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# The Condition of Women in Developing and Developed Countries

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MICHELLE FRAM COHEN

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women achieved significant progress in the economically progressive areas dominated by Western culture, including North America, Europe, and Australia. In developing areas dominated by non-Western culture, however, women remain more or less subjugated, and in some countries they are stripped of any human rights.

Exploitation and abuse of women, including outright violence, are acceptable in countries where women have an inferior social status by customary or formal law. Violence against women and girls is a direct corollary of their subordinate status in society. Primitive cultures have beliefs, norms, and social institutions that legitimize and therefore perpetuate violence against women. Abused women in developing countries tend to accept their inferior status and to adopt the traditional values of submission and servility. In a study conducted in Algeria and Morocco in 2003, two-thirds of the women surveyed said that domestic violence was justified in certain cases—for example, when a wife disobeyed her husband (UNIFEM 2003, 64). Poverty and custom in developing countries drive extended families to live together under the same roof, which means that young couples are subordinated to the traditional values of their parents and grandparents, making a normative change difficult if not impossible.

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## Denial of Property Rights

Outright violence is not the only form of subjugation directed against women. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) study *Women's Land and Property Rights in Situations of Conflict and Reconstruction* (2001) documents the economic subjugation that results from the absence of property rights for women (details of this report's findings are discussed later).

Access to land is crucial in many African countries where subsistence farming is the main source of livelihood. In such countries, including Kenya, Liberia, Rwanda, Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia, women usually lose their land when they are widowed because their entitlement to the land is founded on their marriage. According to the customary law, they gain access to their husbands' land through marriage, but they do not gain property rights. When they are unmarried, they have access to their parents' land as long as their parents are alive. Women in those countries may inherit their fathers' land only in the absence of male heirs, and even then their legacy is likely to be challenged by other male relatives. In theory, women may own property according to the formal civil law. In reality, however, the customary law prevails over the civil law, and the former still gives women the same status as goods or cattle. The lack of land results in abject poverty for women and the children. The testimony of a Rwandan woman whose nephews drove her away from her family farm after her parents had died is particularly harsh: "I had twelve children on my land, seven are still alive. . . . When I went to court I was told I had lost even before they started my case. . . . When I said I would stay on my father's land, since my father has given it to me, I was put in prison. . . . My nephews said, 'She just has to go.' They said no woman has ever inherited land" (UNIFEM 2001, 83).

In Burundi, the customary law is somewhat more favorable to women. A widow has the right to gain access to and use her deceased husband's property as long as she does not remarry. She cannot transfer this right to a third party. The husband's heirs cannot dispose of the property without her approval—they must wait until she remarries or dies—but she does not own the property; she is allowed only to use it. A divorced woman, however, does not have any rights to gain access to or use the property she shared with her husband during their marriage.

Access to land entails access to water, which is an invaluable resource in agrarian societies. Women in these societies are responsible for bringing the water for domestic and farm use, spending eight hours on average walking to and from a water source, collecting the water and carrying it back. One thousand liters of water are required to grow one kilogram of grain. Although a woman can carry as much as fifteen liters per trip, it is of course not enough. For many women, life revolves around the chore of fetching the water, which is crucial for their families' survival. The customary law in African societies regards the fetching of water as strictly woman's work, denigrating for a man. In some places, a man is prohibited even from assisting a woman in retrieving the water. The social status of the water fetchers is on a par with that of cattle. When a woman's access to water is restricted because of distance, time constraints, or

illness, she must use lower-quality water. Unfortunately, 80 percent of all illnesses in undeveloped countries are transmitted by contaminated water (UNIFEM 2004), so the resort to inferior water sources poses a serious threat to health.

Formal civil law sometimes joins the customary law in fostering the subjugation of women. The socialist regime in Ethiopia (1975–91) enshrined customary law by appointing only men to be guardians of the state-owned means of production, especially land. In Somalia and the Sudan, customary law has been reinforced by formal law founded on the Islamic law, which disavows any ownership of land and property by women (UNIFEM 2001).

