

## TURNING THE TIME OVER TO...

Tim and Tamlyn Heaton

## IS FEMINISM A THREAT TO THE FAMILY?



The deterioration in the quality of family life arising from sexism poses a major threat to the stability and well-being of families in contemporary society. Feminism's war against sexism may thus provide useful tools to strengthen families.

### THE FAMILY IN DECLINE

Many scholars agree that recent family decline seriously threatens childrearing.

ALTHOUGH SCHOLARS HAVE long debated the status of the family, most posit that the family is in decline. In the lead article of the August 1993 *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, David Popenoe concludes that "family decline since 1960 has been extraordinarily steep, and its social consequences serious, especially for children."<sup>1</sup> He further concludes "that familism as a cultural value has diminished, and that people

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have become less willing to invest time, money, and energy in family life, turning instead to investments in themselves."<sup>2</sup> He believes that recent family decline seriously threatens childrearing and provision of affection and companionship. Many other family scholars agree. In a 1987 issue of the *Journal of Family Issues* devoted to the state of the American family, the modal response reflects concern over changes in the family rather than optimism or belief that continuity is more salient than change.<sup>3</sup> The issue has also received great attention in the mass media. For example, in the cover article of the April 1993 *Atlantic*, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead concludes that the growing trend in marital disruption is harmful to large numbers of children.<sup>4</sup>

Family decline is a rubric referring to several trends. The two leading indicators of de-

cline are a rapid rise in divorce in the 1960s and 1970s and a continuing rise in the age at marriage, which will most likely result in a decline in the percentage of people who ever marry. Related demographic trends include a decline in the age at first intercourse such that marriage and sex are becoming more distinct, a rise in unwed parenthood, and a reduction in the birthrate that, barring continued immigration, will lead to population decline. So far, however, it is doubtful that voluntary childlessness will spread to a large segment of the population.<sup>5</sup> Along with behavioral trends, individuals' attitudes are becoming more accepting of premarital sex, unwed parenthood, and marital dissolution.<sup>6</sup>

Several culprits have been blamed for family decline: (1) a growing emphasis on individual fulfillment at the expense of traditional family orientations;<sup>7</sup> (2) legal changes emphasizing the family's importance to the individual rather than its importance to society;<sup>8</sup> (3) growing tolerance for diverse family life-styles;<sup>9</sup> (4) restructuring role orientations that challenge the traditional breadwinner/homemaker division of labor;<sup>10</sup> (5) welfare policies that facilitate single parenting and discourage marriage;<sup>11</sup> and (6) structural changes in the labor market that make it more advantageous for women to be employed. More traditional commentators would also add a seventh factor: the feminist attack on patriarchy.

Conflict between feminist agendas and the well-being of families is evident in this list of factors contributing to decline. Blurring of gender boundaries, equality in the work force, support for single parents, opportunity for self-fulfillment, and demise of patriarchy are each goals pursued to varying degrees by feminists. Indeed, some feminists say "good riddance to the family."<sup>12</sup>

As is often the case, rhetoric precedes and exceeds reliable evidence. Family scholars have not yet provided definitive evidence regarding the contributors to family decline. At the societal level, it is clear that several trends are interrelated, but correlation does not prove cause. Women who work are not necessarily more prone to divorce; households with a less traditional division of labor have not been shown to be less stable; attitude changes often are a response to rather than a cause of behavioral change; and studies have not shown a clear link between desire for self-fulfillment and lack of commitment to family values. Nevertheless, there is strong sentiment that feminism poses a serious threat to family well-being because it challenges behaviors and attitudes that are assumed to be the bedrock of stable family life.

Although we admit that the more radical feminist proposals—such as elimination of legal heterosexual marriage—are not compatible with preservation of family units, we argue that many more moderate goals of feminism may contribute to the betterment of family life. We propose that the deterioration in the quality of family life arising from sexism poses a major threat to the stability and well-being of families in contemporary society. Feminism's war against sexism may thus provide useful tools to strengthen families.

