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What We Know About the Psychological Needs of LDS Women

Ida Smith

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At a result of the women’s movement of the last ten years, and perhaps spurred by the “Depression in Mormon Women” film and the excommunication of Sonia Johnson, the question, “What do Mormon women really want (or need)?” is frequently asked.

Care should be taken when singling out the needs of Latter-Day Saint women from women generally. Whereas it is true that Mormon women are (or should be) different from non-LDS women in several substantial ways, they still must cope with many of the same challenges brought about by discrimination and traditional sex-role stereotyping in our society as do non-LDS women.

In the foreword to “The Sexual Barrier,” Marija Matich Hughes writes:

“We are moving toward a society in which sex discrimination will not only be outdated but unacceptable. We must face facts about women as never before.... Our collective future—from our family life to our national economic health—depends disproportionately on our capacity to accept the rapidly changing facts of life about women, their role, and their new aspirations. America as a nation needs to understand the winds of change for women as much as the movement that is spurring that change. If unfairness can survive our knowledge of its effects, we are all lost. I cannot believe that Americans, who have faced mammoth issues of racial, ethnic, and religious equality, are unprepared to assimilate sex equality.”

In light of the many changes that have taken place in women’s lives in the last 10 to 15 years (and therefore peripherally, if not directly, to men’s lives as well) a brief overview of the women’s movement is appropriate here. Like it or not, what is happening to women nation-wide is having and will continue to have a profound effect on Mormon women.

It is difficult to find a publication nowadays that does not deal in major or minor ways with the phenomenon of the working woman. Over 51 percent of the adult women in the country are in the labor force—full or part time—and the vast majority of them are there for the same reasons that men are: compelling economic need. Nine out of ten women will enter the labor force at some time in their lives. In 1970 the average woman could expect to spend 22.9 years in the labor force; by 1980 that had risen to 27.6 years. The government estimates that by 1990 over 70 percent of mothers with children will be in the labor force; and in fact at the present time, the fastest growing group of female workers in the country are those with pre-school age children. The statistics for Utah are on a par with the national averages and have been for the past ten years. In the thirty years prior to 1970, women in Utah went to work at a faster rate than women in the rest of the country.

The complaint is heard from many individuals, both male and female, that “the women’s movement has radicalized our good sisters, causing them to throw over home and family and enter the world of work—a man’s world where they do not belong—thereby creating disruption in the family.” I believe it could be a ‘chicken or the egg?’ situation. Usually women who are able to be traditional, non-working wives and mothers in the home are not accused of being ‘out of line’ with what is expected of them in our Mormon culture; and many of these women honestly and sincerely do not understand what all the fuss is about with women. “What can they possibly want more than what the Lord has destined for them to have: a home and family?” But many American (and Mormon) women do not have a traditional home and family. One out of three adult women in the country does not have a husband in the home to support her. Nearly 30 percent of adult Mormon women are single, widowed, or divorced. And many previously non-working married women are going to work in record numbers because inflation is making it impossible to survive on one income. Utahns feel an added pinch because not only are they 44th out of the 50 states in per capita income, they have twice the national birthrate as well. A large Salt Lake corporation did a survey of its employees and discovered that 58 percent of its female employees were working as breadwinners—not as supplemental wage earners.

Much of the so-called radicalization of women comes after they have—of necessity—entered the work force. For many, jumping into that hard, cold, man's world is like being thrown into an icy pool. It wakes them up. When women enter that world, they very soon learn "what all the fuss is about."

For one: Even though equal pay for equal work laws have been on the books for many years, in reality it is not happening. What is happening is that female high school graduates still earn less than men who have not finished elementary school, and women with four years of college make less than men with an eight grade education.  

