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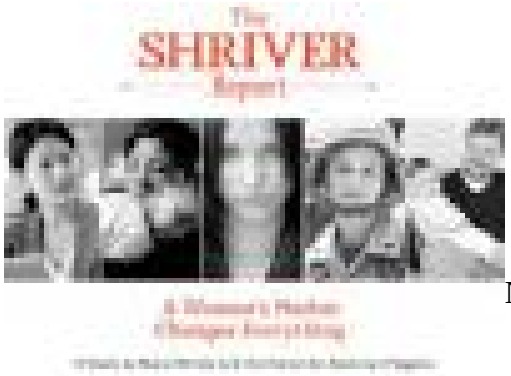
The great discovery: It's a human issue, not a woman's issue

Joan Chittister | Oct. 27, 2009 From Where I Stand

Every science student in the country knows that for every action we can expect an equal and opposite reaction. Which translated means that whatever we try to do, someone else will try to stop it. So here's the question: Given the kind of explanatory data that is coming out of "**The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation** [1]" on the social condition and challenges facing women at this moment in history, what can we expect now?



Not since John F. Kennedy appointed Eleanor Roosevelt in 1961 to head his President's Commission on the Status of Women have we ever had a complete review of the circumstances defining the lives of women in the United States. Now we do. And who, besides women, would have believed what the current research shows.

There are several figures that underlie all the rest: Half the United States workforce at this point in time are women. Over 40 percent of those are the primary breadwinners of their families. Another 23 percent are co-breadwinners of the family, meaning that the family can't get along without their income.

For those who live on another planet, those figures point to two radical social changes that are now the fabric of this country. First, "the little woman" is not working anymore for pocket money. She's working to survive. And second, for the sake of the country as well as for its women, other social institutions are going to have to adjust to this new reality.

It isn't just that change is coming. It is that change is here. And now it's time for other things to change, as well.

For instance, as men moved off the farms and into the cities in the 1920s and '30s, industries adjusted. First, they discovered that labor unions were here to stay. Then, they began to provide things like parking lots and vacations and credit unions, and medical insurance and typing pools, and escalators and elevators and secretaries and telephones and coffee breaks. Whatever men needed to make the work possible, men got.

Now women, the sole bread winners of their families need day care services for their small children on site. Some businesses already provide them. Most do not. That's a woman's issue, they say repeatedly. It's not a corporate responsibility, they argue.

But neither do most of them now allow for flex time. Corporations apparently still assume that the basic and

standard commonplace of breadwinners is a partner at home whose whole life is spent caring for the children and maintaining the house the breadwinner leaves behind in the morning. That's a family issue, they think.

Well, think again.
As a result of that kind of thinking, a good proportion of the money a woman earns goes for the childcare she is not able to provide herself. Or himself, as well, in those cases where a younger generation of men, too, the Shriver Report shows, also want to be part of the child raising. Men who have already changed to keep pace with the changes in women's lives also want to be a more present part of family life. They want to be more than the father who can do little else than come home for dinner -- late -- in order to work the two jobs it now requires for many in this country to be able to afford to keep a family.

In fact, day care is a social issue that links to other whole categories of social concerns: latchkey kids, the length of school days, the nature of school schedules, the need for schools and cities and municipalities to provide monitored before-school and after-school activities, the size of the US talent pool, corporate growth and development, US performance in the world market. The list goes on and on and on

It's hard not to break into a chorus of George Herbert's 17c proverb that they taught us in grade school, "For want of a nail the shoe is lost, for want of a shoe the horse is lost, for want of a horse the rider is lost." The fact is that these things are not women's issues or family issues. These things are national issues. For want of Day Care facilities in the richest country in the world, the industries that deny it will soon themselves suffer from the loss of the worker pool it needs to be competitive.

We should have listened to Herbert, perhaps.

In 1963, the date of the Roosevelt report, women were 31 percent of the work force. Since then, the Shriver Report tells us, women are now earning 60 percent of the college degrees and 50 percent of the Ph.Ds and professional degrees in this country. Obviously, it is more than likely that women will remain a determining factor in the American work force for decades to come.

The situation is clear.

From where I stand, it looks like what we do for women we are doing for the country. And what we don't do for women, will affect not only women but this country--its families, its children, its eventual growth or decline.

It's a serious question for us all. No amount of sexism aimed at suppressing or ignoring the implications of this report operating under the aegis of women's natural inferiority can justify it. Science has long ago put that argument to eternal rest--along with racism, the flat earth theory and the Man in the Moon.

Given the implications of this report for us as a people in this millennium moment of choice about our futures on many levels, I will look at other dimensions of The Shriver Report (awomansnation.org) in weeks to come. After all, if what we do or do not do with this data has something to do with all our lives, it's worth the time, isn't it?

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