**SEXISM THREATENS THE FAMILY**

*Gender bias causes some family members to gain more love, attention, and respect than others, reducing the commitment to stable relationships.*

“FAMILY values” has been one of the most used but least defined terms in political rhetoric over the last several years. To avoid confusion, we define family as relationships created by marriage, birth, and adoption. Our explicit assumption is that these relationships are better when those involved love each other, help each other grow and develop, and are committed to remain in the relationship. No

doubt, love, care, and support can occur in other types of relationships, but we will limit our focus to families. Sexism is defined as behavior and/or attitudes that consistently give one gender (usually men) higher value, greater privilege, more power, or more resources. In the following discussion, we describe ways in which sexism harms family relationships. More specifically, we give examples of how sexism reduces the amount of care given to some family members and reduces the commitment to stable relationships.

First, sexism biases the support given to children, often in favor of males. The most extreme cases occur in less developed societies where excess female mortality results from male preference. In India, for example, patriarchal kinship and low female labor-force participation greatly increase the risk of excess female childhood mortality.<sup>13</sup> Less extreme, but more common, is the tendency to provide more schooling to sons than to daughters. Although progress is being made, men still stay in school longer than women in many areas of the world.<sup>14</sup> Though less easy to document, it appears that sexism reduces other parental investments in their daughters including encouragement to do their best, providing opportunity for growth and devel-

opment, and resources to succeed.<sup>15</sup> In short, sexism detracts from care given to daughters in some Third World settings and from parental encouragement to achieve. Gender inequality is also evident in the U.S. where men are more likely to attend college, to receive encouragement in math and science, and to specialize in fields that pay higher salaries.<sup>16</sup>

Second, gender inequality in educational attainment and work experience places children at high risk of poverty by reducing mothers' ability to provide for the family should circumstances require it. In the United States, for example, about 20 percent of the children live below the poverty level and over half of the children in female-headed households live below the poverty level.<sup>17</sup> Lack of marketable skills and work experience are the main reasons single mothers are unable to provide even a modest standard of living for their children.

Third, hierarchical relationships inherent in traditional family models detract from the quality of marriage. “High levels of marital satisfaction occur most frequently among egalitarian couples in comparison to marriages where either the husband or wife is dominant.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, coercive control leads to marital dissatisfaction.<sup>19</sup> By implication, beliefs that one partner should be the boss or “head” of the household detracts from the benefit each partner derives from marriage.

Fourth, sexism leads to devaluation of the role of motherhood. Historically, women were denied equal access to education and employment because they were believed to be intellectually, rationally, and emotionally inferior to men.<sup>20</sup> This devaluation of the potential contribution of women in the public world implies that the role traditionally allocated to women—motherhood and homemaking—is of less value or importance. Even now, the belief that women need to be told to stay at home shows tacit agreement that the homemaking role is less desirable.

The devaluation of women and the roles they play has been reinforced by “science.” In sociology and economics, it has been assumed that the male world of work and production is far more important than what goes on in the household. The family's status was measured by the husband's job. In psychology, developmental models have assumed that women have limited potential, that males are the prototype for human behavior, and that female experience, if different from the male's, is less important.<sup>21</sup> Research on women centers on reproduction; in contrast, researchers see males as less

HARMONY EIGHTH WARD

any 8th Ward! If you are new to our ward, Waterman's office in the east hallway immergent meeting.

