

CHAPTER 8: THE EXTRANUPTIAL HOUSEHOLD

A Case Study of Never-Married Mothers in the Rural Northwestern United States

Introduction

As we have seen in earlier chapters, and as we know from our own lives, the face of the American family has changed, and it continues to do so. Not only are families smaller and less likely to consist of more than two generations, but even the number of families made up of mother, father, and minor children is lower than before, 69% in 2000, compared to 87% in 1979 (Fields and Casper 2001:7). But the family changes that have most strongly captured the notice of the American public are those that have to do with households headed by single mothers, especially those who have never married. In 2000 the percentage of single mother headed households was 26%, up from only 12% thirty years earlier, and of the single mothers in 2000, 43% had never married (Fields and Casper 2001:7, 8).

This chapter presents an account of a group of young, never-married mothers in an effort to understand better their circumstances and motivations. It is based on discussions and tape-recorded interviews with 17 never-married mothers in rural Washington and Idaho from July, 2000 to August, 2001, as well as informal conversations conducted with some of them later on.

The Problem

The National Center for Health Statistics reported in April of 2001 that in 1999 exactly one-third of all infants born in the United States had been delivered to unmarried

mothers (www.childstats.gov/ac2001). By 2005 the estimate for the previous year was 35.7 per cent (www.childtrendsdatabank.org/indicators/75UnmarriedBirths.cfm).

Amara Bachu's 1999 examination of trends in American extranuptial childbearing (that is, childbearing outside marriage) points out that fully 40.5% of all *first* births in the United States between 1990 and 1994 were to unmarried women, a figure that was more than twice the 18% it had been in 1970-74 (Bachu 1999:2). Broken down by race, the figures show that 32.4% of white first births were extranuptial between 1990 and 1994, compared to 76% of African American first births (Bachu 1999:2). The figure for Hispanics was 40.2%. As Solot and Miller (2001) point out, some of these births may have been to mothers in stable, coresident relationships with the infants' fathers, a category that is not specified by the Census Bureau.

Other statistics on never-married mothers in the United States (all taken from Bachu 1999) provide a fuller portrait of this population. These women are overwhelmingly young: 75% of 15 to 19 year old first mothers and 38% of 20 to 24 year old first mothers have not been married. Educational attainment is also significant: only 7% of first mothers who have a bachelor's degree or more are unmarried, compared to 38.9% of first mothers with only a high school diploma, and 63.6% who have not graduated from high school. Though the data do not indicate this, it seems likely that these college educated women are elective mothers. That is, more of them are likely to have planned the births of their first children than is true for the never-married mothers with less education. Central cities have an average extranuptial rate of 42.6%, while "areas outside central cities," that is, suburbs, have the lowest rate: 27.3%. Rural, or

“nonmetropolitan” areas are in the middle, with a rate of 35.3% of extranuptial first births.

Rates of extranuptial births have increased in numerous countries other than the United States. Only in Japan, where unmarried motherhood is kept in check by social and economic discrimination against single mothers and their children, coupled with widely accepted and easily available abortion, have the rates of extranuptial births dropped since the end of World War II—to a rate that now stands at only 1.1% of all births (New York Times 1996:A-1). Elsewhere in the world, rates have increased. In the Western world the leader in extranuptial births is Iceland, where the rate in 1984 was already nearly 50%, upholding an international ranking the country has held since at least the 1820s. Though state benefits are low in Iceland compared to other Scandinavian countries, the coresidence of extended families provides support for the unmarried mother, who, in any case, is likely to marry her child’s father some time after birth (Burns and Scott 1994: 63-4). Elsewhere in the West, figures for 1992, when the U.S. rate of extranuptial birth was 30.1%, were similar or higher. Canada had a rate of 29%; the U.K., 31%; France, 50%; and Denmark and Sweden, nearly 50% (U.S. Census Bureau 1994: Document P20-482).

Despite an almost universal increase in extranuptial births in the developed world, never-married motherhood is not a unitary phenomenon. The most striking dimension of variation is the rate of poverty of never married mothers. In the United States and Australia for example, 56% of households headed by single mothers live in poverty, while in Finland the figure was 7%, and in Sweden it was 5% (Edin and Lein 1997:xxiii). There are at least two kinds of explanations for these differences. In the first place, as

Burns and Scott point out (1994:64), unmarried mothers in the United States (but not in Scandinavia) are overwhelmingly young and/or members of ethnic minorities, with little education or job experience, and without coresident partners. In the second place, Danish and Swedish single mothers (but not those in the United States) are supported by generous social welfare payments and services. Because Scandinavian culture has adopted the notion that marriage and procreation have no necessary connection, “welfare payments (in the United States) [are] typically described as welfare dependency rather than, as in Sweden, a citizenship right” (Burns and Scott 1994:65).

In the United States, both politicians and the population as a whole are inclined to see extranuptial birth and the resulting mother-headed households as a moral as well as an economic problem. Though they all recognize the disproportionate poverty of these households, they are inclined to contend that the problem cannot be solved “by throwing money at it;” that generous benefits would “reward” immoral behavior, and that because of these “rewards,” the immoral behavior would increase. This perspective is summed up in a statement by President Reagan, contained in his weekly radio address of 3 December, 1983: “But there is no question that many well-intentioned Great Society-type programs contributed to family breakups, welfare dependency, and, and a large increase in births out-of-wedlock” (quoted in Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986:131).

The inaccuracy of the belief espoused by Reagan and many others can easily be seen by looking at the steady increase of extranuptial births in the United States despite the decline in the real value of welfare benefits due to inflation throughout the nineteen seventies (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986:131), and the continuing increase into the twenty-first century, despite the dramatic cutbacks in Public Assistance made during the

nineties. As Edin and Lein note (1997:xxvi), “for conservative legislators and voters, single motherhood is a moral rather than a political problem. They want the government to punish what they see as bad behavior, regardless of whether such punishment has any deterrent value.” In this position the legislators mirror the views of many of their constituents, despite the fact that unmarried motherhood is becoming increasingly common in mainstream, middle class American life.

The Case Study and Its Participants

Much of the American information on never-married mothers is derived from work with African-Americans, most of them urban. The study described in this chapter relied on a contrasting group of mostly white residents of rural eastern Washington state and northern Idaho, contacted initially through their participation in an Early Childhood Head Start program. Interviews took place wherever informants felt most comfortable, from their own apartments to a college cafeteria, to fast food restaurants. At the end of each interview the informant received \$25 in cash. The original plan was to interview each participant three times, but this did not always occur. Informal conversations with friends of participants also took place.