## Honor Killing

Islamic law stimulates honor killings in Muslim countries and occasionally among Muslim immigrants in Western countries. Women who dishonor the family include rape victims, women suspected of engaging in premarital sex, and women accused of adultery. According to the UNIFEM report *Violence Against Women: Facts and Figures*, more than one thousand women are killed in Pakistan every year for dishonoring their families. A 2002 study of women killed in Alexandria, Egypt, indicates that 47 percent of them were killed by a relative after they had been raped. In Jordan and Lebanon, 70 to 75 percent of the perpetrators of these so-called honor killings are the women's brothers (2005, 3).

Early in 2005, the Pakistani government rejected a pro-women bill that sought to strengthen the law against the practice of honor killing ("Pakistan Rejects" 2005). The Jordanian Parliament blocked a proposed law imposing harsher punishment of those convicted of honor killing. Honor killings are permitted under Jordanian law articles 340 and 98 ("Honour Killings' Law Blocked" 2003). Turkey, the most westernized Muslim country, revised its "honor crimes" law as part of the country's preparation for European Union accession proceedings, and it now imposes life sentence on the perpetrator of an honor killing ("Turkish MPs Probe Honour Killings" 2005). A day after a court in Istanbul handed down a life sentence for the murder of girl by her brothers, however, a survey by a university in Turkey showed that almost 40 percent of the respondents supported the practice of honor killing ("Honour Crime Defiance" 2005).

According to a conference on honor killing held in Lebanon, even when honor killing is considered murder under formal law, juries tend to acquit men who kill their female relatives for dishonoring the family, and judges tend to give light sentences to those convicted, even if they confess to the murder ("Beirut Hosts 'Honour Killing' Conference" 2001).

In 2001, a sixteen-year-old rape victim turned to Jordanian police for protection from her family members, who threatened to kill her. The police made the girl's father sign a statement in which he declared that he would not harm her. As soon as the girl returned home, however, her brother shot her four times in the head. After spending six months in jail, the brother was released and made the following statement to a CBS

reporter: "I shouldn't have been in prison for a minute. If she had stayed alive, everyone in our family would have hung his head in shame. A girl is like a glass plate. Take a glass plate and throw it on the floor and it breaks. Would it be any use anymore or not? A girl is just like that. If she has been violated, she's finished" (Roberts 2001).

Although incidents of honor killing sometimes occur among immigrants living in the West, such incidents are far less prevalent than in the immigrants' countries of origin. The strict Western law that treats honor killing as murder and imposes life imprisonment keeps such killings at bay.

### **Dowry-Related Subjugation**

The *Asia Observer* reported in 2002 (Reddy 2002) that the practice of dowry is prevalent in all socioeconomic groups in India. A young woman's family must pay a dowry in order to avoid the stigma of having an unmarried daughter. Dowry is regarded as the bride's contribution to the marriage because she is unlikely to have paid employment. The dowry is usually paid in the name of the groom or his family. In some cases, it is treated as the wife's inheritance, and the assets are placed under her name, but once she is married, she may lose control over these assets. Even when the dowry is paid, the woman's in-laws may continue to blackmail her family for additional payments and kill her if their demands are not met. Young wives are sometime driven to suicide under the pressure of such blackmail.

Dowry-related killings occur predominantly in South Asia. According to the UNIFEM report *Violence Against Women*, almost fifteen thousand dowry deaths are estimated per year in India, most of them in kitchen fires designed to look like accidents. In Bangladesh, dowry disputes have led to many acid attacks, often causing blindness, disfigurement, and death. In 2002, a total of 315 women and girls were victims of acid attacks there (2005, 2).

