

Women, the Family and the Common Good

Thank you

I'm definitely old enough to admit up front the preposterousness of representing myself as qualified to represent women's views as a general matter. But I am willing to learn from what women say their preferences **are** when asked by good researchers, and from the choices women actually **make** about family when they have choices. (I come from a law and economics oriented university and admit a weakness for empirics).

So what I would like to do this morning then is to start by talking about women's family "practices", but then move on to consider the dispute over approaches to women's flourishing that do not or do appreciate the role of the family, and THEN talk about how we might better express the causal relationship between supporting family, and supporting women, with first a theoretical proposition and then a practical one.

First women's family practices:

Women express a desire to marry, to have children, and to have the gift of time to care for those children, with a husband, and without frustration and exhaustion.

When that "complete package" is not accessible to them, whether because there is a shortage of marriage-oriented men relative to women in a particular "marketplace," or because nonmarital sexual relationships are normalized, even expected, women will still **gesture** toward their aspirations by cohabiting (albeit with more marriage-minded hopes than men), or raising children alone, without marriage. In fact, to show the persistence of the drive to form a substantial romantic union, -- in the U.S. -- if you added cohabitations to marriages, you would find that the age of "first serious romantic partnership" had not actually risen for women over the last 100 years. It would be 23. It's only the age of Marriage that's risen so high...to about 27. But in the U.S. for example, over 55% of women are agreeing to cohabit before marriage.

And I don't think there's a better figure to demonstrate the persistence of women's interests in having and caring for children that the fact that, worldwide, over 90% of all lone-parent households are headed by women. Add to this, women's consistent reporting to researchers that they prefer work lives that allow them to put their families first. And in line with the familiar wisdom in the U.S. which says that -- "If Mama's not happy, nobody's happy," -- it turns out that what correlates with divorce is NOT whether the wife works outside or inside the home, but whether she feels that her work arrangement does justice FIRST to her family. To this end, the majority of women in economically developed countries where they have a greater range of choices -- prefer **not** to work fulltime when they are raising minor children.

Now to the dispute over approaches to women's flourishing as between those who do not and those that DO appreciate the role that family plays in this.

Everyone here knows that despite these well-known facts on the ground, powerful NGO's and western nations frequently "disappear" family from their advocacy for women, or at least cast suspicion on it. Still, however, they get important credit as women's rights advocates, for their insistence that they represent women, and for their visible, vocal and often celebrity-studded campaigns. These regularly insist on easy access to contraception and abortion at a minimum, but regularly also include advocacy *against* sexual and other kinds of violence, and *for* economic and educational empowerment, and flexible work arrangements, often in the name of women supporting their families. Respecting more developed economies, some women's advocates also promote 50/50 sharing of domestic labors, in all private and public groups – from families to corporate boards to parliaments.

Now there are internal contradictions concerning women and the family, in this "usual package" of "women's rights" demands. On the one hand, it claims that countries owe women the means to support the families they love – education, employment, flexible schedules. On the other hand, it labels families an opportunity cost, which contraception and abortion can avoid; domestic labors are an unappealing use of time that men must endure more of, and more and better childcare --provided likely by other mothers for pay- is a foundational good for women. I saw this contradiction all on one page of a report by an internationally renowned business consultancy, claiming feminist credentials: Page 22 of Booz and Company's *Empowering the Third Billion: Women and the World of Work in 2012* says all of the following:

That caring for family is "clearly a burden that falls largely upon women, and....is a barrier to women's economic development ..and "women's reaching their maximum economic potential"

That "if care work were assigned a monetary value, it would constitute between 10 and 39 percent of GDP"

And that carework is "crucial to the future development of national economies because it helps create a new generation of healthy, educated citizens."(22).

Talk about your contradictions! But there is more contradiction in the usual agenda of the leading groups claiming the mantle of women's rights. The disappearing of, or even hostility to family -- alongside usually very positive support for sexual expression unlinked to children – is also itself a contradiction. For reasons too long to develop here, -- monogamy versus polyamory, marriage versus cohabitation, stability versus easy divorce -- not only advantage women, but also put the rich and the poor on a more even plane. And the usual vocal women's rights organization

ignores the drastic differences between the rates of violence and even death for women and children, as between cohabiting and marital households.