Participants in this study ranged in age from 20 to 32, and all but one of them were white. The one exception was Desiree, a woman of mixed Native American and Afro Caribbean ethnicity. Like all participants discussed in this chapter, Desiree’s privacy is protected by a pseudonym. With one exception, all of the women I interviewed described themselves as “middle class.” They had all been born and raised in Washington, Idaho, or Montana, to families living on farms or in small, rural towns,

the smallest containing only a few hundred inhabitants, and the largest having a population of roughly 35,000. A few parents were farmers, but most earned a living in ancillary occupations, such as working as an accountant in a large food packing plant or selling or repairing farm implements. About a third of the informants' mothers had not been employed since marriage, while the rest had participated in paid employment at least part time while their children were growing up. The most common maternal occupations were clerical, but a number of mothers had worked as salespersons, child care providers, waitresses, and cooks.

Four women had grown up in households where the parents had divorced when the children were young, and one woman's parents had separated shortly after she graduated from high school. The rest of the women came from intact families. All the women told me that they were "very close" to at least one member of their family of origin, and many said they were close to many family members. With one exception, all the women I interviewed worked, either full or part time. They worked as Certified Nursing assistants (CNAs); they cleaned motel rooms and apartments; they provided child care; they were employed by fast food businesses; and they did clerical work. Only one woman was not employed; she was a fulltime student at a community college and lived on her student loans. A few women regularly or irregularly received child support payments from the fathers of their children, one of whom was reported to contribute only \$38 per month toward his daughter's upkeep.

With the exception of Sonia, who lived in a trailer she was buying from her father, informants lived in rented housing. Household size ranged from five persons (a mother, her three children, and her current partner, who was not the father of any of her

children), to two, (a mothers and her only child), but household composition fluctuated with some frequency. Only one informant, Courtney, was living with the father of her child during the time I was conducting interviews. Partly because most of the women I interviewed were in their early twenties, numbers of children were low. Desiree had three children; four women had two, and the rest all had only one.

Growing Up: Family, School, and Aspirations

Family

All of the participants in this study grew up in the countryside and rural towns of eastern Washington, Idaho, and Montana. Though some of them had moved around as children, most had remained with the same friends through at least their high school years; they were not isolated from peers. With the exception of Debra, who had had serious quarrels with her mother over her friends, activities, alcohol, drugs, and school attendance, women generally reported “just the usual” disagreements with their parents. When informants mentioned a particularly close relationship with a parent, as three of them did spontaneously, it was always with a father. This was true whether the father had left the family, as Debra’s had, or whether the family remained intact. When they were questioned about their relationships with their mothers, many informants responded that their mothers had been unable to understand what they were going through as children and adolescents, and that they had been punitive and unsympathetic. Fathers, on the other hand, were seen as more forgiving and “realistic” in their expectations for their daughters’ behavior. No informant reported that she had confided in her mother (or farther) the details of her emotional life, or that she had ever had lengthy conversations

with either parent about any topic. Siblings were likewise considered unsuitable confidants because they were either too young or too old. School friends of the same sex were the universal choice for the exchange of confidences and for advice, because, as Sonia put it, “They’re going through the same stuff you are, and they don’t judge you.” Lina also expressed a commonly held perspective when she said that she had never really been able to confide in her mother because “She’s kind of old, and she really doesn’t know what’s going on outside the house.” Her mother was forty-six at the time of the interview.

Indeed, despite a universal assertion that their families of origin were very important to them (in response to an open ended question about how they felt about their families), there was a curiously distanced, or “unplugged,” quality to most informants’ descriptions of their family backgrounds. Several did not know where their parents had met, how many siblings had been in their parents’ families, or where one of their parents had grown up, even in cases where there had been no divorce. Though most women had made trips as children to visit grandparents or other relatives, many were unable to say where these relatives had lived. Finally, and most unexpectedly, several informants were unable to remember the name of their parents’ religious affiliation. These were not deeply religious households. At least three informants who had sometimes gone to church with their parents as children struggled vainly to come up with a sectarian designation, two of them finally resorting to a description of the location of the church they had attended. And Tricia forgot entirely that the first six years of her schooling had been spent at the Catholic school until she was pressed for memories of her elementary schooling.

School

With respect to their attitudes toward school and their success in school as adolescents, informants represented quite a range. At one end was Debra, who dropped out of high school after several moves, and joined the Job Corps, which she left prematurely after a quarrel over drug use. Debra said that conquering her addiction had been difficult, but she had done so, had earned a high school equivalency certificate (GED), and was enrolled in a community college at the time she was interviewed. At the other end of the range was Sonia, who had always lived in the same very small town, had attended first the Catholic parochial school and then the local public school, always in the company of her friends. Sonia liked school and did well as a student, planning to attend college. Unlike any of the other women interviewed, Sonia actually did pack her bags and go off to college, a seven hour drive from her parents' house. But a combination of homesickness and morning sickness convinced Sonia that going away to college was unworkable, and she returned home less than two months after she had left. Shortly after her daughter was born, Sonia enrolled in a program at a nearby community college that resulted in her becoming a certified nursing assistant (CNA) after one academic quarter. With that certification, Sonia got a job at the nursing home where her friend, Christine, worked, and plugged away at her community college studies for LPN (licensed practical nurse) certification, a program in which Christine was also enrolled. Sonia finished the program first, and was immediately hired by a medical practice in a college town nearby, where she made a substantially higher income than she had made at the nursing home,

and received better benefits. Both Sonia and Christine plan to work for a year after they receive their LPN and then return to school to earn an RN.

Among the 17 women interviewed, all had finished high school or earned a GED, and most had attended community college classes, some of them finishing an AA degree or other two year certificate. Several women were enrolled in a baccalaureate program at a four year college. The women saw their education almost wholly as a means to an end, but they enjoyed it, nonetheless. Their academic accomplishments not only led directly to improved employment and higher incomes, but also gave them a sense of accomplishment, both after a program was completed and even while it was in progress. Though some women, like Sonia and Cheryl, had enjoyed elementary and high school and been good students, others, like Courtney and Desiree, had found school pointless and tiresome, except as a social opportunity. But once their children were born, nearly all of the women found that when education served a concrete purpose, it became far less onerous and often enjoyable in its own right.

Aspirations

One trait all the women had in common was that they had lacked concrete goals and aspirations as high school students. Even good students who had aimed at college had no serious plans for the future. In a vague sort of way they all assumed they would work, and indeed many had worked during the time they were in high school, mostly at a variety of fast food jobs or as sales clerks. But the idea of planning for a career had not occurred to any of them, nor, indeed, had the idea of a career, itself. Part of this was undoubtedly their participation in the still widespread failure of young American women

to realize the inevitability of their working for a living as adults and their resulting reluctance to plan for a career (Stone and McKee 2000). But the never-married mothers in this study seemed by their own descriptions of themselves as adolescents to have been more than usually unaware of the consequences of their actions. Though only a few years separated most of these women from their adolescence, many of them looked back to the years before their children were conceived with obvious amazement. “I don’t even know what I was thinking,” Cheryl said in baffled disgust; “I guess I wasn’t really thinking anything. I guess I just wanted to have fun.”