The heavy cost of providing a dowry makes many parents prefer sons to daughters. The expense of a dowry turns a son into an asset and a daughter into a liability. Among the results has been a proliferation of female infanticide and sex-selective abortion. In 2005, the United Nations Population Fund reported that the proportion of females in the 0-6 age range had declined precipitously. Female infanticide "goes largely uncensured, undetected, unpunished and unmourned." According to the *Asia Observer*, parents are encouraged by unsavory medical practitioners who advertise their abortion services with the claim that 6,000 rupees (\$122) paid today to abort a female fetus is cheaper than paying a lot more later for a dowry (Reddy 2002).

The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 made the giving or taking of dowry illegal in India, punishable by a prison term and a fine, but the formal law has had little effect on the operation of the customary law. In 1986, the individual states in India appointed Dowry Prohibition Officers, with legal authority to document, monitor, and enforce antidowry laws. Nevertheless, the family members of a "bride burning" victim, killed over a dowry dispute, are unlikely to press charges, and even if they do, the average time to dispose of a case is six to seven years. There is a high rate of

acquittals in cases of dowry-related murders or suicides (Reddy 2002). According to a *Frontline* report, of the 730 cases pending in Bangalore City Court at the end of 1998, 58 resulted in acquittals and 11 in convictions. At the end of June 1999, of 381 cases pending, 51 resulted in acquittals and 8 in convictions (Menon 1999).

Unlike the honor killing among Muslim immigrants in Western countries, dowry-related killing or suicide is nonexistent among Indian immigrants in Western countries.

### **Lack of Legal Protection**

The gap between customary law and formal law, whether in regard to land ownership, honor killing, or dowry, leaves women helpless and confused about their actual rights. Says Isha Dyfan, a lawyer and women's advocate from Sierra Leon: "First, there is the colonial law, and then the customary law, and also Muslim law in our system. For women, and even for lawyers, this proliferation of law is like a minefield, and really discourages them from facing the legal system" (quoted in Rehn and Sirleaf 2002, 98). According to the UNIFEM report *Women, War, and Peace* (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002), the vestiges of colonial law are not necessarily more progressive than the indigenous customary law. In Mozambique, Portuguese colonial law regarded the man as the head of the household. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Belgian colonial law required married women to obtain their husband's permission before undertaking a judicial action. Confusion about the status of women, however, is not limited to Africa or India. In Guatemala, one article of the law provides for the equality of spouses in civil marriages, whereas another article declares that the husband is the representative of the household. In addition, because most Mayan couples live together in common-law marriages, the Guatemalan law cannot be applied to their situation. In Asian countries such as Bhutan, Burma, and Nepal, sociocultural and religious constraints hamper the implementation of legal reforms, and women fail to take advantage of the new opportunities accorded to them by such reforms. They are either ignorant of these reforms or unable to overcome the traditional norms in which they were brought up.

### **Exploitation of Underage Girls**

In March 2001, the United Nations Children's Fund released a report highlighting the continuing practice of marrying underage girls, effectively ending their chance for education. An extreme case is Nepal, where 7 percent of girls are married before the age of ten, and 40 percent by age fifteen. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Niger, Bangladesh, and other countries, large percentages of girls are married before their eighteenth birthday. The problem is so acute because of the numerous risks from pregnancy-related complications for girls who are not physiologically ready to bear a child. According to the United Nations report, pregnancy-related death is a leading cause of mortality for girls ages fifteen to nineteen. Early marriage and pregnancy are not the only hazards for underage girls. In Southeast Asia, many young girls are sold into prostitution by their poor families (UNICEF 2001).

## In Times of War

*Women, War, and Peace* documents the major indicators of the demise of women under repressive regimes in countries involved in internal conflict. Three of these indicators are:

- Media scapegoating of women, accusing them of political or cultural betrayals
- Physical attacks against women who are related to political adversaries
- Proliferation of households headed by women whose husbands were killed or imprisoned or are involved in fighting, who have no means of supporting themselves and their children, and who thus resort to begging or prostitution to obtain the necessities of life. (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002, 11, 112)

The report observes that the violence women suffer during conflict does not arise out of the conditions of war, but is an extension of the violence directed toward women in peacetime.

