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Abused, Poor Women Often Shun Marriage

By Cheryl Wetzstein, The Washington Times

WASHINGTON – Poor women who experience sexual or physical abuse, especially during childhood, often find it difficult to marry or form long-term relationships with men, says a study that urges policy-makers not to overlook domestic violence when they talk about promoting marriage.

“If we are concerned about the decline in stable, long-term unions among the poor and near-poor, then we may need to consider measures that would directly reduce the levels of physical and sexual abuse that women bear,” said Johns Hopkins University professor Andrew J. Cherlin, co-author of the study, which appears in today’s American Sociological Review.

The timing of a woman’s abuse seems to affect her romantic patterns, said the researchers, who surveyed about 2,400 poor mothers and conducted in-depth interviews with 256 poor families.

Women who were abused as children were most likely to have “transitory” relationships – essentially, a parade of boyfriends moving through their lives.

In contrast, women abused as adults often shut down emotionally and avoided romantic entanglements with men altogether.

The result was that few poor women married: Of the 2,400 mothers surveyed, about 14 percent were married and living with their husbands. About 12 percent were married but separated, 6 percent were cohabiting, and 69 percent were single and unattached. Three-quarters of the mothers surveyed were in their 20s and 30s.

Sexual and physical abuse is “widespread” among poor women, and policy-makers are well-advised not to gloss over these problems when they talk about promoting stable family relationships, the researchers said.

The Cherlin study reinforces other research that finds “experiencing and witnessing violence does have long-term consequences and can make it more difficult to form strong families later in life,” said Kiersten Stewart, a top policy official with the Family Violence Prevention Fund, a national group that works to end domestic violence and child abuse.

Roland Warren, president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, said the study underscores the

need for more “involved, responsible and committed fathers” – a message that his group has been championing for more than a decade.

A good father not only loves and protects his daughter, but he teaches her how to distinguish between men who “have her best interest at heart” and those who don’t, he said.

The Cherlin study, which was funded in part by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, found that 52 percent of the 2,400 women surveyed had been abused in some way: Twenty-four percent said they had been sexually abused as a child; 11 percent had been sexually abused as an adult; 21 percent had been physically abused as a child; and 44 percent had been physically abused as an adult.

Sexual abuse included molestation, rape or witnessing sexual abuse in the home. Physical abuse included beating, burning, assaults with weapons or having their lives threatened after witnessing regular abuse in the home.

When Congress takes up welfare reform this year, it likely will debate a Bush administration proposal to allocate up to \$300 million a year to promote healthy marriages, especially in low-income neighborhoods.

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