

Women's Lives and U.S. Public Policy— Where We Are Now

THIS IS A FATEFUL TIME FOR THE UNITED STATES. Two distinct visions for the country were pitted against each other in the recent elections. Clearly, women's rights are still in question; civil rights are seen by some as irrelevant; and the federal budget deficit looms without a consensus as to its importance or how to fix it.

Public policy decisions, which often seem about war and the budget, are, in fact, always about women as well. Though we must focus on "women's issues," we must not lose sight of the importance for women of economic and military issues, Supreme Court and other judicial court appointments, and even environmental policies. As the Wellesley Centers for Women motto goes: "A world that is good for women is good for everyone."

—JEAN HARDISTY

HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARIZE ADVANCES FOR WOMEN MADE DURING RECENT ADMINISTRATIONS?

In the last four years, advances for women have been mixed at best. On the plus side, President Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which gives women more time to file for pay discrimination based on gender. Hillary Clinton, as Secretary of State, has raised women's issues to a new level of importance in foreign policy—for example, by instructing U.S. embassies to develop local strategies to empower women politically, economically, and socially. And the White House created a White House Council on Women and Girls, though its effectiveness is hard to gauge.

Of course, there's no doubt in my mind that the Affordable Health Care Act will benefit women of all ages in the short and long run. And significantly, President Obama appointed two women to the Supreme Court. The importance of this cannot be understated, since the Supreme Court virtually holds women's fate in its hands and later I'll want to say more about that.

On the other hand, reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act has been blocked by House Republicans for at least five months. This action is usually a pro-forma exercise to reauthorize federal funding for services to victims of rape, domestic violence, and stalking. It's hard to believe it's being blocked. If you de-fund rape crisis centers, that pushes everything back.

In both George W. Bush's administrations, low-income women especially have been devastated by cuts in the social safety net, and by the work demands of "welfare reform," which impose some unrealistic burdens on women in hard economic times. Obama's hands are tied, making it hard for him to maintain the social safety net at an acceptable level.

SAY MORE ABOUT THE SAFETY NET.

It has been diminished to a disgraceful degree. The reduction in services and support for low-income people, the mentally ill, those who are disabled, and children is shocking in a wealthy nation like ours. We have the highest rate of poverty—17 percent—among the 34 "peer countries" [in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], but one of the lowest levels of social expenditures. Clearly, that low level explains much of our higher rate of poverty.

But you didn't hear much talk about the constant erosion of basic services and benefits between 2000 and 2010. And now that food stamps are used increasingly because of high unemployment, the House of Representatives has passed a FY 2012 budget proposal that cuts food stamp aid to the states. Further, there have been battles in Congress over extending unemployment compensation during the recession.

With some of these issues, it's important to understand that a big but little-recognized villain is block grants.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “VILLAINOUS” BLOCK GRANTS?

Block grants are money that comes from the federal government to provide specific services, but falls under the control of the states. It was Ronald Reagan who fought so hard to get them, under the justification of “states’ rights.” He wanted to turn all the social service funding from the federal government into block grants, so the states would have more self-determination in how they wanted to spend it. Now that states are hard-pressed for cash to cover their budgets, they increasingly are motivated to play fast and loose with block grant money, sometimes asking for exemptions for certain programs they are experimenting with (usually granted), and often simply not accounting for how the money was spent.

TELL US MORE ABOUT THE PICTURE FOR LOW-INCOME WOMEN.

Low-income women have been particularly hard hit by the recession, and the safety net is one of the favorite places for budget cuts. It’s been hard for Obama to fight that, but he has slipped some things in. In the stimulus package enacted very early in his administration, he targeted some money to low-income women. And that money had the virtue of not being block-granted; if states were required to spend it on Medicaid or child care, which was often the case, they had to. They couldn’t divert that money to something else.

A particular bind for women receiving welfare benefits is that they now face time limits on benefits—five years in a lifetime—as well as requirements to work; and when jobs are scarce or nonexistent, these requirements become unrealistic. When higher-paid workers become unemployed, they apply for the jobs at the bottom of the pay scale, further crowding those already there. So the unemployment of low-income women has doubled. They need to work to get welfare, but there are so few jobs—they’re between a rock and a hard place. Like others in the country, they are more under-employed today than in decades.

Obama has tried to address this bind with stimulus money and a waiver of the work requirement for states that request it. But many Republicans fight these efforts as

being “soft on welfare.” Many of these women are single mothers. In 2009, 34 percent of single mothers were unemployed, as opposed to 12.5 percent of all workers.

The push to cut back on food stamps is a particularly shocking blow. It’s based on the idea that poor people use the safety net not because they need it, but because it’s there. This sort of ideological position encourages states to take block-grant money away from the poor to meet the states’ budget gaps.