The authors of this report make the following observation about the condition of women under repressive regimes: “Preliminary research suggests that the status of women is associated with a country’s level of stability. Countries with very low percentages of women in parliament or with high rates of domestic violence are considered more prone to repression and violent conflict. Afghanistan under the Taliban, with its massive human rights violations against women, is one such example” (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002, 112). Thus, when women are subjugated, everybody is more likely to be subjugated. The oppression of one part of the population creates a climate in which the entire population can be oppressed.

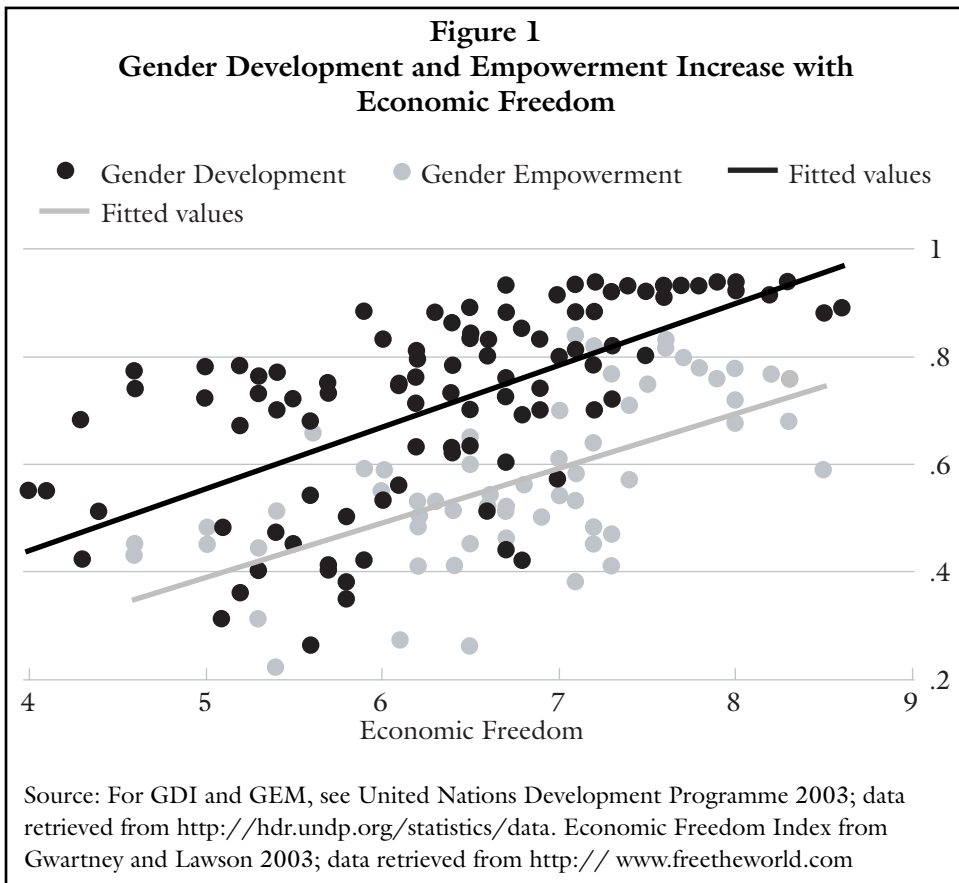
## The Western Contrast

In contrast with the dire condition of women in developing countries, the condition of women in Western countries is now outstanding. Young women in the United States and Europe are as likely as young men to acquire a college degree (Spain and Bianchi 1996, 59). Moreover, these college degrees are not confined to traditional occupations for women, such as teaching and nursing (62). Women enter law school and medical school in growing numbers. As of the year 2000, women composed 47 percent of law school students in the United States, and 42 percent of legal aid attorneys and public defenders in the United States are women (American Bar Association 2000). In Great Britain, women compose 60 percent of medical school students—as many as 70 percent at some universities (Carvel 2002). One-third of the professional degrees in law, medicine, and business in North America and western Europe are now granted to women. Consequently, women’s representation in public office in these parts of the world has risen dramatically (Spain and Bianchi 1996, 76). According to the U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau (2006), 38 percent of working women in the United States as of 2005 held managerial and professional positions, and 23 percent of chief executive officers were women.

