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WOMEN’S BUREAU
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READING LIST OF REFERENCES
ON
HOUSEHOLD EMPLOYMENT
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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR,
Women's Bureau,
Washington, October 27, 1937.

MADAM: I have the honor to transmit for publication a report bringing up to date the list of references for reading on the subject of household employment first published two years ago.

Greatly increased activity among employees and employers in the search for a workable program for the raising of standards in domestic service is an encouraging condition in this chaotic field of employment. The references assembled here should serve as a guide to the information necessary to intelligent opinion on the important questions involved.

The list was prepared by Jean Collier Brown, of the division of public information, assisted by Elizabeth Batson, of the editorial division.

Respectfully submitted.

MARY ANDERSON, Director.

Hon. Frances Perkins,
Secretary of Labor.
LETTER OF TRANSFER

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FOREWORD

In spite of the rapidity with which machines are changing our ways of living, the great majority of women are still at work inside their homes or in the homes of others. Domestic service was one of the earliest ways of earning a living, and it still provides employment to more women in the United States than does any other occupation. About 1½ million women were working in this field at the time of the 1930 census.

The large number of women working as household employees must not be taken as an indication of the popularity of this occupation. In general, domestic service has serious disadvantages from the viewpoint of the worker and is looked upon by many women only as a last resort when other types of employment are not available.

From occasional reports made over a period of years, it is seen that there are, perhaps, from the point of view of the worker, five major drawbacks to household employment. In the first place, there is the matter of the long daily and weekly working hours. In addition, Sunday is frequently the busiest day, with an elaborate noonday meal to prepare. Overtime is rarely paid for. A regular 8-hour workday, such as thousands of factory employees take for granted, seems only a rosy ideal to such a worker.

Lack of employment standardization is a second serious disadvantage in domestic service. Household employment is a relation between individual employers and individual employees. Household workers, as a rule, have no union or other organization to protect their mutual interests. There are no definite wage scales based on experience, skill, or amount of work to be required during the course of the day. The employer has at her disposal the additional weapon of employees' "references." Even the most competent household worker is dependent on satisfactory recommendations from her former employers to secure a new job. She cannot be too careful, therefore, not to antagonize her employer through complaints or criticism of any kind, even though in many cases such complaints are justified.

The fact that thousands of household workers must live in the homes of their employers and consequently are shut off from family and friends except in brief periods off duty, is another reason why many girls and women prefer factory to household employment. Companionship with members of the employer's family usually is limited. Frequently the employee finds it difficult to entertain her friends, as many householders supply no room other than her bedroom or the kitchen in which the worker may receive guests.

Household employment generally is viewed as unskilled work, and persons so engaged are looked down upon socially. Such a stigma attached to any occupation constitutes a serious drawback to a satisfactory work adjustment on the part of the employee.
A fifth disadvantage to household employment, from the point of view of the worker, is the exclusion from certain kinds of social insurance and legislative protection afforded other groups of workers. The section of the Federal Social Security Act relating to unemployment insurance exempts household workers from its provisions. In but one State (Washington) are domestic employees protected by hour legislation, and only one State (Wisconsin) has set minimum wage rates for such workers. Only in New Jersey and Connecticut are household employees included like other workers in the provisions for accident compensation, and Connecticut exempts employers of fewer than five workers, naturally the great majority.

An urgent need for a vigorous and intelligent program directed toward raising employment standards in domestic service is obvious. It is also evident that more adequate training facilities for household workers will have to be provided if improved standards are to be maintained. In these respects it is encouraging to note that many employers and workers alike, as individuals and in groups, are actively studying the field of household employment, looking forward to the establishment of standards that will insure just and adequate working conditions and of improved training facilities. To the end of encouraging such study through directing those interested to the best of the available literature in the field, the following reading list of references has been prepared. This list, consisting mainly of references to material appearing in the last 10 years, is not exhaustive or all-inclusive, but it is hoped that it will serve as a guidepost to much that should be of use to persons interested in the complex problems of today's household workers.
Reading List of References on Household Employment

(October 1937)

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