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**FEMINISM VS. FAMILISM:
RESEARCH AND POLICY FOR THE 1990's**

**BY
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My name is Roberta Spalter-Roth and along with teaching in the Women's Studies Program at the George Washington University, I am Director of Research at the Institute for Women's policy research. The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) is a feminist think tank devoted to doing research on policy issues affecting women's lives and to developing networks between the research, policy and advocacy communities.

My task today is to discuss family research and policy from a feminist perspective. A feminist perspective, in my view, is one that sees hierarchical gender relations, along with hierarchical race and class relations as a core principal of social organization and takes as its mission the necessity of overcoming these inequalities in order to improve women's lives. As we will see these inequalities in gender, race or class are often either masked or are seen as natural or functional in family research and policymaking. My task today is to unmask them and to suggest that family policy that has as its goals keeping families together or strengthening families at the cost of women's well-being are misguided. To illustrate the importance of unmasking inequalities within as well as between families and the importance of determining what we can do to as policy researchers, policy analysts and policy advocates in order to improve women's lives, I will discuss six interrelated issues. These are: (1) The recent economic, social and demographic

changes in women's lives; (2) The need to deconstruct "the family" as the unit of analysis; (3) The specific methodological problems with research that underpins social policy; (4) The resulting need for a feminist standpoint in doing policy research and analysis;

(5) The specific kinds of research we need to do and (6) The specific policies we need to support.

Changes in Women's Lives

Since the end of the 1950's women have taken advantage of such factors as birth control and household technology, the curtailment of families activities, industrial shifts and the growth of service sector jobs, and even economic crises such as recession and inflation to change their lives. In what follows I will suggest that the result of the changes has been increased economic autonomy for women, on the one hand, but, on the other hand a lack of policies to improve their well-being, and their ability to integrate the salient aspects of their lives.

Women's Increasing Economic Independence

Despite the low wages, lack of benefits, involuntary part-time hours and lack of mobility that characterize many women's jobs, women have taken advantage of their availability and have, as a result, increased their economic autonomy. As a result of the enormous increase in labor force participation, American women have gained an unprecedented measure of economic

independence.¹ The increasing tendency of women to head their own households for longer periods of time rather than living with relatives is a manifestation of this autonomy.²

The growth of female-headed households is not the only manifestation of this revolutionary social transformation. The earnings of married women with children grew from 30 to 40 percent of their husbands' earnings. Not only are increasing numbers of women responsible for themselves and their children, but they are also largely responsible for preventing large declines in family income in married couple households. Between 1973 and 1983 family income dropped by three percent, but it would have dropped by 10 percent without the additional paid work of married women.³ As a result women have a greater say in

1. This perspective is forcefully argued by Heidi I. Hartmann, "Change in Women's Economic and Family Roles in Post-World War II United States in Lourdes Beneria and Catherine M. Stimpson (eds.) Women, Household and the Economy, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986). In claiming that women have gained economic independence from men, Hartmann does not discount the reality of economic dislocation and female poverty.

2. Others would argue that the increase of female-headed households from 21 to 28% from 1970 to 1987 is a manifestation of social breakdown, especially in the black community where black men are seen as increasingly unable to support families as a result of the loss of decently paying manufacturing jobs. See, William J. Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.) While we do not wish to minimize the employment losses and lack of opportunities for many black men, we regard the argument that female-headed families are social problems as retrogressive. Women's as well men's wages should be able to support families.

3. Joint Economic Committee, Working Mothers are Preserving Family Living Standards.

family decision making.⁴

During the past two decades the pay gap between women and men has even decreased slightly. The earnings ratio of women's to men's wages increased from 59.7 cents to every \$1.00 to 64.3 cents for every \$1.00. Although 25 percent of this increase represents a decline in men's earnings as a result of the erosion of primary tier jobs, 75 percent does not.⁵ Women are doing paid work for longer parts of their lifetimes. The average women's work life is now 76 percent as long as the average man's -- up from 32 percent in 1940.⁶ All these statistics indicate that women are no longer a reserve labor force able to be pulled in and pushed out of the work force because they only work for "pin money".

The Price of Economic Independence

Although the unprecedented rise in women's labor force participation has resulted in greater economic independence, women pay a heavy price for this social transformation. The

⁴ Jane C. Hood's research shows that when women earn more than one-third of household income, the balance of power in decision making changes and the married couples' relationship becomes more egalitarian. (Becoming a Two-Job Family. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983).

⁵ National Committee on Pay Equity, "Briefing Paper on the Wage Gap," September 18, 1987. This trend has especially hurt black men.