## The Benefits of Economic Freedom

The relationship between economic freedom and equality for women can be seen in figure 1, which plots two United Nations development indicators, the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Index (GEM), against an index of economic freedom. The GDI compares life expectancy, literacy, and earned income across countries, with penalties when these variables are distributed unequally. The GEM considers the number of women with parliamentary seats, the number of women who are senior officials and managers, and the estimated earned income for men and women, again corrected for gender inequality. The gender indices are graphed against the 2003 Economic Freedom Index (Gwartney and Lawson 2003), which is based on the size of government, protection of property rights, marginal tax rates, mean tariff rates, the ease of starting a new business, and other such factors across countries.<sup>1</sup>

Both indicators increase strongly with economic freedom. The free state is good for women. Correlation does not necessarily imply causation, of course, and causality might run from economic freedom to women's development, from women's development



1. I thank Alex Tabarrok for this graph.

to economic freedom, or a third factor might cause both—probably all three processes are involved to some extent. Nevertheless, at a minimum, the graph indicates that economic freedom and women’s development are compatible, contrary to the assertions made by many feminist radicals. It is interesting that no country with a high index of economic freedom has a low score on either index of women’s development.<sup>2</sup>

## Work and Family

The traditional family model, in which man is the breadwinner and woman is the caretaker, has been seriously challenged. According to the *U.S. Census 2000*, nearly one in three working wives out-earns her husband, and one in four fathers provides childcare while the mother is at work. According to *The First Measured Century*, a study of the social changes in the United States during the twentieth century, women gained in every aspect of their lives. In 1924, 87 percent of married women spent four or more hours each day doing housework. By 1977, the comparable figure was 43 percent. By 1999, it had plummeted to 14 percent (Caplow, Hicks, and Wattenberg 2001, 36–37). As the time and effort required for household chores diminished, married women no longer needed to stay at home. Whereas married women’s employment used to reflect badly on their husbands’ earning ability, no such implication arises today. Husbands are no longer expected to earn enough income to support their wives and children, and married women are expected to share in the burden of earning a livelihood for their families (Caplow, Hicks, and Wattenberg 2001). Furthermore, public attitudes toward married women’s employment has shifted dramatically from disapproval to approval, as demonstrated in figure 2.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, as women have gained more education, their jobs have evolved into lifetime careers, without an intermission for rearing their children. These working mothers have created a demand for day-care facilities for their children. Many mothers have opened family day-care centers in which they care for their own children and receive pay for taking care of other children.