In 1955 a woman made 63.9 cents for every dollar a man made. By 1978 it had gone down to 59.4 cents. And this at a time when more and more women were entering the labor force as breadwinners—not as supplemental wage earners. Both sexes for years had accepted the wage disparity because of the perceived need for a man to be the family bread-winner. But now, even though more and more women are having to play that role also, men are still perceived by employers to be worth more. Utah's record regarding the wage gap is very poor. It ranks second from the bottom--with women earning 53.3 cents to every dollar earned by men. The only occupations where women make over 70 cents to the dollar for men were in such "non-traditional" areas as: MD's and Dentists, Engineers, Computer Specialists, Teachers, Public Administration and Construction Workers. We should not be surprised to see women wanting to get into the construction business when they can make 92 cents for every dollar a man makes. Women are trying to get into traditionally men's jobs because that is where the money is and always has been; and they find that they cannot live and support a family on what a woman has traditionally made.

Resentment and frustration sometimes build because not only does a woman see herself receive less pay for the same work but she often sees less qualified men placed in positions over her; women are constantly being passed over for managerial positions because the boss believes that "a woman should never be over a man in anything."

Resentments also build because with all the talk of being "liberated" into the world of work which pays, most women are really liberated into two full time jobs: one in and one out of the home. A recent study at the University of Michigan confirmed other studies done in this area: As women have gone to work outside the home,

most men have not increased their household work load. In addition, the market place has not encouraged male help with women's double load as evidenced by the fact that when remedial acts like flexi-time schedules are incorporated in the workplace, they are available for women only. Larger and larger numbers of women are asking to see more of Father in the home as helpers—as well as disciplinarians.

As women enter the work force they are learning that they are valid and accepted in traditional female roles, but when they are compared to the adult norm in society they are often rated second class. You are no doubt familiar with some of the numerous studies done on the effects stereotyping has on both men and women. To highlight only a few:

1. At the University of Maryland a study was conducted where children from kindergarten through sixth grade were asked to select toys and occupations under one of the following instruction sets: 1) choose for a girl, 2) choose for a boy, 3) choose the best one. Results: Children made selections for boys and girls which were in accordance with culturally accepted stereotypes. However, the children's selections of the BEST toys and occupations more closely resembled those chosen for boys than those chosen for girls.

2. As boys and girls progress through school, the opinions of both sexes grow increasingly more positive toward males and increasingly more negative toward females. Both sexes are learning: Boys are worth more than girls.

3. In a study of undergraduates at the University of Michigan, it was noted that women equated intellectual achievement with a loss of femininity. In a testing situation the bright young college woman worries not only about failure but about success as well, and often displays a desire to actually avoid success.

4. A study of high school age students concluded that girls of high school age felt that male classmates disapproved of a woman using her intelligence.

5. In the Boverman study of 1970, three groups of clinicians were asked to describe what a healthy, mature, socially competent (a) adult, sex unspecified, (b) a man or (c) a woman should be. Results: The clinicians' descriptions of a mentally healthy, socially mature adult corresponded significantly more closely with the male than with the female stereotype. This

means that if a woman displays the adult characteristics she is considered by the clinicians to be pathological as a woman. The results confirm a double standard of mental/emotional health for men and women, with women perceived as significantly less healthy when judged by adult standards. Thus, according to the clinicians, for a woman judged to be ‘healthy’ in our society, she must conform to the sex-related behaviors acceptable to that society, even though those behaviors are considered less socially desirable and less healthy for the generalized competent, mature adult. The bright, competent women must then choose whether to behave as an ‘adult’ and perhaps risk being declared ‘unfeminine’ or adjust to the acceptable ‘role’ society has given her, assume a second-class adult status, and perhaps live a lie as well.  

During childhood a young Mormon girl faces a paradox: She is supposed to acquire the proper gender identity, and the standards of culturally held sex roles. And yet the characteristics that she is supposed to acquire are less valued by the culture in which she lives than are those of the opposite sex. How our young girls deal with this paradox when they become aware of it and how well adult Latter-Day Saint women deal with it throughout the span of their lives should be of major concern. Are there attitudes perpetuated in our Latter-Day Saint culture that make it difficult for men and women truly to view each other as equal creations in the eyes of our Heavenly Father, and therefore impede us in some way in our progress of becoming gods--together? And is such attitude being perpetuated, what affect are they having on the Latter-Day Saint woman’s mental and spiritual health?

