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THE COST OF LIBERATION

Art Buchwald's particular brand of humor has made him a social commentator on current cultural and political trends just as Will Rogers' humor delighted an earlier age. A recent Buchwald column titled "Liberation and the Self-Maid Woman," like many of his Capitol Punishment columns, was more truth than comedy.

After talking with a liberated lawyer named Lila, Buchwald concluded that "Behind every liberated woman, there is another woman who has to do the dirty work for her." (For the moment, we will overlook Buchwald's prejudice that it is "dirtier" to take care of children and cook the family meals than it is to outwit, out-maneuver and out-litigate an opponent in a lawsuit.)

Buchwald made the amazing discovery that Lila's career in a Washington law firm absolutely depends on a Latin American domestic named Juanita who takes care of Lila's children, cooks the meals, cleans the house, and tends to Lila's husband's shirts. Juanita's wages consume half of Lila's salary, but, even so, job turnover is high; Lila has to hunt up a new "Juanita" about every eight months.

Playing the straight man in this conversation, Buchwald asked Lila about all those magazines that show husbands sharing the household duties. Lila explains that those husbands exist only in magazines. Husbands, she says, are more than willing for a wife to be liberated, just as long as she takes care of the house and children, too.

In his own inimitable way, Buchwald caricatures the conversation; one can infer that he sympathizes with Lila's dilemma. He had thought Lila was the shining example of a liberated woman who had the best of both worlds. He is shocked to find that, without Juanita mopping floors, Lila wouldn't be liberated at all. Or, in his exquisite hyperbole, "in order to be free, a woman must find another slave to replace her."

In all the gallons of ink that have poured over the subject of women's roles during the last decade, it took a humorist to open the curtain on this most sensitive subject.

Equal pay for equal work and equal employment opportunity have been the law of the land since 1963; that's not controversial any more. Yet, women do not earn as much as men

earn, even in the same categories of employment.

There are many obvious reasons for the differentials. The average woman works 10% fewer hours per week than the average man; the average woman has been on her present job only half as long as the average man; the average women simply has not been in the work force, building up seniority and skills, nearly as many years as the average man.

But even if we build a society in which women have absolutely guaranteed equal opportunity in hiring, pay and promotions -- even if modern young women really have a single-minded dedication to a business or professional career, and put in as many overtime hours and lifetime effort as their male competitors -- the average woman still will not achieve the heights of career and financial success that the average man does.

This is because men have one great asset over their female competitors -- men have wives. And, in the world we know, there are not very many persons who want to be the wife of a woman. Wives are a tremendous asset to career-oriented men. Wives provide the nurturing of the children, the keeping of the house, the emotional security of a nest to come home to, and, most important, the incentive for a man to work hard and achieve success.

One attractive, young, liberated career woman who was recently divorced was heard to state the problem frankly. She admitted the divorce was caused because "neither one of us wanted to be a wife."

What Buchwald and Lila recently discovered, the feminist ideologues have known for some time. That is why they have worked so hard to eliminate the economic rights of wives and mothers. The feminist legislative agenda for more than ten years has included such anti-wife proposals as eliminating the dependent-wife's benefit in Social Security and repealing all state laws that ensure the wife's right to be supported by her husband.

Taking away rights from wives doesn't put one thin dime in the pockets of any unmarried working woman. What lurks behind these anti-wife proposals is the resentment of career women like Lila that her children are taken care of by a hired, temporary "Juanita," whereas her male competitors in the business world have the advantage of wives.

The "Me" generation which seeks only its own fulfillment as life's goal will probably say that sex-role stereotypes aren't fair and that we must use the strong arm of government to abolish them. But those who believe that it is a social good for children to be cared for by their own mothers in a family environment are not about to acquiesce in the elimination of the traditional rights of wives.