It is difficult to account for this resolute refusal to plan their occupational futures. These young women knew that they were likely to work, and they knew that unprotected sex was almost certain to lead to pregnancy. They had all watched their mothers (or their aunts or their elder sisters) work, and they had all taken sex education classes in high school. But they found their mothers’ (or aunts’ or sisters’) clerical or sales jobs “boring,” and they energetically agreed with Courtney that “sex ed was a joke.” They felt an unbridgeable gap between their lives and those of their older relatives. They were young, after all, and nothing like their mothers. And though they nearly all professed to love their mothers, they had little confidence that their mothers could understand the texture of their lives and no desire at all to understand their mothers’ lives.

As for institutional efforts to assist them in coping with life, such as sex education in the public schools, these seemed similarly worthless. The women were not very articulate about their aversion to their sex ed classes. They had certainly learnt about eggs and sperm. They knew that contraception was essential unless they were sexually abstinent, as their classes had all told them they should be. But there seemed to be two

varieties of unspoken resistance to this message. First, many of my informants found sex education classes themselves somewhat embarrassing. Second, they felt that their teachers, like their parents, had little knowledge of their lives, and that their message about sex was of no use. Teachers talked about sex and pregnancy, but as high school girls, the connections they perceived to sex were love, a boyfriend, and increased admiration from friends. Though it is hard for older observers to believe, and may not in fact be true, informants universally asserted that pregnancy had been far from their thoughts.

These young single mothers had resisted advice and instruction that seemed to them worthless and even cynical, since it resolutely ignored the sexual and emotional realities of their lives. But beyond that, the undeniable impression that emerges from discussions with them about their adolescence is that at that time they felt little sense of control over their own lives. They had no concrete goals or aspirations, and, as most of them said to me, often in exactly the same terms, “I just didn’t think about that stuff.” They did not want to repeat their mothers’ lives, but they had no notion of how to ensure a different future. Certainly, they did not know women whose lives they wanted to emulate, and they had never considered any practical steps they might take to achieve a secure, rewarding future. Having no sense of control over their lives, they appear simply to have denied that they ever could have such control in the future. And they ignored or denied the inevitability of the consequences of their actions.

Dating and Sex

There was quite a range of experience with dating and sex among these never-married mothers. Some, like Christine and Lina, had dated frequently, but more, like Cheryl, Sonia, and Desiree, had had virtually no romantic experience at all. Those who had dated before they met the father of their first children had all had some prior sexual experience, but except for Courtney they had not regularly used reliable contraception. Courtney had started taking birth control pills when she began sleeping with Ray (her baby's father). Much to her amazement she found herself pregnant despite the oral contraceptives. This, she explained, was the result of the interaction between her birth control pills and an antibiotic she was taking for a sinus infection. Ray, who was 22, already had a six year old daughter by another woman, who lived with their daughter 35 miles away. Despite Courtney's efforts to prevent pregnancy, her Sunday school pledge not to become sexually active until after marriage, and Ray's desire not to father another child until he was in a better economic position, Courtney said that neither she nor Ray ever considered abortion, which both of them consider immoral.

More common was Christine's story. Her mother had urged her to start taking birth control pills when she had become sexually active shortly after graduation from high school. Christine had made an appointment at Planned Parenthood in a nearby town, but never kept it. "It just seemed like a lot of trouble," she recalled, adding that she and her sexual partners had generally used condoms. One night after work, she and Duane, a fellow employee at a fast food restaurant, went to bed together and used no birth control. He was separated from the mother of his two children, and he and Christine had been flirting off and on for a couple of weeks. They never slept together again, but Christine had already become pregnant. When she discovered her pregnancy, Christine

quit her job, but Duane had already returned to his old girlfriend. Christine never spoke to Duane again, and never told him that her daughter is also his. He lives a few blocks away from her apartment, and he and his girlfriend have had two more children.

Debra has been sexually active since she was fifteen, but never used any form of birth control. She mentioned several times that she is allergic to all methods of contraception, and therefore, though she hopes she will not become pregnant again, she must take her chances or give up sex altogether. Debra's two sons have different fathers, both of whom physically abused her, as did several of her other boyfriends.

Cheryl had never had a date when she met Arnold the summer before her senior years in high school. She was spending the summer with her aunt and uncle, at whose house she met Arnold, a man in his early twenties, who was a friend of one of her cousins. Cheryl and Arnold used no birth control after their first few encounters, but Cheryl said she never worried about it. As the summer came to a close, she realized she was pregnant, and told Arnold. She now says that she "half hoped" Arnold might marry her, and she was horrified when his only offer was of money for an abortion. At that point, Cheryl says, she knew she wanted the baby more than she wanted Arnold, and declined his offer. "Then I'll be back in a couple of years to see my son," said Arnold, and disappeared from Cheryl's life. Cheryl completed her senior year of high school in a special, alternative program. Her baby was a girl, and she never saw Arnold again.

One last story rounds out the range of experience. Sonia was, by her own, somewhat rueful description, a "good" girl. She did well in school, was very close to her father, and despite the "usual" arguments with her mother, had no serious problems. She was planning to go away to college after graduation, and had already been accepted.

Trent was a “bad” boy. His parents and his sister had been in legal trouble for drug use and sale, and Trent, who was a year younger than Sonia, was two years behind her at school. Sonia had a group of friends whom she had known all her life, but she had never had a boyfriend until Trent. When asked why she had found Trent so appealing, Sonia said simply, “I was a good girl, and he was a bad boy.” When her parents went up to their vacation cabin on spring and summer weekends, Sonia stayed behind—and she and Trent slept together. They used condoms only at the beginning of their relationship. Soon after that they had ceased to use any contraception because, as Trent told Sonia, “We don’t need to; we’re in love.” Sonia now says she had no clear idea of what Trent meant, but she tried to put her worries about becoming pregnant in the back of her mind. She and Trent were together a great deal during the summer, but Sonia was not unhappy about the prospect of leaving him to go away to college. As August progressed, however, Sonia realized that there were going to be some severe complications to her plans: she had become pregnant. She told her parents and went off to college as she had planned. But two months later she was back at home, living with Trent in a trailer her father had bought her.