Mormon women, listening to what the prophet is saying, are beginning to demand their birthright blessings as daughters of God. They are listening to and internalizing temple and gospel teachings and more and more are realizing they don’t read of “gods and clinging vines” or “priests and shrinking violets.” They have been brought up to be respectful of and obedient to the “priesthood”—but too often have interpreted that to mean being subservient to all men. In true priesthood/patriarchal order, the Lord did not intend that every woman should be subject to every man.

Many women have been acted upon, told what to do, and when and how to do it most of their lives, but after hearing the Prophet say:


they are saying, “I want to be in such a partnership! I don’t want to play the child anymore!”

I will now briefly list a few of the needs of Mormon women as I see them, breaking them down into three general areas: One, basic human needs, two, needs a woman might have in a counseling situation, and three, special needs a woman feels because of the added dimension in her life gained from learning gospel principles.

Basic Human Needs:

She needs to know that she is a child of God, valuable and precious. She needs to feel loved, and feel a degree of self-esteem. She needs to feel she has control over her life, to have input in decisions affecting her. In short, she needs to exercise agency. Those thoughts were taken from a Relief Society lesson on Mother Education in how to raise a child. A mother is instructed to implant these important concepts in the minds of her children—and in many cases she is handicapped because she, herself, does not experience them in her own life. I have heard women complain, as I am sure you have, “I have not participated in a single major decision affecting my life since the day I was married.” The description in the Relief Society lesson continued: “[She] needs close loving relationships. [She] needs love... Everyone needs to be shown affection—to be hugged and kissed....” As I read these I thought: These are not only children’s needs—or women’s needs—or men’s needs. These are human needs. We all need affection; we all need to be loved, we all need to have feelings of self-confidence and to see ourselves as capable, contributing human beings. And we all need to feel we have input in decisions which affect our lives, that we have a right to exercise the free agency God granted to us (and that we fought for!) in the pre-existence—which will give us some control over our own lives.

In many studies, which you know much better than I, marriage is too often seen to increase happiness for the male, and decrease it for the female. One such study describes it as a problem of power.... The person in the relationship who has the most power—to make decisions about where to live, how to earn money, how to spend it, etc.—was almost always the man. The person with less power—usually the woman—tried to seek power in manipulative or artificial ways.


In a statement to a group of psychiatrists, Marjorie Braude said, "Any group that is systematically invalidated economically, socially, and ideologically suffers thereby in its mental health. Their self-concept suffers; there's a lower level of aspiration, a higher incidence of depression." 21

Many women have been conditioned to be silent; "Don't complain." "Accept your lot." "Remember you are responsible for the tones and atmosphere in your home. If things go wrong, it is your responsibility." As a result of such conditioning, there are women all across the country who tend to take responsibility (credit) for all the bad things that happen in their families whether it be the children's bad grades ("If only I were a better mother..."), the husband's business failures ("I need to be a better wife"), or the quality of the marital relationship itself. Yet when things go well, the American woman is far more likely to attribute the successes in her life to external forces or "luck," than to take credit for them herself. 22

In a survey in 1978 to which 52,000 women across the country responded, it was found that the American women who rated highest on the happiness charts are the ones who are middle-aged, just past menopause, and unburdened by their now-grown children. Of particular note: they are the women who all along have had access to satisfaction in both family life and outside work. Basically, they are women who feel they have had some control over their own lives. They have an identity of their own. They are more than just someone's wife, or someone's mother— they are individuals of worth all by themselves. One of the most dramatic findings of the study was that the older women who were highest on the happiness scale had not taken the easy way; they had not been free of conflict, hurt, or even tragedies. Their hardships and losses were as great as their miserable contemporaries. One reason for their success: they had weened themselves from a crippling dependency on other people's approval, and had begun to validate themselves. 23