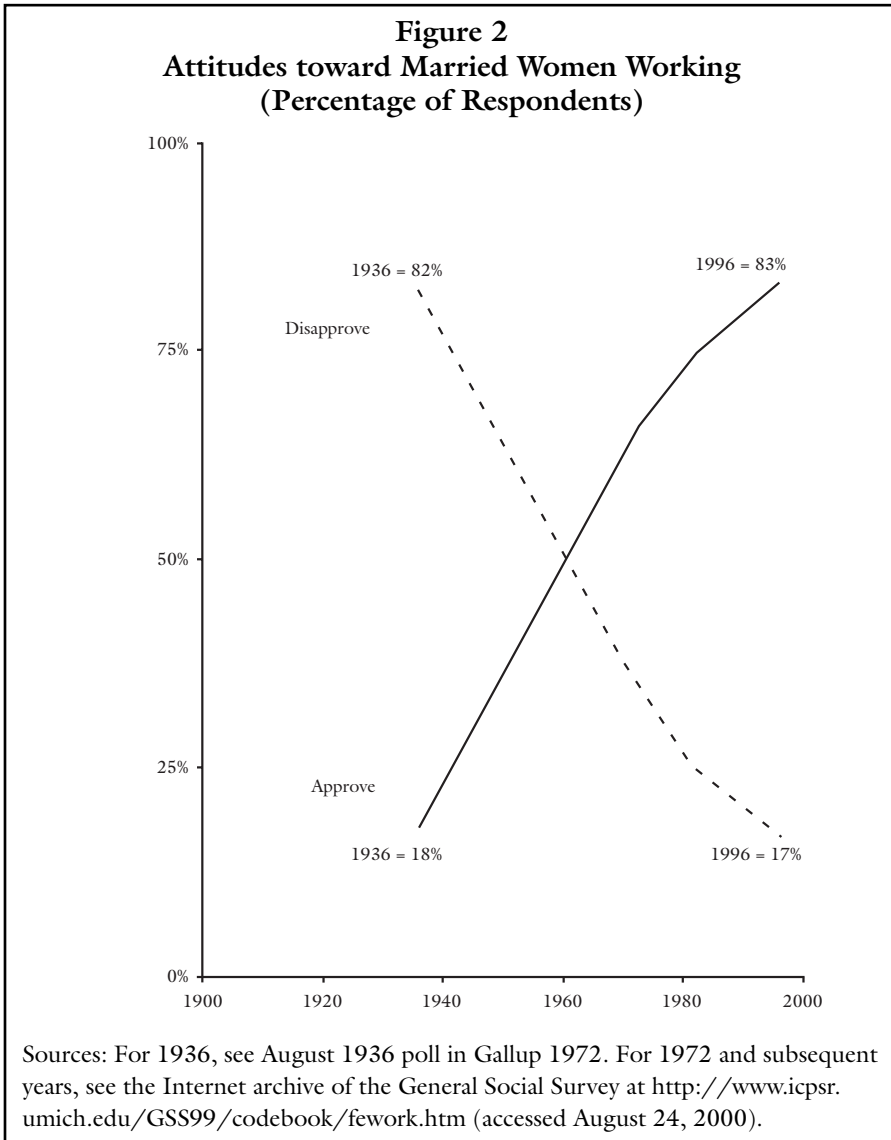
As marriage became a less urgent economic need for women, they deferred marriage to pursue their education or to launch their careers. In 1997, one in four American women in their early thirties was unmarried. As the social stigma disappeared for unmarried women, the marriage rate for women stood at fifty in 1996 (with the rate calculated as the annual number of marriages per one thousand unmarried women, single, widowed, or divorced, over the age of fifteen). The median age at first marriage in 1996 increased to twenty-five for women and twenty-seven for men, allowing both sexes to complete their higher education and to begin a career before starting a family. Although the divorce rate stood at 40 percent in 1995, marriage is still held

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2. Figure 1 actually underestimates the relationship between economic freedom and women’s development because there are incomplete data for many countries (Gambia, for example), and we can be fairly sure that these countries have low economic freedom and low gender development.

3. Reproduced from Caplow, Hicks, and Wattenberg 2001, “Work—Women at Work: Values.”





to be a desirable goal. The married proportion of the adult U.S. population was 59 percent in 1997, and more than 80 percent of Americans have been married at some time during their lifetimes (Caplow, Hicks, and Wattenberg 2001, 68–69).