Pregnancy

Breaking the news to parents

All the women interviewed said that, despite their almost universal insouciance about birth control, they had been terrified when they initially discovered that they were pregnant. No one reported being even a little pleased. Pregnancy did not spell for these women the joy of someone who would love them, the prospect of welfare payments, or

the freedom of independent living, nor did it seem to present a handy way of cementing their relationships with their boyfriends. Universally, it spelled failure in the eyes of parents and a future for which the pregnant adolescents were completely unprepared. The memory of announcing her pregnancy to parents was sharp and detailed for each woman. Only two prospective mothers broke the news to their parents with a boyfriend standing by; most did so alone. And though no parent raved or lost his or her temper, many parents said that they were “disappointed” in their daughters. When asked for an explanation of “disappointed,” most women said something like Karen: “Well, you know, I wasn’t raised like that, and my parents had hoped that I would go to college, or at least get a good job.” The statement that “I wasn’t raised like that” occurred almost verbatim in several interviews. Cheryl’s mother, though also “disappointed,” told her that she could hardly be angry at her, since she, herself, had become pregnant before she was married (though she married before the child was born). Sonia’s parents asked her not to tell her grandparents before they had had a chance to forewarn them, but her father soon recovered his good humor. Having voiced the standard disappointment, he then said that at least they should all look forward to having a new member of the family. In recounting this story, Sonia said that she would always be grateful to her father for that statement, and his general support during and after her pregnancy.

Boyfriends’ reactions

Though only one of the women was still with the father of her child(ren) during this study, no one reported having been apprehensive about the possibility of losing her boyfriend as a result of her pregnancy. Many of the relationships had become somewhat

shaky by the time the pregnancies were discovered, but others remained sturdy for months or even years afterwards. Only Cheryl's boyfriend, Arnold, left as a result of her pregnancy, as mentioned earlier. Few of the prospective fathers proposed marriage, and the only one to do so immediately had just finished his sophomore year in high school and did not strike his girlfriend as a good prospect.

Several women had lived with the fathers of their children as "fiancés," though none of them had set dates for marriage. Debra lived with two different fiancés, but broke up with both of them after their physical abuse became intolerable. Lina broke up with her fiancé, Darrell, when she realized that his drug use made him dangerous to the baby and absorbed all the funds in the household. Among these never-married mothers, Courtney was unique, since at the time she was interviewed she lived with Ray, her infant son's father. Courtney was a hairdresser, studying to pass the state licensing exam, but at the time, Ray was the sole support of the household, while also contributing child support to the mother of his six year old daughter (whom he fathered at sixteen). Courtney and Ray were not married, but in the course of our conversation, Courtney referred to Ray as her "fiancé." When asked when they were planning to be married, and Courtney responded vaguely, "When the time is right." The conversation provided a valuable lesson about kinship terminology in this speech community: fiancé is someone with whom one has a committed relationship, but not necessarily concrete plans for marriage.

A final variation on relationships with sexual partners is presented by Desiree, who had lived for nearly ten years with the father of her three children. According to Desiree's assessment, this man, a Dominican named Tito, had never married her because he felt that he had greater control over her if they were not legally married (though she

often referred to Tito as her husband). “He thought I wouldn’t leave with three kids, and one of them handicapped, because I wouldn’t have any legal claim on him. But this isn’t the Dominican Republic, and I left. You have to do what’s best for your kids. Husbands come and go, but you’re always going to have your kids.”

Emotional responses

Unlike earlier generations of never-married mothers, none of the women in this study evinced any detectable embarrassment, and even less did they give evidence of guilt or shame. It is true that several women, friends of those interviewed formally, did not want to participate in formal, tape recorded interviews. But this appeared to have more to do with a diffuse notion of “privacy” than it did with shame or guilt. Not only did no one raise the topics of shame or guilt spontaneously, but when asked specifically about them, no one recalled having experienced these emotions. Sonia’s response was typical: “Yeah, I guess I was a little embarrassed at first, maybe with my aunt. But after Paige was born I didn’t even think about it. And besides, one of my cousins is pregnant now, and she’s not married, either.” Several women reported friends and relatives who had become never married mothers after them, but few had friends, sisters, or cousins who had become pregnant outside of marriage before they did. Sonia estimated that more than half of the twelve women in her graduating class at her small rural high school had become single mothers four years after commencement. Cheryl, at 32 the eldest of the women interviewed, said that she had been a little embarrassed at first, when her pregnancy had become apparent early in her senior year of high school. But after she had transferred to the alternative program (housed in the same building as the traditional high

school) she said she had ceased to feel any embarrassment or awkwardness. “Some of the football players wanted to feel my stomach just before Jasmine was born,” she said; “so I let them. They weren’t being mean; they were just real curious.”

The only continuing source of awkwardness these women reported was what almost all of them described as the “snottiness” of medical and clerical employees at various medical facilities in the area. This rudeness and brusqueness, a topic that arose spontaneously both in interviews and in unrecorded group conversations, was universally attributed not to the women’s status as unmarried mothers, but to their participation in state and federally sponsored health care programs for the poor. “It’s like, as soon as they see that card, they’re doing you a favor,” one never married mother of two said bitterly, amid the nods and murmurs of assent of the women sitting around her.

Facing the future

Beyond the prospect of telling their parents about their pregnancies, few of the women reported any apprehension about their future as single mothers when they were pregnant. This fearlessness appeared to be made up of three elements: lack of shame and minimal embarrassment about their status, no acquaintance with other single mothers who were having a difficult time, and an absence of any focus for their lives or plans for the future that stood to be interrupted.

All the women were either still in high school when they became pregnant, or else were working at unskilled, poorly paid jobs that promised nothing for the future. Though none of the women reported being deeply unhappy at the time she became pregnant, all of them appeared to be drifting aimlessly at the time. Thus, the pregnancies, though

emphatically neither planned nor desired, offered no particular derailment of future goals, either. Once past the terrifying hurdle of announcing their status to their parents, most women reported settling back into the lives they had previously been living. None of them was psychologically or economically prepared for motherhood, something that frightened and depressed them when they first discovered their condition. But as their pregnancies wore on, the fear and depression wore off (or were effectively repressed), so that life seemed to return to what it had been. Everyone reported this phenomenon in a matter-of-fact way, but Christine said in evident amazement at her youthful ignorance (of less than three years earlier), “I just never thought about it. I thought things would go on the way they always had. I must have been crazy.”

Abortion or motherhood?

Each one of the women in the study was asked whether she had considered abortion as an alternative to having the baby. Without hesitation every woman responded that abortion had never occurred to her. None of the women was religious, and none, including those raised Catholic, mentioned a specific sectarian or even religious objection to abortion. But all said they considered abortion “wrong,” or “wrong for me.” Two said that they had been “raised to take responsibility for their mistakes.” In this decision they were supported by their parents, and usually by their boyfriends. The possibility of giving an infant up for adoption struck those women whom I asked about it as incomprehensible, though not immoral, as they considered abortion. Cheryl continues to hold a grudge against her daughter’s father, for offering to pay for an abortion, and

leaving when Cheryl refused. Sonia holds a similar grudge against the doctor who initially confirmed her pregnancy for having strongly suggested that she seek an abortion.