A woman needs not to have to feel guilty— about everything—all the times. She needs to internalize that when things go wrong, it is not always her fault. She needs to have the insight, courage and integrity to place the right monkeys on the right backs. The "happy face to the world" syndrome may become necessary because she feels that if everything is not all right, something may therefore be wrong with her. A woman needs to recognize this syndrome for what it is: unloving behavior. It demonstrates a lack of love for herself and others. Allow-

23. Ibid., p. 54.
by himself. A woman is often taught she is worthy as she is an adjunct to someone else. What then of the women who are single, divorced or who have problem-laden children? They often feel they have not only failed as wives or as mothers, but have failed as women as well. I’m sure that you have seen such clients in your various practices.

A woman needs the dignity of not having to ask for money every time she needs to shop. If she does not have money of her own, her husband should see that she has some—no matter how small or large the amount—for which she does not have to make an accounting.

She needs to hear her own name, and feel a sense of identity in it. One woman recently commented that she was brought up short recently to realize she had not heard her own name for months. She was always “so and so’s wife,” or “so and so’s mother.” She was beginning to wonder if she, as an individual, existed.

A woman needs (and has a right) to receive nurturing as well as to give it. She has a right to be depressed without having her morality questioned. She needs to feel there is a safe place, somewhere, where she can share how she feels without fear of reprisal, condemnation or ostracism and to be free of a fear or suggestion that she is headed for excommunication if she either disagrees with or speaks up to a man.

A woman needs help to overcome feelings of inadequacy when she feels she never really measures up, no matter how hard she tries or what she actually accomplishes.

She needs to learn what female bonding is all about and that she not only can, but should, have strong female relationships. Men gain such bonding with other men through sports, priesthood relationships, etc. Only forty-five minutes in Relief Society once a week will not do it for many. Women need to nurture strong female friendships which will not only give support in times of stress when they need it, but will help them greatly to enrich the dimensions of their lives.

Family economic structure was drastically altered at the time of the industrial revolution when industry slipped from home to factory. Husband and wife were no longer “working together” (as men and women had been doing since Adam and Eve) and both their roles within the family changed. Many women also went to work in factories in the last century, but as wages increased for men, it became a status symbol for a man to have a non-working, stay-at-home wife. The feelings generated then are still with us today as many men feel that they are failures if their wives must—or do—work.

The responsibilities that have fallen to women the last 200 years have also changed dramatically because of the industrial revolution. With modern retail outlets available, a woman can have accomplished the equivalent of a week of her great grandmother’s work by noon on Monday. A woman needs a sense of personal identity. She needs to develop a political philosophy of her own, not just

a rubber stamp of someone else's thinking. She needs to know that righteous following of the priesthood does not require that she be mindless or opinionless, or that the admonition to "be beautiful in the home" means that she is to be purely ornamental. A woman needs to feel that she has great worth apart from any "counting system." Many women tend to determine worth in terms of numbers: "number" of children, "number" of bottles of fruit canned, "number" of projects, and now, "number" of dollars earned.

A woman needs to feel she is not or should not be, in competition with other Mormon women. "Patty Perfect" may not be the right model for her. She needs to feel she has a direction in her life; that she is not just floating. She needs not to feel guilty when she uses abilities that the Lord has given her, when those abilities are non-traditional in the culture in which she lives.

The women's movement has caused larger and larger numbers of women to become more aware of inequities in the world. In a recent update of a survey done ten years ago, it was found that women are a long way culturally, psychologically, and socially from where they were ten years ago.23 They have grown more sensitive to all the kinds of discrimination they have to deal with in almost every area of their lives. And although an overwhelming 94 percent of the women interviewed favored marriage as a way of life, it is seen increasingly as a responsibility to be shared by both husband and wife.

Change is part of life and women need to know that change is not only okay but can be exciting. Rigidity can be stifling and damning. She needs to look at alternatives: housing, food, children, jobs. There is not just one acceptable life pattern for every woman in the church, i.e.—"all Mormon women are....", "all single people feel....", "all mothers will....", etc.