### Women in the Military

In the early 1970s, following a series of federal court decisions on sex discrimination, the U.S. armed forces integrated their branches for women with the branches for men. By law, women today receive the same training, rank, pay, and promotion as men. They can serve currently in some frontline positions and onboard combat ships. It is possible and acceptable for women to command men in military operations, with little public notice

or concern. According to figure 3, between 1975 and 1998, the number of female officers and enlisted personnel tripled to 14 percent.<sup>4</sup> The consistent increase in the number of women in the military since the 1970s may also be correlated with the end of the draft for men in 1973. Once military service became voluntary, the armed forces had a greater incentive to hire women who could fill the vacancies filled previously by male draftees. Thus, greater freedom for one sex led to greater freedom and equality for the other.

### Lingering Traditional Views

Nevertheless, the law cannot alter the traditional attitudes of parts of the population in Western countries any more than it can do so in developing ones. A closer look at the condition of women in industrial countries reveals cases in which the apparent equality of men and women is misleading. According to the *Passport Switzerland* guide for doing business in Switzerland, more than half of the students at Swiss universities are women, but only 5.7 percent of all professors, lecturers, and researchers—highly respected persons in Switzerland—are women. Swiss women account for 42 percent of the workforce, but only 18 percent have made it to middle-ranking executive, and a meager 1 to 3 percent have successfully integrated into top management (Micheloud 2001, 40–42).

According to the U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau (2006), U.S. women are still concentrated in clerical jobs, sales, teaching, and nursing. Women make up 97 percent of secretaries and administrative assistants, 92 percent of receptionists and information clerks, 97 percent of preschool and kindergarten teachers, and 92 percent of registered nurses. Women contribute to their occupational segregation by trying to accommodate the requirements of child rearing. Working as a teacher enables a woman to be home when her children are out of school. Working in a low-responsibility position enables a woman to be absent from the office when her children are sick. In a 1992 survey, female high school seniors placed considerably less emphasis than male high school seniors on having a high income. Although steady employment was important for these young women, they regarded marriage and a family as equally important. Girls expect to balance work and family, whereas boys expect to devote themselves to their careers and regard caring for a family as a woman's work (Spain and Bianchi 1996, 93).