Living on welfare is not the American dream. Most poor single parents would like to raise their children in a stable and prosperous family, and would be more than willing to work for a living wage to further that goal. The stereotype of welfare recipients as lazy, lacking the self-discipline and work ethic that would make them “deserving” of aid has been popularized by an organized movement of right-wing activists and politicians. In fact, a major victory of this has been in the public mind. The “deserving” and “undeserving” labels have been in contention since the founding of our current welfare system, but the distinction began to fade as a “welfare rights” movement attempted to abolish it in the 1960s and 1970s. Recently, it has been raised and trumpeted by the Tea Party in its organizing and media reach.

HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK THE TEA PARTY IS?

The TEA (Taxed Enough Already) Party seemed to be a spontaneous response to the election of Barak Obama and the collapse of the economy.

The Right always mobilizes when a Democrat is elected President, as liberal organizing is always invigorated by the election of a Republican president. But in the case of Barak Obama, Tea Party activism has been strikingly vicious and effective. Many of the “new” Republicans elected to Congress in 2010 are Tea Party followers, and their votes and blocking tactics show how well they represent the right wing of their party. Just four years ago, many of their positions were considered too extreme to be held by Republicans, and many are women. In fact, more than 17 percent of American women identify positively with the Tea Party.

The organized Right usually uses right-wing populism to mobilize its supporters—but in this case the added factor of big money has made organizing extremely effective. It’s unusual for corporate and industrial interests to unite with right-wing populism, because corporations need a stable and predictable government to work with. But Obama is seen as a person who favors regulations, who pushes a more even-handed tax policy, and favors workers’ rights.

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These are exactly the factors that can negatively affect business interests.

Besides, Obama has several characteristics that fortified each other to unite the Republican base: he is a Black man; he is charismatic; he is a mild liberal who's able to reach out to independents; and he's willing to use the military option if he thinks it's necessary. All these characteristics made him an acceptable alternative to Republican presidential candidates, and resulted in a particularly nasty campaign to try to unseat him. The Tea Party seems to be losing some steam. But even if it fizzles as a movement, it's already done substantial damage to the possibility of progressive reform. And most of those who joined the House Tea Party Caucus in 2010 were re-elected in 2012.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CURRENT ECONOMIC TRENDS FOR MEN?

Men have been hit very hard by the recession, especially those working in construction and manufacturing. Layoffs reached well into the middle class; even middle managers and men working in the financial sector lost their jobs. African American men fared worse than white men.

But as the country moves slowly out of recession, it seems that men are having a stronger recovery than are women. That may be partly because some of the weakened sectors are recovering, but also because men are increasingly moving into areas of employment previously dominated by women, such as private education and health care.

We can't talk about the economic situation of men without mentioning incarceration. We have the highest rate of incarceration in the world. A very high proportion of inmates are men of color, largely because of the racially discriminatory aspects of the war on drugs. That reality and our tough-on-crime policies have led to increased poverty. In many states, a record of incarceration makes it nearly impossible for a man to find and hold a job after he has been released, so unemployment and recidivism among this sector are very high. Massachusetts recently reformed its Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) laws that provided former felons with a major barrier to employment, housing, loans, and so forth. That's a step in a positive direction, but it's a rare one.

The New Jim Crow, by Michelle Alexander, is a superbly researched book that details the disproportionate incarceration of men of color due to the war on drugs and

tough-on-crime policies. I think it is also brilliant on how the Supreme Court has failed to defend human rights. It expresses one of the reasons I'm so concerned about the importance of the Supreme Court.

BACK TO WOMEN. WHERE DO WE STAND IN TERMS OF ACCESS TO CONTRACEPTION?

The Catholic Church is currently protesting a provision of the Affordable Care Act that requires private health insurance plans to cover the costs of contraception. The Church has framed this as a matter of religious liberty, because providers who may oppose contraception will be required to provide it. Probably a compromise will be reached, which will undoubtedly come at the expense of some women's access to contraception.

But in general, opponents of contraception are, in my opinion, somewhat weakened. Abstinence-only programs have not proved effective, and the outcry over the Susan G. Koman Foundation's decision (which has since been reversed) against the funding of Planned Parenthood indicates the support that women's health and reproductive rights have gained. On the other hand, access to abortion is perpetually under attack from abortion opponents, and has been whittled away to an alarming degree. The states and the House of Representatives keep launching bills that are later struck down as unconstitutional, so that the whole legislative process at the state and national level is tied up in defending against abortion restrictions. For anti-choice forces, this is like throwing confetti at a fan and hoping some of it gets through.