A woman needs to grow mentally, emotionally and spiritually just as fully as a man! Her problem is to find a proper avenue and place in which to experience this needed growth. Sometimes she feels trivialized by her husband, her Bishop, her Stake President, her counselor (or whomever) when she makes a suggestion, expresses an opinion, or tries to describe her feelings about herself and her world. And because she does not want to appear to be what she feels she is not, namely disobedient to authority, extremist in her views, becoming a 'women's libber,' etc. she often remains silent. You no doubt see such clients with symptoms of depression, illnesses—both physical and mental, etc. She may or may not be aware of what her real problems are.

In most instances women's equality, in the home and in the workplace, strengthens the family and enables it better to resist dehumanization. Families are easier to control when women are passive and dependent. One of the first acts of the Nazis when they took over Germany was to take away some of the rights of women. Despite all the rhetoric, the family has never ranked very high on the political and economic agenda—except as a unit to which to sell things. It basically has been a man's world.

As women begin to take their place on the economic and political scene, perhaps those agendas will, finally, truly include the family, and begin to take it seriously.

From a Counseling Perspective:

It must be kept in mind that many Mormon women are used to having men tell them what to do and how to think. There may be a temptation for a counselor, also, to tell her what to do. Being told to go home to pray and fast and repent about her problems may not help her at all if her problem is with prayer. Being told to talk it over with her husband may not help if he is the problem and she simply does not have the skills to break the negative downward cycle their relationship has assumed. Yes, she knows that she is a child of God, she had heard it and sung it a thousand times—but if she has not internalized it, and does not have the skills to help her stand up for herself as a child of God, that piece of information will not help her.

There is a tendency for us to think of men as individuals—and women as roles. What do women need? What do wives need? What do mothers need? Women tend to be put in pigeon holes the minute they take on a new relationship: wife, mother. At those points there are many things that they are assumed to be, to think and to do. My understanding of a therapist's responsibility is to help clients understand their own values, and then help them deal positively with those values; because, given the proper coping skills, human beings are capable of curing themselves.

Since some Mormon women have been trained all their lives to depend on men, it is very important, if the therapist is male, that it be made clear to the client that he is not going to tell her what to do, or to solve her problems for her. She if often not used to having herself as a change agent, and that very vision of herself must change. She has a responsibility to take action in her own life. Very often a man may be at the root of her problem: a husband, a boss, a lover. Often he either cannot, or will not, come for help with her, and the therapist cannot deal with him directly. The woman must learn, therefore, how she can initiate change in the relationship, and cope with it alone. It is important not to make assumptions that if there is trouble in the relationship, the woman is the cause—even if she is taking all the blame. Remember: she has probably been taught all her life that if the relationship isn't working it will be her fault.

Life cannot be reduced to a formula, it is not simple, and we should not pretend it is. If a woman is told by her Bishop or counselor or whoever, that her problems can be solved by prayer and fasting, and she does, and the

problems are not solved, her guilt will increase, her depression will go deeper, and it will be that much harder to help her out of whatever pit she is in. If a person is having problems building something and is hung up because he or she does not know how to use a power drill, we do not say, "Pray and fast about your problem and you will be able to solve it." We teach that person how to use a power drill! If a woman is having difficulties because she does not know how to deal with a man exhibiting chauvinistic behavior, she needs to be taught skills in how to make changes in herself which will help her deal positively with that relationship. And she very well might have a basic built-in fear of change as evidenced in women who will remain in relationships for years where they are beaten regularly. Many women are conditioned to be silent. Verbally standing up for themselves, their ideas, their opinions--indeed their rights, does not come easy to them. As they make progress and have early successes, it is important not to assume the war is won. Watch for sustained change; a steady strengthening of the back bone. It took two years after one woman announced to her husband one night that she "was not going to be one of the children anymore!" before the reverberations in their relationship leveled to the degree that the counselor felt the marriage would last. It did. Two years later the marriage was a thousand times better than it had ever been before. But the changes did not take place overnight--or even after many months.