⁶ Heidi I. Hartmann, "Women's Work, Economics Trends, and Policy Issues." Paper presented at Organizing and Representing Professional Technical and Salaried Women at the George Meany Labor Studies Center, May 2, 1988.

number of female-headed households with below poverty income, despite their participation in the work force, has also grown. In 40 percent of the poor single-mother headed families with children, the mother worked at least part time.⁷ Women of color are proportionally most likely to be among the working poor.

And despite their increasingly high rates of labor force participation and their greater role in family decision making, women still do the primary work of caring for new-born babies, sick children, husbands, elderly parents and in-laws. This responsibility has led to the increased reliance on day care centers in the absence of family members such as grandmothers, sisters, and aunts to care for children. Child care costs are usually considered women's responsibility and these costs now consume nearly 10 percent of a household's budget and 20 percent of a poor household's budget.⁸ Caring for elderly parents, an especially likely task for women between the ages of 45 and 64, has increasingly become a burden borne by working women.⁹

They have begun to organize political for policies that not only extend the more traditional wage and hours benefits but

7. As cited in "Children and Families in Poverty: A Fact Sheet." Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, U.S. House of Representatives, n.d.

8. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Who's Minding the Kids, Current Population Reports, Household Economic Studies, Series P-70, No. 9, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C. 1987.

9. See for example studies cited in Exploding the Myths: Caregiving in America. A Study by the Subcommittee on Human Services of the Select Committee on Aging of The U.S. House of Representatives, Committee Publication No. 99-611, January, 1987.

for new standards such as child care, health benefits for part-time workers and family leave policies. This is the social context for the new movement for policies that recognizes the central role of women in the new American economy while simultaneously recognizing the burden of work that they bear in caring for households and family members.

It is my view that research and policymaking that mask this dual burden by failing to view caring activity as work or alternatively see women's labor force activity as done only to improve their families' living standards reduce support for these new policies. To increase support requires deconstructing "the family" so that women's needs and interests can be seen seperately.

Deconstructing the Family

In contrast to many family researchers and policy advocates who take as their mandating "strengthening the family, reinforcing family responsibilities, increasing marital stability and parent-child bonds, preventing family problems" and so forth, feminist researchers such as Hartmann (1981) and Berk (198) refer to the family as "the locus of gender and political struggle" and "the gender factory," respectively. In general, feminist critics of "the family" have recognize marriage as a hierarchical gender relation. They have recognized that social policy (or the lack thereof) frequently legitmating these inequalities in which women are responsible for the major portion of unpaid housework, child and elder care and this activity is not rewarded as socially

necessary labor but rather is seen as something "good mothers should do out of love and duty. Most feminists therefore do not view the family as an equalitarian, resource sharing unit although they are, of course, aware of the cooperative aspects of family life including intimacy, emotional security, caring and the redistribution of income from waged to non-waged family members. However, as an antidote to the widespread acceptance of the ideology of "strengthening the family unit (often disregarding the costs to women of so doing), many feminists emphasize the family along with the workplace a locus of women's oppression and the site for change. These changes are more likely to come when we routinely deconstruct the family and look at differing positions of its individual members and the relations between them.

Feminists have been somewhat successful in redefining the family in more feminist terms. Witness the widespread support for some form of child care and parental leave. They have been somewhat successful in gaining recognition for the fact that women's needs and interests may conflict with those of other family members (remember Jesse Bernard's famous marriage his and marriage hers in The Future of Marriage); and they have been somewhat successful in getting women's work counted (the increasing recognition, for example, that women have to quit jobs in order to care for elderly family members). Nonetheless much of the research and analysis which is used as a basis for policy making is sexist, familistic (and racist and classist).

Problems with the Research

In order to understand our changing society we must understand the position, the activities and the experiences of American women are different than men's. We cannot simply look at the world of men and add in women as an afterthought. Nor can we assume that "women" is a sufficient category of analysis, that women are all alike, that they have equal access to resources, similar experiences and similar goals. Rather we must analyze the differences among women as they vary by race, ethnic group, economic class, geographic region, age, and marital status as well as analyzing the commonalities among them; commonalities such as working, caring for families, struggling for adequate resources and increasingly fighting for their own autonomy as well as their families' well being.

Problems of race and gender insensitivity, overgeneralization based on the experiences of only one population group, and double standards and ideological notions of sex appropriate behavior can show up at all stages of the data gathering, analysis and dissemination process. Some that need to be eliminated in order to provide a valid basis for policymaking are:

(1) Concepts and measures that are insensitive to gender and race/ethnicity and as a result render population groups invisible in the collection, analysis and distribution of data.

