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THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

We have heard a great deal of comment in the last couple of years about a phenomenon called "the feminization of poverty," which means that more of the poor are women than men. This fact has been used to assert that the cause is "sex discrimination," and also as an argument against Federal spending cuts because most of the people who suffer from spending cuts are female.

Contrary to popular belief, most women who are poor are not the elderly but the young. The major causes of the feminization of poverty are divorce and out-of-wedlock births.

According to a Census Bureau report, if family composition in 1980 had been the same as in 1970 (and other variables were held constant), the figures on poverty would have been dramatically different. Whites would have had a three percent rise in median family income (instead of only a one percent rise). Blacks would have had an eleven percent rise in median family income (instead of a five percent decline).

Single-parent families have risen from nine percent in 1960 to 22 percent of all families with children in 1982. Thirty-seven percent of black married women age 25-44 are now separated or divorced, and the figure for white women is 16 percent. Half of the female-headed households are in poverty.

During the decade of the 1970s, most states made two major changes in their marriage laws as a result of lobbying by militant feminist groups. States adopted easy, no-fault divorce laws, and they sex-neutralized their marriage laws by repealing the legal obligation of the husband to support his wife financially.

Easy, no-fault divorce was supposed to eliminate fighting about who had misbehaved with whom. The fighting still goes on, just as bitterly and even more expensively; couples just fight about money and child custody instead of about fault.

The feminists seem to believe that traditional marriage is a sort of oppression of women and that, therefore, easy divorce provides liberation for women to terminate an

unhappy marriage. They seem to think that requiring husbands to support their wives financially during marriage, or to pay alimony to ex-wives after divorce, is an outmoded stereotype and that society should be liberated from such notions of dependency.

Until recent years, dictionaries defined alimony as "an allowance paid to a woman by her former husband." Then, in the 1979 case of Orr v. Orr, the Supreme Court redefined alimony to give the courts the power to order wives to pay alimony to their ex-husbands, thereby rewriting the alimony laws of about half the 50 states.

Feminists cheered this decision on the ground that any gender-neutralization of statutes is an advance for women's rights. As a practical matter, this decision didn't matter much anyway since alimony has practically gone out of existence. Courts seldom award alimony any more. If they do, it lasts only for a year or two; then the ex-wife is supposed to support herself no matter how long she has been out of the labor force.

Feminists urged the elimination of alimony, which they deemed demeaning, and its replacement by "equitable distribution" which they said would be fairer to women. The feminists who promoted those equitable-sounding words were out of touch with the real world.

The only women who could possibly benefit would be those whose husbands owned significant property or assets to distribute. A recent article called "Women and Divorce" in New York Magazine relates case after case of how women are financially devastated by the new divorce laws.

In the majority of marriages, there is relatively little property to distribute except a mortgaged home, and the real wealth is the present and future earning power of the husband. After divorce, the husband's income continues to rise as he moves into his higher-earning years, while the wife is cut off at the pass with little or no earning power, having to start at the bottom of the earnings ladder.

Divorce thus has dramatically diverse effects on the financial circumstances of the former spouses. One study made by a Stanford sociologist concludes that a woman's standard of living generally falls by 73 percent in the year following a divorce, while a man's typically rises by 42 percent.

Of course, there are two sides to most divorce cases and, whether you talk to the man or the woman, both sides usually believe they have been shafted by the system. Divorce is a no-win situation for everyone; there is simply no way a man and woman can live as well separately as they did in the same household.