Sacrament Meeting  
Priesthood Meeting  
Relief Society Meeting  
Sunday School Classes:

Gospel Essentials (Brother Toscano)  
Gospel Doctrine (Sister Bagley)  
Gospel Doctrine (Brother Kimball)  
Genealogy (Bro. and Sis. Ostler)  
Temple Preparation (Bro. Talmage)  
Family Relations (Brother Moench)

WARD TELEPHONE NUMBERS

A. Waterman  
st Counselor  
d Counselor  
rs Quorum President  
Society President

Room 4  
Room 5  
R.S. room  
Stage  
Bishop's Off  
TBA

Rating

PG  
PG-13  
NR  
NR  
NC-17

355-0976  
322-0227  
589 9906  
887-5501  
785-0498

Comparisons between Mormons and other Americans show little difference in marital satisfaction, time spent with spouse or children, family violence, positive evaluation of family roles, or contact with kin. Clearly, there is room for improvement.

biologically driven. Rather, they are individualistic, rationalistic, and egocentric.<sup>22</sup> Thus, females are not desirable research subjects and their development tends to be ignored. Moreover, disciplines that focus on women such as family studies and home economics have lower status than those that focus on men.

Fifth, a traditional delineation of gender roles leads to devaluation of the parental role of fathers. Recent increases in divorce have sparked debate regarding the importance of fathers in their children's lives. Although the weight of evidence demonstrates that children do better in intact families, evidence suggests that fathers do not seem critical to young children's developmental outcomes.<sup>23</sup> This is not to say that fathers cannot be important. On the contrary, fathers can be very beneficial for a broad range of children's outcomes including development of a healthy identity, a strong sense of morality, intellectual capacity, assertiveness, independence, a positive body image, and social competence.<sup>24</sup> One possible reason for the discrepancy between the potential and actual role of fathers for their children is that the breadwinner/homemaker distinction diminishes the importance fathers place on their parental role because they assume that making a living constitutes their major contribution to the family. It is worth noting that families with sons are less likely to break up than families without sons.<sup>25</sup> The authors conclude that this is because fathers are more invested in their sons' well being. Presumably, if fathers were equally involved with their daughters, marriages would be more stable.

Sixth, sexism rejects the values we teach to children. A majority of parents believe that children should do well in school, be independent, and be responsible. A large majority also believe that parents should encourage independence in daughters as much as sons.<sup>26</sup> These values are incongruent with sexist notions that females should be subservient and should be less concerned with achievement. Such incongruity contributes to growing cynicism regarding basic family values by some feminists.

Finally, gender inequality makes marriage a bad bargain for women, thus reducing the desirability of family life. In their book enti-

tled *New Families, No Families*, Frances Goldscheider and Linda Waite argue that the potential double burden of making a living and taking care of a home turns women away from marriage and childbearing.<sup>27</sup> It appears unlikely that women's decisions to enter the work force will reverse. Thus, men must become much more involved in the homemaking role or fewer women will opt for marriage and childbearing.

Although the above list is far from exhaustive, it should be clear that sexism does pose a threat to family well-being. Female dependence on male income, restriction of appropriate female roles to homemaking, and promotion of male authority and superiority may create stability in families, but such tactics can only work in a repressive environment. They can also take heavy tolls on the quality of interpersonal relationships. Efforts to eliminate sexism may thus benefit families.

#### THE FEMINIST AGENDA(S)

*Although multiple feminisms exist, feminists agree that improving society begins with eliminating inequality.*

**T**O say there is a single feminist agenda would be a gross oversimplification. Some feminists object so strongly to the way women are treated in traditional family systems that they would be offended by the suggestion that their goals would help families. Indeed, they would support an agenda that is antithetical to families as defined above. Other goals such as greater political representation of women may not have obvious direct benefits for families. There are, however, at least four goals shared by a majority of feminists that directly address the detrimental sexist patterns noted above.

First, increased value needs to be placed on personal characteristics viewed as primarily "female." Individualism and personal achievement, important in the corporate world, are value orientations blamed for undermining family. The "female" world is more concerned with relationships and nurturing. Without a shift in values toward getting along with and helping others in the family, the current decline in the commitment to family will most likely continue.