IN THAT REGARD, WHAT'S HAPPENING AMONG TEENAGED WOMEN?

For reasons not entirely known, birthrate and pregnancy rates among teen women have been declining. This may be due to increased awareness and availability of contraception, but may also be the result of education by teachers, social workers, and community activists about the difficulties of teen motherhood, especially single teen motherhood.

Here's a related point that's important for women of *all* child-bearing ages. In my opinion, we should be sure that women are free not only to prevent pregnancies, but also to become pregnant. But this right is under pressure from a provision in the 1996 Welfare Reform Law that's known as the "family cap," or "child exclusion." For a mother receiving welfare benefits who becomes pregnant, this provision allows a state to deny any increase in those benefits to help with expenses of the new baby. It's been adopted by 23 states. To punish a single mother and her child in order to control her reproductive activity is a denial of her most basic human rights.

This point is important to my heart. Young women almost always benefit from delaying childbirth. But for women to be

accorded their full reproductive rights, we need to protect the rights of even young women to have children, then protect the health and well-being of those children.

YOU'VE WRITTEN ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP OF MARRIAGE TO POVERTY—TELL US ABOUT THAT.

More than 50 percent of all births to women under 30 now take place outside of marriage, and single motherhood is statistically associated with higher rates of poverty. So it could appear that the declining marriage rate is to blame for increased poverty rates.

But it's dangerous to assume that the absence of marriage causes poverty. Social conditions for many single mothers in the U.S. are daunting. I've already mentioned the high incarceration rate of men of color; and unemployment is high in those communities and in low-income communities, so the ability of those men to serve as providers and fathers is severely compromised. The weak economy makes it harder for single mothers to find work, and cuts in social services have made it increasingly hard to raise a child alone or to attend school. Because education is the most reliable path out of poverty, lack of access to work and education are the real explanations for single motherhood and poverty.

LET'S TURN TO PUBLIC LIFE. WHAT ABOUT THE INCREASING PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN PUBLIC OFFICE?

I'm thrilled to see more women becoming politically active, but I'd be more comforted by the increased number of women in public office—though it's occurring largely at the state level—if it were always true that elected women supported equal justice and reproductive rights for all women. It breaks my heart to see that some of those women are extremely conservative and traditionalist when it comes to women's rights. The right wing has mobilized support for women candidates who are anti-feminist, pro-marriage, and anti-abortion. Michele Bachmann is an obvious case in point. On other conservative issues, such as gun control, militarism, opposition to affirmative action, and opposition to government social programs, a Republican woman candidate is also expected to toe the line. If she doesn't, she's going to be challenged in the primary by a candidate to her right. It's a signature practice of the Tea Party—to run candidates to the right of existing Republican office holders, bump them out, and replace them with Tea Party representatives.

LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT KEY CONCERNS SHOULD WE ADDRESS IN THE NEXT FOUR YEARS?

In our nation where a large middle class and a moderate rate of inequality have been points of pride, we need to raise

public awareness of our growing income gap, and to identify which groups are losing ground in our economy so policies can be developed that reverse these trends.

We need to address the fact that poverty, poor health, unemployment, incarceration, and lack of access to reproductive health services and child care are all disproportionately high in communities of color.

The level of inequality in public education between schools in poor neighborhoods and schools in wealthy neighborhoods is a national disgrace.

And these issues often are arbitrated by the Supreme Court which has recently shown little support for civil rights and the protection of workers. Future appointments to the Supreme Court and the confirmation of those appointments by the Senate are issues of major concern for the next four years.

Those appointments are important for the future of all public policy issues, and especially for those issues we traditionally think of as women's issues, such as: further efforts to decrease women's access to abortion and contraception; attempts to weaken gender discrimination laws; or reluctance to hold firm on funding and policy regarding violence against women. Such attacks may very well be pushed back only by a Supreme Court that stands firm on women's rights.

SPECIFICALLY, HOW MIGHT WOMEN RESPOND?

Women must find their own ways to respond. If you're comfortable with marching in rallies, that's fine. If you're comfortable writing letters, or putting stamps on letters, or speaking on the radio, that's fine. Don't try to do what you're not comfortable doing because you won't last as an activist. One of the things the Right has done very skillfully is give women means to express themselves politically without leaving their kitchen tables.

Pushing people out of their comfort zones is a great mistake that's sometimes made by progressive movements. But not providing constant encouragement and constant paths to activism—and to leadership, if women can and want to do that—is an equally big mistake. I believe we each have talent to contribute to advocacy for a more just society, but we must make our own path, not forgetting to celebrate our successes. We can make a better world for women, which will be a better world for all. ■



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