Given their general lack of religiosity, it is difficult to interpret these women's resolute refusal to consider abortion. It may be that, having violated parental (and general cultural) norms by becoming pregnant while unmarried, the women felt that they might achieve a certain measure of social redemption by giving birth to the baby and thus paying their dues. And it may be that, living aimless lives devoid of structure or plan, these women found in the prospect of a baby a focus that might give their lives new meaning.

Birth and Beyond

All the women had worked or attended school until just before her baby was born. If the relationships with boyfriends survived conception, then the couples usually moved in together. Sometimes this meant that they had to live with the woman's parents, but more often they found an apartment or trailer of their own. Sonia, who lived in the trailer her father had bought her, went to work for a family friend who was a daycare provider, while her boyfriend, Trent, continued to attend high school. When their daughter, Paige, was born, Trent dropped out of school, ostensibly to help care for his daughter. But according to Sonia, Trent slept late every day and spent his time drinking and taking and selling drugs with his friends. Sonia put her daughter into daycare, threw Trent out of the trailer, and began attending classes leading to a CAN (Certified Nursing Assistant) certificate at the community college fifteen miles away. The charm of the "bad boy" had worn off, and as Sonia said, "I finally realized that even if I had made mistakes before, I

had to get control of things for Paige.” Trent rarely comes by to see his daughter, though Paige is fond of him and looks forward to his visits. He still sells drugs for a living according to Sonia, but since he is officially unemployed, he pays no child support. As noted earlier, Sonia subsequently earned LPN (Licensed Practical Nurse) certification and now works for a local medical practice.

Christine, who grew up with Sonia, became pregnant at about the same time. She did not have the luxury of her own trailer to retreat to during and after her pregnancy, nor did she have the solace of a boyfriend for even a few months, since her daughter, Emma, was the result of a single sexual encounter with a coworker. Christine continued to work in fast food establishments as long as she was able to do so, and then moved in with her divorced mother to await the birth of her baby. This arrangement was difficult, since Christine’s mother attempted to exert some control over her daughter’s activities, which Christine strongly resented. Like her friend, Sonia, Christine entered first the community college CNA program, and having completed it, got a job at the same nursing home that employed Sonia, and continued to work toward her LPN. Ultimately Christine, too, plans to earn an RN, and then to move far away to work as a nurse. Christine says she has her eye set on Chicago.

There is another dimension in which Christine differs, not only from Sonia, but also from all the other women: she had severe post partum depression. “When Emma was born I could hardly even look at her, “ Christine said. “I took care of her and [breast] fed her, and everything, but that was it. It took a long time for me to bond with her.” Christine received no counseling during this period, when she and Emma were still living with her mother. She attributes her depression entirely to her ignorance of the limitations

that her new daughter would impose on her life, and says that the worst of the depression passed in a few weeks. Things improved even more when Christine moved with Emma into a rent subsidized apartment she shared with another single mother and her child. Emma was cared for by the community college's daycare program as well as by Christine's roommate, with whom Christine exchanged child care duties. From time to time her mother or brother would help out, and Christine felt that her relationship with her mother had improved as a result of having moved into her own apartment. Her apartment was pleasant and orderly, and it was impossible to discern from Christine's interactions with Emma that she had ever been emotionally distanced from her.

Desiree welcomed a break from her children and was always glad to be interviewed at a fast food restaurant. She said that after becoming pregnant she had moved in with Tito, her Afro-Caribbean boyfriend. Tito had been recruited to play baseball by a small, local college, but he disliked the Northwest, and soon decided to move Desiree and their new son to Florida, where he had lived before, and where he had family. Desiree worked cleaning apartments and motel rooms, and Tito played semiprofessional baseball and worked at other jobs, as well. Over the next eight years they moved back and forth between Florida and Idaho, and had two more children. The last child, a son, was born premature and with multiple health problems, including severe asthma and delayed developmental.

Desiree said that her life with Tito was "not that bad; he was good to me and the kids, and he bought us whatever we needed, if he could." But Tito spent a lot of time away from home, working and playing baseball, which left Desiree alone with the children, and solely responsible for the care of the youngest child, who needed frequent

medical care. As time went on, Desiree also came to resent Tito's unwillingness to marry her, seeing it as a ploy to keep her dependent on him. In the end, however, Desiree found Jorge, a friend of Tito's, and also Afro-Caribbean. Jorge asked her to move in with him, and she accepted, much to Tito's amazement. "He just thought it wouldn't happen because of all the kids," she said, "and because I'd had my tubes tied." After her last child was born handicapped, Desiree's obstetrician had suggested sterilization, and she had agreed.

Shortly after moving in together, Desiree and Jorge decided to try living in the Northwest for a while. Jorge felt uncomfortable and out of place, though he found work almost immediately. Desiree worked cleaning apartments and enrolled in a local community college. There she struck her community college instructors as unusually competent and was employed as a mentor for other single mothers enrolled in the community college. After completing her AA degree Desiree was offered a lucrative scholarship (for Native American students) to a local four year college. Although she was pleased to have won the scholarship and eager to continue her education, Desiree was not willing to risk her relationship with Jorge for the sake of an education. Ironically, she had described several instances in which she had struggled to convince fellow community college students of the importance of an education. Specifically, she always pointed out that men were not reliable, but that one's obligations to one's children were constant, and could best be discharged through an education. Yet despite her conviction, Desiree, herself, opted to follow her boyfriend rather than to finish her education and thus secure her children's well-being.

One final sketch will round out the picture of the never married mothers in the present study. This is the case of Debra, a 25 year old mother of two sons, who was attending a community college, relying on her student loans, and living in a filthy apartment while struggling to regain custody of her children, whom Child Protective Services had temporarily placed with her mother. Debra's parents had divorced when she was young, and Debra had lived in a variety of small towns with her mother and her mother's boyfriends, until dropping out of school to live on her own. She entered the Job Corps some time after that. Through what Debra says was a miscarriage of justice, she left the Job Corps after charges of drug use, and returned home.

The next few years were a jumble of numerous fast food jobs, drug addiction (Debra does not deny the addiction, only her use of drugs in the Job Corps), frequent moves, and abusive boyfriends. Because she believes that she is allergic to all forms of birth control, Debra uses no contraception, and thus became pregnant by two different men. Though she had hoped to marry one of them, his physical abuse became intolerable, and she left him. Debra relied heavily on her mother for assistance with child care during this time, and was also on public assistance and in a drug recovery program. With her amphetamine habit finally mastered, Debra completed her GED, applied for and received student loans, and entered the local community college, which also offered subsidized child care.