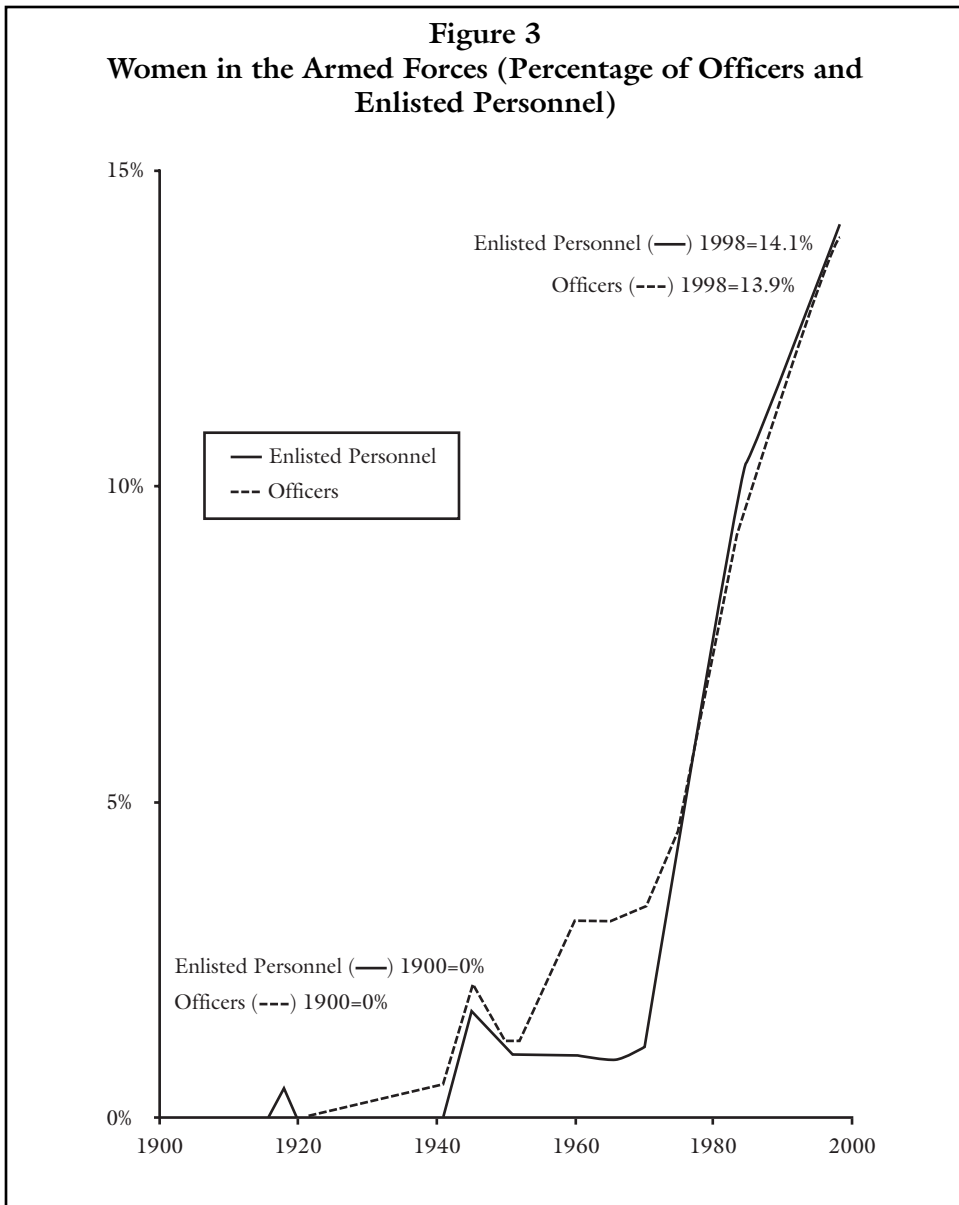
### It Is Up to Women and Men

American public opinion about working mothers is ambivalent, but a mother's choice is generally respected. In a 1995 Virginia Slims poll, one in six women and one in five men disapproved of mothers' working while rearing their children; one in three approved, and the rest said that whatever the mother preferred was fine (reported in Young 2000). Nevertheless, Americans are currently pulled in opposite directions by the conservatives who demand tax cuts so that women can afford to stay home with their children, and

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4. Reproduced from Caplow, Hicks, and Wattenberg 2001, "Government—Women in the Military."

**Figure 3**  
**Women in the Armed Forces (Percentage of Officers and Enlisted Personnel)**



the liberals who demand that the government provide free universal day care so that all women can work in the paid labor force. As Cathy Young observes in “The Mommy Wars: Why Feminists and Conservatives Just Don’t Get Modern Motherhood” (2000), parents can and should make the decision to work or stay home, how to balance child care and career, and assume responsibility for their decision. She points out that nobody

trusts the mother and father to know best what is good for them and their children. In a 1997 survey, however, nine out of ten working parents were satisfied with their child-care arrangements. As one working mother told Young, the question is not whether a mother should work or not, but what is successful child rearing.

Sweeping legal reforms have opened many doors for women in Western countries, but women have not always taken full advantage of these reforms. Legal measures are insufficient where traditional norms of a woman's place are still predominant in the culture. As in developing countries, customary law may still prevail over the formal law. It is up to both men and women to challenge the traditional norms to bring about a genuine change in women's condition.

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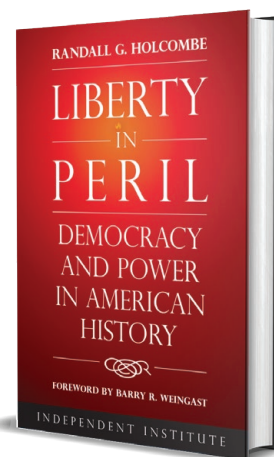
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