Until 1980 no long-term, comparable data on different women of color in the U.S. were available. Since then, the decennial

census of population and housing is still the only data source that has numbers large enough to allow for the disaggregation of women of color into the six race/ethnic groups listed above. There are still reliability problems with these data collection effort, especially for the Hispanic population.

Equally problematic is lack of analysis and distribution of data on women of color. "Women" and "Minorities" are the most usual categories for the disaggregation and presentation of data. Women is usually translated to mean white women and data in government publications such as We the Black Americans, We the Hispanic Americans, We the Asian Americans are not broken out by gender. As a result, women of color are rendered invisible and generalizations based on averages are of questionable validity. Since the majority are concentrated in the lowest paying jobs, over represented among the least educated and in the greatest need of health care, housing and social support programs, more detailed information by subject area, by gender as well as race/ethnicity, by socio-economic status, and by stage in the life cycle are vitally necessary.

(2) Concepts, choice of variables and measures that reflect the activities of only one sex, where men are seen as actors, where male activities are the norm and women's activities are invisible or undervalued.

In the decennial Census and other government data collection efforts (such as the Current Population Survey and the Survey of Income and Program Participation) the majority of information is

collected about prime-age workers (more likely to be male) than about any other groups. Information of those who are older or not "working" because they are caring for families are of less interest. So basic is this distinction between wage work and non work or family that basic information is not available about the work done by women in families and family issues in the workplace.

Given the transformation in our work and family lives and the necessity to make public policy to deal with the transformations, answers to such basic questions as how many working women had babies last year (currently not available). the areas on which we need more information do not stop with working women's babies. We are also interested in housework. If wage workers can be asked how many hours did you work last week, so can house workers. And we are interested in reproductive work more generally--how many hours do women (and men) spend on taking care of their own health, the health of others, especially dependents such as disabled and elder family members. How much time do different groups of women (and men) have to rest and relax.

For those many women who are trying to balance work and family under difficult circumstances, we have little systematic on how many families get employer-provided help with child care, or how health care costs are met or what kinds of sick, disability, maternity, parental, vacation and/or medical leave are available.

Efforts to define and redefine poverty have not included measures that reflect the different dynamics of poverty experienced by women who maintain families alone. The poverty thresholds, developed on the basis of 1950s data and demographics, presume a two-parent family in which one adult is able to stay at home with time to prepare budget-stretching meals and care for children and dependents. More than half of poor families now do not fit that model, but instead are families maintained by women alone. Forty percent of these women work; childcare, for example, is a major cost not included or anticipated in poverty measures which assume two-parent families.

(3) Asymmetric concepts and measures premised on double standards or treatment of the sexes as two entirely discrete entities.

Double standards involves evaluating, treating, or monitoring identical behaviors, traits, activities or situations by different means based on the gender of the subject. Certain human activities or attributes, performed or found in both sexes are attributed to one sex only. An obvious example is the term "unwed mother" which not only reflects cultural biases but also places the onus of parenting on women only rather than on women and men. A most recent example are indicators designed to measure the growth of the urban "underclass." Underclass areas are defined as Census tracts with high values of indicators of social ills associated with the underclass. Two of the primary indicators are: the proportion of working age males not attached to the labor force and the proportion of households

headed by a woman with children. These indicators reflect sex-biased double standards in that they accept labor force participation as an appropriate adult male not female activity and raising children without a live-in man as a deviant behavior.

(4) Treating the family as the smallest unit of analysis as a unit in which individual family members are assumed to share uniform experiences, equal access to resources and to benefit (or suffer) equally from particular policies.

Some of the most widely used indicators of living standards treat the family, rather than its individual members or the relations between family members (e.g. husband/wife relations or parent/child relations) as the only relevant unit of analysis. Indicators such as average family income, per capita family income and family income/needs measures assume that family members have the same experiences, get and consume the same resources and change their living standards at the same rate. Small-scale studies that disaggregate the family to its members or to its basic relations, not only find significant differences in living standards, especially among low-income populations during periods of economic crises, but also find that members' living standards change at uneven rates. Another aspect of this methodological problem is to neglect the gender of family member being discussed. So, for example, a recent Reagan Administration policy document praised parents who stayed home to take care of children, sounding as if men and women were equally likely to do this task.

The result of these problems of gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status and age insensitivity in the collection, analysis or distribution of data result in gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status and age insensitivity in policy evaluations and recommendations. The result is a failure to understand the differential implications and effects of policies for different groups in the population. Changes in the methods for collecting, analyzing and distributing information are vitally necessary if we are to derive a valid understanding of the multiplicity of women's lives, assess how well or badly they are doing, understand their needs and make policy that can assist them in improving their lives.