Debra hopes to earn a bachelor's degree after she completes her AA degree, and eventually to become a social worker, but the path is not clear. She has economic problems that result in her utilities being turned off, and worse than that, Child Protective Services is investigating her for possible suspension of parental rights. Clint, Debra's

seven year old, is extremely aggressive at school, and both he and his younger brother, Cliff, have turned up at school and daycare with suspicious bruises. Debra says that the children are just clumsy, and that Child Protective Services is prejudiced against her because she is a former drug addict. But both boys are presently living with Debra's mother; Debra is required to attend "anger management" classes; and the threat that she will lose custody of her sons is always on her mind. As a result, she appears to be profoundly depressed. She has no car in a town without public transportation, and has to depend on friends for transportation. She spends most of her time alone in her airless apartment, watching soap operas and surrounded by overflowing ash trays and fast food containers. Debra worries about her father, who has kidney failure, and says she wants to donate a kidney to him; she is so demoralized that she is not keeping up with her classes; and she is torn between anger at her mother for "taking away" her children, and relief and gratitude that the boys have a safe haven in the midst of turmoil. Debra has had a difficult and painful life, with little trust or affection. When the interviewer brought her a pastry from a local bakery, she seemed not only filled with disproportionate gratitude, but amazed that anyone would have thought to do such a thing.

Discussion: Living the Decomplementary Life

In their 1994 study, Ailsa Burns and Cath Scott developed a theoretical paradigm that would explain the enormous increase in female headed households. To this perspective they gave the somewhat unwieldy title of the "decomplementary approach" (Burns and Scott 1994:189). According to this interpretation, the crux of the change in family formation has to do with the shift away from the formerly complementary gender

roles of husband and wife (male-as-breadwinner and female-as-homemaker), and toward a pattern of female and male self sufficiency. For Burns and Scott, what is particularly significant about this approach is that it accounts for both men's and women's motivations that affect family formation. The present study, too, indicates a number of ways in which "decomplementarity" is a primary force behind the changing face of the American family. Using the lives of a group of never-married mothers along with data from other studies, it is possible to identify four significant clusters of behavioral changes in the United States that contribute substantially to the increase in female headed households, generally, and in those of never-married mothers, specifically.

1. Women's self-sufficiency

In the United States, women are increasingly able and expected to earn a living. The cultural shift to virtually universal female employment in the age group and generation of the present study's informants has not, however, been accompanied by a parallel shift to career planning. Though all the women had expected to work after high school, and all of them ultimately supported themselves, none had given much thought to developing a career, nor even to preparation for work that would provide a comfortable, middle class life. The mothers of the women held primarily clerical or sales jobs that were largely unrewarding and poorly paid, and that they had, themselves, not planned but accepted out of economic necessity. To the women interviewed for this study, their mothers' jobs offered neither excitement nor sufficient income to make them worth accepting, but they had no other practical models on which to pattern their own lives. Before they became pregnant, when they were without the family responsibilities their

mothers had had, these young women almost universally turned to fast food sales. These jobs were numerous, required no skills, and could be entered and left at will; in fact, many informants had been employed by several different fast food restaurants.

In addition to their lack of occupational skills and strategies, these women had no coherent plans for their futures. They had diffuse fantasies of love, marriage, and the economic support of a husband, but, as many women acknowledged, these fantasies were not well founded on most of the men who were their sexual partners. Thus, though these informants *wanted* love, economic support, and the increased status they believed a man would provide, they no longer *needed* a man's economic support for survival. This was not only clear to them, but clear to their boyfriends, as well, and clear to the families of both.

A corollary to the increasing (though marginal) self sufficiency of young American women is that, though extranuptial pregnancies are still less acceptable than pregnancies of married women, they are increasingly common and decreasingly perceived as sources of guilt or shame. For this reason, as well as for their abilities to support themselves, the women in the present study were more willing to face the prospect of single motherhood than women in previous generations. Additionally, their parents (and possibly the parents of their boyfriends) were unwilling to push the youthful prospective parents into marriage, as might have been the case even a generation earlier. The era of the shotgun marriage, which may be said to have peaked between 1965 and 1969, when 18% of all first births were premaritally conceived (Bachus 1999:2), is apparently at an end.

2. Obsolescence of women's traditional domestic skills

As women no longer require men's labor for their support, men no longer need women's labor for their maintenance. Traditionally, laundry and cooking were time consuming tasks essential for men's (as well as women's) well-being, but requiring skills possessed primarily by women. Though few men today possess the skills of the pre World War II housewife, they are no longer required. Permanent press fabrics, laundromats, prepared foods, and fast food restaurants have taken their places for many Americans. Certainly, single men are no longer driven to the unpalatable alternatives of their natal homes or boarding houses, when the laundromat and the drive-through can allow any man to live on his own.

3. No need to protect the family name or holdings

As a smaller and smaller proportion of Americans rely on farming for subsistence, fewer and fewer people other than the very rich are concerned with the maintenance of family property. And as more and more families are fragmented by divorce, fewer and fewer men are concerned with maintaining the family line or name. Thus legitimizing offspring is less important to most contemporary Americans. Illegitimacy itself has little social or legal cost in the United States today, either for those born outside marriage or for their mothers. Indeed, none of the women I interviewed mentioned the issue of illegitimacy.

4. Easy access to sex

Men now have easy access to sexual partners without the necessity of an explicit or implicit offer of marriage. Initially, easy sexual access had to do with the development

of oral contraceptives, which in the mid 1960s provided women with safe, reliable, non intrusive birth control. The virtual assurance of sexual activity without the risk of pregnancy promoted premarital sexual activity. But as the twentieth century wore on and the twenty-first began, premarital sex had become common and accepted whether or not contraception was actually used. Despite the absence of a promise of marriage if pregnancy should occur, the excitement of romance is so great for young women and the expectation of increased status among peers so powerful, that sexual activity continues unabated even *without* birth control.

Analytical summary

The material complementarity that once served as the basis for marriage has to a great extent dissolved. What remains is the veneer of romantic attachment, afterinterpreted by males as sexual attraction and by females as love. But whatever the interpretation, the interlocking strands of mutual dependency, of complementarity, had increasingly failed by the end of the twentieth century. Fathers (who do not become husbands) are in no way materially worse off after the conception and birth of their child(ren), but mothers (who do not become wives) are almost certain to be so. On the other hand, these mothers *are* capable of supporting themselves and their children, even if initially (and possibly permanently) at a low level. Furthermore, the birth of an infant, though neither planned nor initially desired, frequently serves to provide a focus for these previously aimless and drifting women. Not only did many of the women interviewed for this study enter postsecondary education, but some were also able to find better and better paying jobs and even to plan for substantially more professional careers in the

future. For all the women, however, money remains tight, a situation that is exacerbated by the high cost of child care. Some fathers pay child support, but the amounts are always low, and those fathers who are missing, unidentified, or officially unemployed pay nothing at all.

