women who find it difficult to make their way if they have young dependents. Only one woman in fourteen who is similarly burdened and has found it necessary to apply for relief is under 24. If the total numbers of the women of the several marital conditions are studied, it is found that they fall into the following descending series: widowed, separated, single and divorced (a strange juxtaposition but true), and married. This agrees in all essentials with a study made in Philadelphia which dealt with *lone* women receiving relief. It was found that while but 9 per cent were over 70 and the same per cent under 30, one-half were over 50 years of age. Moreover, when marital status was considered, the order taken, in a descending series as to importance, was: widowed, single, separated and divorced. This has, from the standpoint both of age and of marital condition, direct relation to their "employability"—their ability to work. There is, for instance, a two to three chance that a widow did not work outside the home while married, thereby lost her skill, and was, on the death of her husband, unable—think of the \$12 wage—to support herself and her dependents by the work she could get and, in addition, lay by enough to bridge unemployed periods. She resorts to relief.

### **Dependents of Dependents**

And children follow their supporters to the relief agencies. This is inevitable.

What happens to these women and children after they appear on the relief rolls? What special care is given them? What work do women do?

In the first place, conscientious relief workers do all they can to protect women and children from the worst consequences of their condition. What can be done is limited because insufficient money is available to do a really good job. Every effort is



made—in most places—to provide milk for children.

They are provided with special treatments in clinics operated by women on relief. School children are given special luncheons, often prepared and served by women who earn their relief by doing so.

Young children are taken into day nurseries, also partly staffed from relief women. But by and large, the children get along as their supporters get along—not appreciably better and certainly never any worse unless they are in the care of irresponsibles. Even if it were possible to bring the standards of food, clothing, shelter and medical care for only the children on relief up to adequate standards, their situation would not be quite enviable. Relief is relief no matter how it is tempered. Over and above all material deprivation is the psychological effect. That is inescapably bad for young children as it is bad for grown folks. The only true escape is through the return to work of those who are normally supporting the family. That is why the overwhelming

## *Women on Relief*

majority of those now on relief want a job—and want it quick! No greater mistake can be made than to think that any but a tiny, tiny minority wants to stay on relief. Most of those now receiving aid are as keen to get work as those who are working are keen to stay employed. Some—and they don't enjoy the prospect we may be sure—will have to accept public support for the rest of their days, but that is another story.

### **Blessed Activity**

To get back. The women on relief are, in a minimum number of cases, given work to do. By doing it they earn their "budgets"—their relief allowances. Since they are not allowed to earn more, many different women take part in the same project in the course of a month. In the week ending September 20, 1934, 130,000 women were at work. In the course of the month from 2 to 4 times as many worked out their relief. (Only one woman works on relief projects for every ten men who do so, and only about one tenth of the relief population works in any given week. The majority of the cases are on "direct" relief.) Of the women who work the larger number are employed in mending and making clothes. This is an excellent thing for the problem of clothes for the relief population has never been adequately considered. Considerable numbers work at the making of mattresses and other useful household necessities. In the season, women take part in the canning of vegetables and fruits. (Where possible, the relief population is encouraged to cultivate gardens.) They help care for children, as mentioned before. They do, in fact, this and that. About 1,800 of the younger women—those around twenty-three—were given two or three months in "schools" this last summer. They were given instruction in "economics," health, homemaking, typewriting and stenography—probably because they were chiefly clerical workers—plenty to eat and some play. They accounted for three thousandths of the women 16 and over on relief—a very lucky group indeed!

While cultivating a garden was the best occupation Voltaire's Pangloss could find, it isn't the ultimate solution of the relief problem. The solution is reemployment to the maximum extent that leaves only the physically handicapped, which is to say those unable to work because of old age, young dependents, as in the case of "female heads of households," and similarly situated cases, on public relief. But since it is rather unlikely that a miracle will be worked and this program accomplished over night, it is necessary to face the "problem of relief." Do not discount it because of the quotes.

After five years of depression and close to two years since the Federal *Emergency* Relief Administration was set up, the whole business has ceased to be a "crisis" phenomenon. It is beginning to take on the characteristics of a permanent situation. If that be admitted then we must soon decide whether we are going to give the people of the relief nation "hand-outs" or really spend enough money so that we can speak of taking heed of their welfare. We must decide whether we are tiding them over between jobs which will appear by the magic of "recovery," as they disappeared through the magic of "depression," or whether their very existence is reason enough to cease to leave the whole matter in the realm of magic and secure and guarantee to them the work that they are so eager to have.

(continued)



*Women on Relief***"Half Slave—Half Free"**

If our nation could not exist half slave and half free, how much less can it continue to exist with 18,300,000 men, women and children on relief? It was after the Civil War that the social forces which made America great found release and expression. It is only when we release the relief nation from bondage that our nation will be on the way to greatness again.

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)