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WOMEN WORKING AT HOME

Did you think that "homework" is a word that means lessons which children carry home and do in after-school hours? That kind of homework seems to have gone out of style in the last decade. Today, the word "homework" is more apt to mean something very different — women working at home for profit.

Homework is the way more than five million women are forging a practical modus operandi between their need for cash income and their need to care for their children in the home. Homework allows mothers to be available to attend to their children's daily needs, and to adjust their work schedule to comport with their domestic responsibilities.

Some women have always been able to work at a little business in the home. In the 1940s, my grandmother met her urgent need for cash by crocheting purses and selling them at the local women's exchange.

But those who follow societal megatrends can see that the new technology mushrooming everywhere is a great liberator that can make it possible for multi-millions of women to choose their own working conditions in the home rather than be tied to certain hours in an office or factory. Experts predict that as much as 20 percent of the work force will be able to work in the home before the end of this century.

The University of Southern California's Center for Future Research predicts that, in ten years' time, there could be five million Americans working at computer terminals in their own homes at tasks ranging from data processing to accounting. This could be the answer to the employment problem of mothers of small children, half of whom are now in the paid labor force.

Sol Chaiken, president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and a vice president of the AFL-CIO, is upset about the prospect of millions of women working at home. In a 20th century equivalent of Marie Antoinette's "let them eat cake," Chaiken cavalierly says, "If supporters of homework claim that it is necessary to enable mothers to keep their children safely supervised during the day, I would instead encourage them to

put their energies to use in establishing a system of high quality, inexpensive day care centers."

But, Mr. Chaiken, that's exactly what these mothers have achieved when they do their homework: high-quality, inexpensive day-care for their children, provided with loving constancy by their mothers. They don't need to look elsewhere for what they already have.

The real reason Mr. Chaiken doesn't like homework is that these women are independent entrepreneurs who don't need unions. They can set their own hours, decide the quality of their own work environment, and work as much or as little as they please. They don't have to put up with bossy supervisors or disagreeable fellow-workers, and they don't have to pay transportation costs to get to a job across town.

In 1943 the Labor Department issued some regulations, under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, banning industrial homework in seven industries. In 1981, in response to protests from Vermont women, Labor Secretary Ray Donovan removed the regulation that prohibited workers from making knitted outerwear in their homes. In November 1983, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia overturned Donovan's action, calling it "arbitrary and capricious."

Senator Orrin Hatch's Freedom in the Workplace Act (S. 2145), currently pending in the Senate Labor Committee, would accomplish what Donovan tried to do. It would render the 1943 Labor Department regulations ineffective.

Marion Behr, founder of the National Alliance of Homebased Businesswomen, thinks that homework is the best way to meet the two objectives of most wives and mothers: giving their children the best available care and earning necessary income. She estimates that there are today 32,000 preschoolers without daytime supervision as well as 2 million latchkey children whose mothers could profit by her book.

Mrs. Behr and Wendy Lazar are the co-authors of "Women Working Home," a remarkably complete and motivating manual for the homebased entrepreneur. It is chock-full of ideas for women to earn money from a homebased business. The authors have discovered the existence of some 200 homebased occupations.

This book tells women how to set goals, generate the idea and incentives, organize their actions, market and promote their product. It provides a wealth of advice with details, from the business card to the computer. (Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA, $12.95)