Future Policy Considerations

In contemplating the predicament of never-married mothers, it is essential to establish with both policy makers and the public that the problem is economic in nature. It is a psychological problem almost exclusively to the extent that psychological difficulties are consequent to poverty. It is not a moral problem at all. Even Duncan and Rogers, who urge additional research to “disentangle” the effects of poverty from those of “lone parenting,” claim that “one can conclude that much of the lone-parent effect is really an income effect” (Duncan and Rodgers 1992:61-2). Other students of the phenomenon, especially those who examine it internationally, agree with Duskin that “the cause for concern” is “the economic disadvantage that many [mother-headed households] experience” (Duskin 1990:10). That is, the issue of extranuptial pregnancy must not be treated by policy makers as the wages of sin, nor can they allow popular sentiment favoring this position to affect their decisions. What is needed is a plan of attack aimed at two fronts. First, we must deal with the realities of the situation as it is: a rapidly increasing population of households headed by never-married mothers, many of them young, and most of them poor. Second, we must act to curtail the frequency of future accidental extranuptial births. This is so not because extranuptial maternity is immoral, but because when it is unplanned, as was the case with all the women in the

present study, the economic consequences are serious for both mother and child, and thus have a deleterious effect on society as a whole.

Coping with the present

With one exception, the earning capacities of all the unmarried parents discussed in this study were low at the time their children were born. Most remained low throughout the duration of the study. This was due partly to the low level of education of the parents, none of whom had more than a high school diploma, and some of whom did not have even that. The other, and related, cause was their lack of vocational skills. When their children were born, none of the mothers and only one of the fathers had any way of earning more than minimum wage. As it happened, this exceptional father was also the only one who was still living with his child's mother (though he had an older extranuptial child by another woman, born when both parents were sixteen).

Among the women in this study paternal support of extranuptial children was both uncommon and, where present, extremely low. As is well known, parental child support in mother-headed households is usually both inadequate and inconsistent (Garfinkel and Wong 1990:103). Further, as Jencks dryly notes, "women who end up in minimum-wage jobs have seldom had children by men who now work steadily at good jobs. Such women are more likely to have had a child with a man whom they cannot identify or who is now dead, in jail, homeless, or addicted to drugs" (Jencks 1997:xviii). The problem of paternal child support has already captured the interest of policy makers and law enforcement. For these reasons, it is not a focus of this discussion, which centers on mothers.

Many of the mothers interviewed were contacted through their participation in either a small, four year public college or a community college. It was easy to see from their experiences how participation in postsecondary education had improved their earning capacity, their potential for advancement, and/or their general sense of well-being and autonomy. There is no question that never-married mothers must be made aware of the benefits of postsecondary education, as well as of the student loans and grants for which they are eligible. Since many never-married mothers have been alienated from school for some time, sympathetic counselors who can both assist them in the application process and inform them of the opportunities available are of great importance. Among the women in this study, several fulfilled these functions informally for friends, and one of them, Desiree, had been employed as an outreach aide in counseling other single mothers who were considering postsecondary education. Since Desiree, herself, had had a rocky experience in high school, had had no job skills, and had (to her surprise) proven to be an excellent community college student, she was an ideal counselor.

Aside from a shortage of money to pay for education, the big hurdle mentioned by virtually every mother was affordable daycare, easily accessible and available beyond the hours of the traditional working day. Since many of these women, like other single mothers, work in the service sector, they often need child care early in the morning, late at night, and on weekends and holidays. But most of all, they need child care they can afford. The problem of childcare is serious, and constitutes an obstacle to both education and employment for single mothers. Though educational institutions often provide very low cost daycare, the hours of these programs are never adequate to the needs of low income mothers.

The women described in this chapter often exchanged child care with friends or roommates, paid a friend for the service, and called upon family members for assistance. These arrangements can become expensive, however, and they can also strain relationships with friends and family. Most important, they tend to be unreliable. Employers of low level, hourly labor are not tolerant of workers whose attendance is affected by childcare problems, and several women described being fired when their babysitter failed to show up on time, or in one case arrived at the mother's place of employment to drop off her child (the babysitter had decided to leave town with a boyfriend). It is essential to provide sound, low cost (ideally free) childcare for all low income households, many of which are headed by single mothers. As Burns and Scott point out, "Americans...remain reluctant to tax themselves in order to provide for these children [of poor single mothers], and continue to believe that the market, by rewarding effort and efficiency, will 'eventually' solve the problem" (Burns and Scott 1994:196).

There are at least two reasons for this American resistance to the Scandinavian solution of the "public family." First, of course, there is the general reluctance of Americans to use public funds for social benefits, especially where the public sees beneficiaries (such as unmarried mothers) as morally questionable. Second, there is a powerful and abiding conviction on the part of the American public that paid childcare is detrimental to children. This is true despite the fact that the majority of families are relying on paid childcare, as more than two-thirds of all mothers now work outside the household: 68.2% in 2005 (www.bls.gov/cps/). Countering the economic and child-centered arguments requires a two-pronged approach. First, the cost of publicly subsidized childcare must be graphically presented as preferable to the far more

pernicious, though more diffuse consequences to both mothers and children of poor, expensive, or no childcare. Such women are trapped in a series of dead end, poorly paid jobs close to home. They are reluctant to embark upon higher education or on more ambitious (and better paying) employment, because they know from experience that their childcare is unreliable. The children would benefit, not only from better, more consistent childcare, but from the advantages that would fall to the entire household if their mothers were able to secure better jobs. Society as a whole would profit from the increased affluence of this segment of society, both in terms of their contribution to the general economy, and in terms of the savings that would accrue to taxpayers as a result of a diminished call on social services. Such services, from public assistance, to public housing, to prisons, are primarily devoted to the impoverished, throughout their lives. Investing more heavily in the early years of households headed by single women with extranuptial children would result in a diminished need for chronic public subsidy for the members of that household later on in their lives.

Affecting the future

Assisting never-married mothers and their children to participate in a secure and prosperous future is both a humane and a self-interested national goal. But because the prospects for mother-headed households are grim without public intervention, it is essential to effect cultural change so that the number of unplanned extranuptial children born to young women is drastically reduced. The obvious place to begin this change is in the schools, the only institution in which virtually all American children participate, and already the locus of teaching about topics related to extranuptial pregnancy. There are

two foci to a new effort to prevent accidental extranuptial births. The first focus, clearly, is sex education. The second, and less obvious, focus is the encouragement of economic independence for young women.