Second, in addition to placing more value

on female traits, increased recognition needs to be given to the value of homemaking and child care. Such activities do not count as part of the gross national product if labor is not remunerated, and wages in these jobs are low. It appears doubtful that market mechanisms will do much to change the situation, but cultural change remains a possibility. Standards for goodness are constantly being challenged and modified. If values do not change, capitalist consumerism will continue to pull mothers, like fathers, away from family responsibilities.

Third, greater investment in women's educational experience coupled with elimination of discrimination against women in hiring and pay would go a long way toward enhancing the experience of children living in families where mothers work outside the home. It is possible that further improvements in the economic status of women would lead to more divorce, but we must question the quality or desirability of marriages held together by economic necessity. Preservation of marriage should be achieved by improving quality rather than by promoting dependence.

Fourth, more general recognition of the equal worth of men and women underlies the above changes. Preference for male children, belief that men should hold the authority, and assumption that being male is better each play a role in undermining the quality of family relationships. While a more general sense of equal worth is necessary to achieve the above mentioned goals, the more specific changes noted above may also be necessary before a greater sense of equality can be achieved.

#### THE LDS CONTEXT

*By relinquishing insistence on traditional gender roles, the Church could more productively contribute to the revitalization of the family.*

**T**HE LDS church has emphasized the family's importance both to society and to individual salvation. Because of the importance given to family life, we might expect LDS members to exhibit desirable family behavior. Yet, LDS families are not much different from the rest of the nation in many respects. Family size is larger, attitudes are more supportive of marriage, and there



are fewer instances of premarital sex, but other measures of stability and quality indicate Mormons are not much different from the rest of the nation. For example, comparisons between Mormons and other Americans show little difference in marital satisfaction, time spent with spouse or children, family violence, positive evaluation of family roles, or contact with kin.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, there is room for improvement.

Sexism certainly affects Mormon families. Several examples illustrate the problems created by sexism as noted above. Substantial investment of time and money in the Boy Scouts of America creates many opportunities for boys that most girls do not have. Mormon children are also placed at risk of poverty because of gender inequities in the work place. Mothers are advised to stay home with children while the husbands earn the income, yet single mothers are expected to seek employment. Obviously, the lack of employment experience while staying home reduces the potential income available to women. Mormons seem to vacillate on this issue of authority within the home: at times they are told that a marriage is a partnership and that parents should work together; other times they are taught that men are the heads of households and have the final authority for decision-making. In LDS culture, motherhood is given great lip-service, but the public role models are professional men and women who are recognized because of their contributions to the economy, the community, and the Church, rather than to the family. It is not uncommon to hear fathers with demanding church callings thank their wives for their support. This usually means she takes care of the children while he gives church service. Certainly, the Church functions much better when people serve willingly, but one wonders if the message being sent to men and women is that fatherhood is not that critical or at least not time-intensive, thus diminishing the quality of family life for children. Finally, girls are taught that they are equally valued daughters of God, but unequal treatment sends a different message.

Social forces changing the lives of women nationally also operate in Mormon families. LDS women are about as likely to work outside the home as the national average.<sup>29</sup> LDS women are less likely to work full-time than women nationally, and the negative relationship between full-time work and church attendance is stronger among the Mormons. If economic forces continue to encourage employment of LDS women, family and church involvement may suffer unless relationships change.

In sum, feminists stress some of the same values that Mormons believe are central to family well-being, including the importance of relationships and the equal worth of people regardless of gender. Because sexism poses a serious threat to the family, elements of feminism offer solutions to the contemporary crisis of family decline both in the Church and the nation. ☐

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## HARLEQUIN

Scalded with cold,  
the maple had given up  
until today; a dozen clowns  
in masks and crests have brought their circus:  
blues and yellows flash from olive green.  
These waxwing tumblers remind me of you  
in their joy. (Still,  
if they were starlings all a-  
singing with spring,  
I'd catch your name  
in speckled feathers.)

—ROSEMARY A. KLEIN