The Dual Vision of Feminist Policy Research

Given these goals we must, on the one hand, do policy research that meets the standards of the mainstream social sciences of validity, reliability, objectivity, and replicability. On the other hand, our work is influenced by the principles of feminist methodology and especially by its challenge to the rigid dichotomies between researcher and researched and between activists and truth seekers (for useful discussions of the characteristics of feminist methodology see Cook and Fonow, 1986, and Harding, 1987). In addition, like

others of our generation we have been schooled in both social sciences and social movements (Bookman and Morgen, 1988).¹ The resulting study Unnecessary Losses, funded by the Ford Foundation, was IWPR's first major effort. As a policy research organization IWPR has the task of producing valid and reliable social science research that assesses the efficacy of proposed policy solutions to social problems and that can stand up to the critical scrutiny of agencies such as the Office of Management and Budget.² In contrast, as feminist researchers we must ask and answer such political questions as "Whose definition of a social problem is reflected in proposed policies?" and "To what extent do these policies treat women not as productive citizens or workers but rather as the social problem itself?" In short, we want to produce credible policy research that can be used by those groups attempting to use the policy process to improve women's lives. The result of these two goals is a form of policy research that incorporates our dual vision.

The dual vision is central to feminist theories of knowledge which see historically oppressed groups as simultaneously holding hegemonic as well as critical or oppositional views (Harding, 1987). To illustrate, we use the dominant policy research paradigm of welfare economics and its major tool, cost-benefit analysis, but we filter it through a feminist prism that views the reproduction of gender, race and class inequalities as a central feature of social life.

In the dominant welfare economics paradigm, the policy

researcher is considered to be an objective expert thought to be working in the public interest as an advisor to policymakers. He is assumed to know all the policy options and can quantify the costs and benefits of each. He will advise policymakers how and when the state should intervene to correct "market failure" (Bobrow and Dryzak, 1987, p.32). The state, like the policy researcher, is seen as a neutral arbitrator that uses results of cost-benefit analyses to moderate between interest groups in order to provide the greatest good for the greatest number.

When we produce policy research, we accept the standpoint of the objective expert using largely quantitative methods (rather than in-depth interviewing or participant observation) to evaluate policy options. And we use the dominant paradigm of cost-benefit analysis when it is appropriate. Cost-benefit analysis, with its assumption of the validity of monetary indicators that are usually divorced from feelings, consciousness and emotions, has been seen by its radical critics as an expression of dominant capitalist material values. Nevertheless we would argue, in a capitalist society, cost-benefit analysis can provide a valid indicator of the gains and losses of particular policy options to class, race and gender groups.

Unlike mainstream policy analysts, however, we also follow the principles of feminist research (Cook and Fonow, 1986). We view research as political as well as scientific. Given our concern with gender, race and class inequalities and the resulting devaluation of women's work and women's worth, we are

critical of hegemonic views that see only one public interest in cost-benefit analysis. We believe that state policy frequently acts in the interests of dominant class, race and gender groups, especially if grass-roots activists are kept from access. We want to do policy research that puts the interests of women--and the often uncounted costs and benefits of policies to them--at the center of the analysis. We reject that part of the objectivity canon that distances the production of knowledge from its uses and thus we apply a constituency test to see if research that we undertake will be of use to grass-roots groups in defining and solving problems.

This dual vision is reflected in the concepts and methodology of our study of family and medical leave. The study, Unnecessary Losses uses both the techniques of cost-benefit analysis and a feminist standpoint that places women's work at the center to evaluate a proposed policy. Our evaluation of the benefits of the proposed policy is done by evaluating the costs of the current lack of policy.

FOOTNOTES

1. It is interesting to note that earlier feminist writers about feminist policy research such as Jean Lipman-Blumen (1979) viewed researchers and activists as having contradictory interests -- the researcher in "truth" and the activist in "change." The idea that these goals are frequently carried in the same person and, if contradictory, lead to a useful synthesis is seen in the work of later feminists such as Bookman and Morgen (1988).

2. Currently Unnecessary Losses as well as a further study on the effect of state-level leave policy on small business growth done by Spalter-Roth and Willoughby (1988) for 9to5 National Association of Working Women is being critically reviewed by the Special Studies Division of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. Given the Reagan Administration's opposition to family and medical leave, we think that OMB's fine-tooth combing of these studies' methods is less scientific than political.