As mentioned earlier, extranuptial pregnancy in Scandinavia and in some other parts of Europe, however common, is not common among girls still in secondary school or young women who have just completed secondary schooling. Figures from 1983, when the U.S. rate of unmarried adolescent mothers was roughly 25% lower than it is today (www.childstats.gov/ac2001/xpop6b.html) was twice that of France, England, and Canada; three times that of Sweden; and seven times that of the Netherlands (Burns and Scott 1994:72). When extranuptial pregnancy occurs in these countries, it is likely to be planned; it usually occurs in women beyond their early twenties; and it often results in marriage to a long term partner. The question, of course, is WHY? The answers are numerous and complicated, but one of them is fairly easy to isolate: sex education, especially in Sweden, is practical and successful (Burns and Scott 1994:39). It is neither in the United States. Some researchers have pointed out that knowledge of contraception by itself does not guarantee its use (Hansen, Meyers, and Ginsburg 1987; Yamaguchi and Kandel 1987). On the other hand, ignorance, uncertainty, and confusion about contraception almost certainly guarantee a lack of use. As noted earlier, all the women in the present study had participated in sex education classes. When asked what “sex ed” had been like, they responded with virtually the same words employed by undergraduate students when asked the same question: “it was a joke.” This unanimity is based almost wholly on the fact that sex education classes stress the Latin names for body parts, describe the interaction of sperm and egg, talk in general terms about male-female

relationships, threaten students with sexually transmitted diseases, and urge celibacy. The classes do not discuss methods of birth control, their efficacy, how to use them, or where to get them, though, as virtually everyone said with contempt, “They know lots of kids are already having sex.” High school students see this approach on the part of the schools as evidence of bad faith, and it intensifies their already well developed cynicism. Even those who, like Courtney, uncynically sign pledges of celibacy, find these pledges meaningless when they meet someone with whom they want to have a sexual relationship. Ignorant and embarrassed about birth control, and desperate for the romantic relationship they have been craving, many young women in high school or recently out of it fail to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy. Once conception has occurred, no matter how unwelcome it is, these young women refuse to consider abortion, on general moral grounds, and a new extranuptial family is under construction.

Celibacy is emphatically not a realistic approach to birth control for high school students in a society in which the excitement of sex and the transcendent joy of romantic love bombard them from every possible vehicle of popular culture. Realistic, practical sex education, that acknowledges the need for detailed information about birth control, will go a long way toward preventing unwanted extranuptial pregnancy.

Sex education alone, however, is unlikely to solve the problem of unplanned extranuptial pregnancy. The other strategy that seems essential in reducing the number of these pregnancies is the encouragement of genuine economic self sufficiency in young women, rather than the dead end, unskilled, and poorly paid employment many of them fall into from lack of planning and preparation. This would, of course, mean that women who *did* become single mothers would be more able to provide themselves and their

children with stable, middle class incomes. But it also seems likely that this capability would act to encourage these women to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies, since those pregnancies would disrupt or destroy the plans they would have made for themselves.

The women interviewed for this study were universally very distressed when they discovered that they were pregnant. Nonetheless, their pregnancies and subsequent births sometimes served to focus their educational and career plans, often at very high economic and emotional cost. It seems essential to understand why these energies were not harnessed *before* pregnancy, and to try to avoid this order of events.

Though several of these women did well in their post secondary studies, few had been successful high school students, and, as noted earlier, none had given much thought to a realistic career. Further, as already noted, the women were not encouraged to plan professional futures by the example of their mothers, whose poorly paid and uninteresting employment was driven entirely by economic necessity rather than by professional accomplishment or career planning. When asked about their mothers' work, many young women responded with the same evaluation: "boring." Few of them were well informed on the topic of their fathers' jobs. When several young mothers were asked if they had ever considered jobs like their fathers', they laughed incredulously, and responded with a variant of "no way." Their father's jobs seemed no more appealing than their mothers', and more unrealistic as career options for them.

Clearly the never-married mothers in this group had little experience with rewarding careers for women; the notion was simply foreign to them. These single mothers know almost no women who have such careers; second, their educational

experience has never included specific discussion, education, or preparation for rewarding careers for women, or even the assumption that girls would one day enter rewarding careers. The same cannot be said for their brothers. Though some male students at the same schools took up dead end jobs, too, this is unlikely to be the result of male ignorance that good careers exist and that preparation for them is essential.

It is now common knowledge that the majority of mothers of small children work. This can hardly have escaped the notice of public school administrators and teachers, many of whom are themselves the mothers of small children. But this knowledge has not generally been put into action as part of the curriculum and culture of the classroom in the provincial schools the young mothers in this study have attended. The schools by themselves cannot produce a shift to economic awareness or advancement for women. But through conscious effort, beginning in elementary school, they can present the world of work to girls in such a way that it becomes a potential source of fascination, respect, and substantial income, and even more important, as *possible* for them. Books, articles, videotapes, trips to various places of work, and visits by working women, as well as by working men, can help make women's careers as expected and likely as careers for men. These careers must not be presented as *alternatives* to marriage and children any more than they are presented this way to male high school students. Rather, they must be treated as expected elements in every woman's life. Only such career models can provide adolescent girls and young women with a stake in their own futures sufficient to enable them to resist situations likely to result in unwanted extranuptial pregnancy. If they have futures worth protecting, there is a greater likelihood that they will protect them.

TERMS

Extranuptial

Occurring outside marriage. This term is the equivalent of “out-of-wedlock” or “extramarital,” but is used in this book because it has not acquired the specific and usually negative connotations of the other two terms.

Decomplementary

Not complementary; not cooperating to form an integrated unit. Burns and Scott (1994) use this term to describe male-female relationships that no longer reflect the mutual cooperation and dependency that characterized earlier marriages.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The women whose lives form the basis of this chapter come from the rural middle and lower-middle class, and we have provided a detailed explanation to account for their extranuptial children. But extranuptial births are increasing among wealthier and better educated women, as well. Why do you think this is so?

2. In many countries in Western Europe, as in the United States, the rate of extranuptial births is high and becoming higher. But there are two big differences: in these countries the mothers are older than unmarried mothers in the United States usually are; and the governments of these countries often provide generous economic support for extranuptial families compared to restricted welfare payments in the United States. What do you think accounts for these two sets of differences?

3. By the time their babies were born, most of the never-married mothers discussed in this chapter wanted no part of their babies' fathers. But most of them *had* hoped to marry these men at one time, though almost none of the men had any intention of marrying their girlfriends. Why did the women want marriage when the men did not? Do women derive greater benefits from marriage than men? What are they? What benefits do men derive?

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