

SundayReview|Opinion
How Can We Help Men? By Helping Women

By STEPHANIE COONTZ JAN. 11, 2014

THIS week Maria Shriver brings together a star-studded cast of celebrities, from Hillary Rodham Clinton to Beyoncé, to call attention to the economic plight of American women and demand that women's needs be put "at the center of policy making."

But is this really the time to focus on women? For nearly four decades, feminists have decried "the feminization of poverty." However, since the 1980s there has been a defeminization of poverty, as a growing proportion of men have fallen on hard times. In recent years men have experienced especially significant losses in income and job security.

Although women are still more likely to be poor than men, on average women's income and labor-force participation have been rising since the 1970s. By contrast, between 1970 and 2010 the median earnings of men fell by 19 percent, and those of men with just a high school diploma by a stunning 41 percent. And while women have regained all the jobs they lost during the recession, men have regained just 75 percent.

Since about 1980 the percentage of men and women in middle-skill jobs has declined. But for women, nearly all of that decline was because of increased representation in higher-skill jobs. Women's employment in low-skill jobs increased by just 1 percent. By contrast, for men, half the decline in middle-skill jobs was a result of increases in low-skill jobs.

The most urgent issue facing working Americans today is not the glass ceiling. It is the sinking floor. So wouldn't it make more sense to focus on gender-neutral economic policies?

Actually, it wouldn't, because "gender-neutral" work practices and social policies were traditionally based on a masculine model. Employers assumed that there was no need to accommodate caregiving obligations because the "normal" worker had a wife to do that. Policy makers assumed there was no need for universal programs such as family allowances and public child care because the "normal" woman had a husband to support her and her children. Accordingly, most social benefits, such as Social Security and unemployment insurance, were tied to prior participation in the labor market. Welfare was a stigmatized and stingy backup for misfits who were not in a male-breadwinner family.

Social and economic policies constructed around the male breadwinner model have always disadvantaged women. But today they are dragging down millions of men as

well. Paradoxically, putting gender equity issues at the center of social planning would now be in the interests of most men.

This was not so evident 40 or 50 years ago, when the struggle for gender equity threatened many male entitlements. In those days, men of every skill and income level had preferential access to jobs that provided security, benefits and rising wages. As the sociologist Erin Hatton shows, when employers needed cheap temporary workers, they turned to companies like Kelly Girl, whose ads bragged that unlike the gimme-gimme male worker, the Kelly Girl was a “Never-Never” employee: “Never costs you a dime for slack time. (When the workload drops, you drop her.) Never has a cold, slipped disk or loose tooth. (Not on your time anyway!)”

Today, however, becoming a “never-never” employee is increasingly a gender-neutral fate. Millions of men face working conditions that traditionally characterized women’s lives: low wages, minimal benefits, part-time or temporary jobs, and periods of joblessness. Poverty is becoming defeminized because the working conditions of many men are becoming more feminized.

Whether they realize it or not, men now have a direct stake in policies that advance gender equity. Most of the wage gap between women and men is no longer a result of blatant male favoritism in pay and promotion. Much of it stems from general wage inequality in society at large.

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IN most countries, women tend to be concentrated in lower-wage jobs. The United States actually has a higher proportion of skilled and highly paid female workers than countries like Sweden and Norway. Yet as a whole, Swedish and Norwegian women earn a higher proportion of the average male wage than American women because the gap between high and low wages is much smaller in those countries.

Establishing a “livable wage” floor would immediately reduce the gap in average pay between American women and men. But it would also boost the wages of millions of low-income male workers, who earn a much lower percentage of the average male wage than their counterparts in other wealthy countries. In 2009, one in every four American workers earned less than two-thirds of the national median hourly wage, the highest proportion of low-wage work in 19 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, according to the economist John Schmitt of the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

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Another source of the gender pay gap is the lack of reliable, affordable child care, which forces many mothers to stay home or work part time even when they need and want full-time work.

Prioritizing child care would not just be a boon for mothers but for millions of fathers as well. The highest proportion of stay-at-home moms is found among women married to men in the bottom 25 percent of the country's income distribution. Most of these women cannot afford to work because of the high cost of child care, even though their partners and children would benefit from the increased income.

Putting women first would mean strengthening America's social safety net, because a higher proportion of single-mother families live in poverty here than in any other wealthy country. But a stronger safety net would help single-father families and two-parent families, too, because these families also have higher poverty rates than their counterparts in other wealthy countries.

Putting women first would also mean changing unemployment insurance rules that leave many part-time workers ineligible for benefits and disqualify people who leave a job due to a family member's medical emergency. Women are especially affected by such rules, but the expansion of part-time and temporary jobs since the 1970s has left a growing number of male workers vulnerable as well. And a recent Pew poll found that almost 30 percent of fathers had reduced their work hours and 10 percent quit a job to care for a family member.

Putting women's traditional needs at the center of social planning is not reverse sexism. It's the best way to reverse the increasing economic vulnerability of men and women alike.

Given the increasing insecurity of many American men, they have good reason to back feminist policies. And if those policies alienate some women in the upper echelons, then maybe feminism isn't for every woman, and doesn't need to be.