If it is necessary for a woman to be given medication, make sure that she knows what she is taking, what she might expect from the reactions to it, what is in it, etc. No one should be told to take anything into his or her body without being given information on the drug's contents and its possible effects. Prescription drug abuse among American (and Mormon) women is a very serious problem.

One final caution: Watch for biases in yourselves and make sure that you are not treating your non-LDS clients as individuals, and your LDS clients as roles: i.e., "You really aren't depressed, you're just an overworked mother and you need a rest." She may be tired yet still have some very serious problems that rest alone will not cure.

The Gospel Dimension

Women today are in a position similar to Blacks in the civil rights push of the sixties. The basic issue there was one of power: Blacks wanted a piece of the action, their share of the pie. Power in the country was then (and still is) basically in the hands of white males; and the blacks wanted a share of it. Now, women are asking for a share of the pie, too.

The context in which I shall use "power" here is "The ability to cause or prevent change." It goes without say-


Gently! Not with a heavy hand!

The Lord has restored to earth the most awesome power ever known to man or to the world--priesthood power: the power to act in the name of God. By this power the worlds were made, rivers are turned from their courses, mountains are leveled or raised, disease is eliminated, and the blind are made to see. The Lord, knowing that power can corrupt, and that absolute power can corrupt absolutely, placed severe restrictions on the use of priesthood power. He noted that some men, when given a little authority, tended to exercise unrighteous dominion--and he warned that whenever that happened, it would be amen to the priesthood of that man. Throughout the entire Gospel of Jesus Christ the Lord is trying to teach us to deal with each other the same way he deals with us: as equal beings endowed with free agency. He presented the plan of free agency before the world was; the plan was accepted by his Father, and we all fought a battle supporting that plan. Now that we are here, our Fathers honors that free agency, and we are continued on p. 32
allowed to succeed, to fail, to be good, to be evil, to follow his plan or not to follow his plan. HE does not coerce his children. He relates to us on a love-trust level—not fear-anxiety level—and desires for us to relate to each other on the same level. Unfortunately most of our relationships limp along on a telestial, fear/anxiety level or on a terrestrial, duty/justice level. We order about our children, our spouses, our employees, etc., because too often our influence alone will not bring about the action we desire. I learned a powerful lesson from my Father in this area. When we were children and would ask, “Father can I do such and such?”—a question which required some judgment to answer. Rather than saying “No,” (and perhaps triggering rebellion in us) he would say, “I would rather you didn’t, but the decision is up to you.” The monkey was put where it belonged. We knew that we would be responsible for whatever action we took. I knew my father loved me, that he knew in his wisdom what was best for me, and I don’t ever remember after being given such counsel going and doing it anyway! “...even so, you are free to choose for yourselves.”

Men—and women—need to reassess in their minds that righteous power is the power to be, not to have. The power of the priesthood is built not by putting controls on, but by building controls within. For example, righteous priesthood power over children is demonstrated when one look of disappointment at a particular behavior is all the punishment the child needs. If that were the kind of power being exercised in every Latter-Day Saint home, as well as on every level of Church governance, we would not be hearing Mormon women complain of feeling “powerless” in their homes or in the Church. Coercive or heavy-handed pressure—even for so-called righteous reasons—is tampering on Satan’s turf, and both men and women would be well advised to stay out of it.

In conclusion: Mormon women’s psycho-social needs are not very different from non-Mormon women—or from men. Possibly the main difference is that she sees “equality” not as a women’s liberation issue, but with an eternal perspective: ultimately she must be equally yoked to an eternal companion if she is to make the celestial kingdom and have eternal offspring. She cannot do that if she is either unable to or incapable of taking her rightful place beside the man—not one step behind him or one step down. She wants her rightful place in eternity—and the chance to prepare for it here, unencumbered by the stereotypes and restrictions often placed upon her in Satan’s world.

And that, as I perceive it, is what Mormon women want and need.