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A Special Opportunity

One of President Johnson's first acts of initiative concerned the employment of women in government. At a cabinet meeting last January the President made it clear that he felt the government was wasting a "national resource" by treating women as second-class citizens. Since that time he has appointed or promoted more than 1000 women to jobs paying more than \$10,000 a year.

This action by President Johnson indicates alert recognition of a special opportunity for improving our society. We have been curiously unresponsive to the profound effects which the technological revolution has had on the lives of women. The median life expectancy of females has steadily increased. At the same time, family planning has become more effective. Not so long ago the median age of mothers at the birth of the last child was 32 years; it now has dropped to 26. The average mother of today is likely to live for 50 years after she gives birth to her last child—a drastic change from two generations ago!

In primary and secondary school, girls are often better students than boys. Thereafter many become preoccupied with acquiring a husband, and intellectual activities become secondary. After marriage a few happy years of family life ensue, but all too soon the children are in school and already more than half lost to the parents. When the children have left home, women in the middle 40's often find that they have little role in the world. They feel insecure and face 30 years of life without significant purpose.

In contrast, at this time the career mother blossoms. In the June issue of the *Ladies Home Journal*, Betty Friedan cites studies which indicate that "women who pursue a conscious goal for their life expressed in creative work reach the height of their human powers in the last half of their life, long after the so-called bloom of physical maturity." She further states, "I could see this as I went around the country seeking them out. They all looked ten to twenty years younger than they were—not in the embalmed sense of a woman who dyes, diets, and tries to hide her age with makeup, but in the very bloom of eyes and skin, and a kind of vitality that burned inside." Perhaps Miss Friedan exaggerates, but we have all seen vitality and bloom in older women who have broad intellectual interests.

At present there are many barriers against the full training and utilization of women in professions, especially in science. The early educational process takes mainly into account the brief span of active motherhood. Women are often discouraged from taking science courses in college. If they do obtain training, they are likely to be offered jobs not commensurate with their capacities. Once married, they have limited opportunities for part-time work during the years of motherhood. The income tax laws impose a discouraging additional burden. When their maternal responsibilities have ended, they are likely to find that their professional training is obsolescent and that it is not easy to get back into the mainstream of science. Removal of some or any of these obstacles could result in a substantial increase in the number of women active in science, with results beneficial both to society and to the individuals concerned.—PHILIP H. ABELSON