Now to this “Usual List” of women’s demands, our more family-centric groups and individuals respond as follows: WE cheer on the equality piece, call out abortion for what it is, *as well as* its awful effects upon women and even on the “marketplace” for commitment/marriage. WE point out the relationship between family and women’s happiness and wellbeing, and endorse these groups’ anti-violence and the flexible work pieces. Each piece of our response... is true...yes...but in my view, the whole thing is not compelling enough. It is piecemeal... It leaves the listener mentally zigzagging through issues dear first to the left, then the right, then the left again...without understanding at the visceral level, the source/the ground rationale for our genuine ALLIANCE with women, the FUTURE we’re trying to build for women, that we are expressing in this potpourri fashion.

So now, to my proposal about how we might better express the causal relationship between supporting family, and supporting women, with first a theoretical proposition and then a practical one. First I suggest articulating some kind of unified principle that helps people grasp what we observe are women’s deepest aspirations and needs and particular strengths, and what we intend to do about them. Articulating this kind of principle also has the advantage of highlighting the **basic contrast** between what animates the “family matters to women” position and what animates the “family is threatening for women” position. I need to work on this, but at the moment I’m thinking that this unified principle sounds something like the following: Taking care of others is the main stuff of life, to which all other things ought to be oriented or subject – work, school, the economy, you name it. It’s the natural cycle of life and death and the source of happiness for both the lover and the beloved,... it’s the the strength of communities, and the only hope for the weak. Sex, marriage and parenting – the stuff of family life – is the major way people learn to care for anyone, and to get care. Economies can rise or fall on it. The government has never come close to replacing its fruits, even in countries with enormous social welfare systems.

Women’s place in this dynamic is unique. This is due, not only to their current preferences, but to a very significant extent, to the fact that sex is procreative for them in a way that requires them and then calls them, to care for the OTHER in a devoted, time-consuming, “all-in” manner. Therefore, from a woman’s perspective, any system, any group, any government really claiming to put people first, to put CARE first, has to privilege family, and part of privileging family is to value, to honor – the procreative power of sex as women experience it, *in se*, as only THIS does justice to the woman’s investment and her hopes.

Do you see how this “*welcoming OTHER people as the main thing*” of which procreation is a privileged aspect, **and** women’s particular work there too – is a kind of unified field theory that can explain **why** we would hold the group of positions we would hold,... against violence for example and for women’s equality, and **for** the family as the primordial experience of welcoming the other, and **for** public and

private policies allowing women and men to privilege caretaking.....and how OPPOSITION to that notion would explain the other side's "let's make sure children and family duties don't get in the way of women's economic progress because economic progress is the main thing" program....?

The virtue of this principle include too that it can be held at either secular or religious level or both. It's naturally attractive, ...it's "who people want to be on their best day." It's neither left nor right politically. But best of all, I think it does get at what we're trying to say... at least I think so.

The second and last part of my proposal involves action to empower women to do the talking about this so that we are not speaking for them. There are already some great groups doing similar work...but not enough precisely on the new debate – whether policy for women in particular and for the larger community too, should or should not be grounded on the importance of the intrinsically procreative quality of sex, and the good of caretaking as a way of life, as the value to which all these other values – work, school, income - are oriented.

Didn't mean to create such a group, but it happened almost by spontaneous combustion. When the Obama Administration declared that its 2012 rule forcing even religious employers to provide contraception and early abortion for free to all female employees and employees' minor children, I wrote a letter and asked 30 women to sign. It had two points : women care about religious freedom and women don't think that sex without babies is the sine qua non of life's freedom and happiness. The letter spread organically til it's over 43,000 American women now. After a time, I began to call the groups "Women speak for themselves." I collected their emails and wrote them – and still do –every three weeks giving them something to DO to promote their ideas – whatever particular idea they have for promoting the main two tenets of the letter – in their locale. The women have staged local rallies. Lobbied their member of congress, written in local and national papers, put information in their church bulletins, held rallies at high schools. Etc. The fB page for them has reached over 2 million individual women with the most widely shared content usually involving how much they hate the way hormonal birth control messes with your body, how much more important to them than child-free sex are things like happy marriages, kids, jobs that let them take care of their families, and so forth. I have been able to file briefs in federal and the Supreme Court in their name, protest the White House just for fun, take over "townhalls" run by the health agency imposing the mandate, etc. When I announced to the women that I wanted to give them some first class media and writing and social media training for free, I got 7 first rate female trainers to offer their services and 500 of "my women" volunteering to be trained. Based on donations mostly from other women, but also other foundations, I can afford to fly in, feed, house and train 20 starting this January in DC..and it's my hope to do this every 9 months or so, to empower more and more women to speak for themselves.

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Stop there, thank you.

