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Uncle Sam Wants You to Get Married: Republican Marriage Promotion Programs Encourage Women to Stay in Abusive Relationships

by Kiersten Stewart, Guest Contributor

Republicans in Congress may not be known for their sympathy for poor women, but you would hardly expect them to be promoting policies that lead to greater domestic abuse.

As Congress heads toward a final round of legislation before the election, one of the less talked-about issues they expect to take up will be the reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF), more commonly known as welfare reform. One of the Republicans' top priorities within the TANF bill, supported strongly by the Bush Administration and Sens. Rick Santorum (R-PA) and Jim Talent (R-MO), is a \$1.6 billion effort to promote marriage among poor people as a solution to reducing poverty.

This approach is disturbing on many levels – Aren't there better things to do with \$1.6 billion in these times of budget cuts and record deficits? Do we really want to be teaching girls to marry well and rely on a man for all their basic needs? But perhaps the most troubling aspect is the harm it will do to women who are victims of domestic violence and their children.

As most people know, women on TANF face a daunting complex of problems hindering their rise out of poverty, from weak education and job skills to insufficient child care to inadequate transportation. But less attention has been given to just how many TANF recipients have been victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. In fact, studies consistently show that about 60 percent of women on TANF are victims of domestic violence and abuse and several studies show rates above 80 percent. In Oklahoma, a state at the forefront of marriage promotion programs, 47 percent of divorced women who had received government assistance cited domestic violence as a reason for their divorce, as compared to only 17 percent of those who had never received government assistance. And 70 percent of those who had received assistance cited "too much conflict," often another way to describe violence and abuse, as the reason for their divorce.

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Battered women are not simply some small subset of the population who can be dealt with separately; they are the core of TANF recipients.

Marriage promotion programs, therefore, must be viewed in the context of battered women's lives and how poverty and children affect their decision-making. Most moms I know will do anything for their children and this often includes putting up with years of violence and abuse. When you tell a woman who is desperately trying to keep a roof over her head, put food on her table, and buy a birthday gift or two for her child that if you get married or stay married you will get an extra \$100 a month, or a \$2,000 one-time bonus, or be helping your children (and conversely hurting them if you get divorced), or will be fulfilling your biblical role – all strategies tried by states or promoted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – you are encouraging battered women to stay in abusive relationships.

Young mothers, one of the key targets of the Administration's efforts, are particularly vulnerable. Young women report the highest rates of domestic violence and 26 percent of very young mothers, girls 13-17, report such violence in the first three months after the child is born. Homicide, usually at the hand of an intimate partner, is in fact the leading cause of death for pregnant and recently pregnant women.

Proponents of marriage promotion programs, chief among them Assistant Secretary for Children and Family at the Department of Health and Human Services, Wade Horn, also put forth the deeply flawed argument that marriage is inherently better for children. Even some liberal pundits and bloggers also make this and other mistakes in defending marriage initiatives. While data do show correlations between positive child outcomes and growing up in a family with parents who are married, there is nothing that demonstrates that it is the state of marriage itself that is responsible for these outcomes. In fact, the vast majority of the difference is explained by poverty; married couples have more money than single moms. That one doesn't seem too hard to understand.

I have little doubt, as a parent of a toddler and daughter of a single mom, that having another person to share in the work of raising and supporting a family makes it a lot easier. Single moms don't get to take a walk or go out with a girlfriend at the end of the day filled with nothing but getting puked on, peed on, willfully ignored and ordered to read "Brown Bear, Brown Bear" for the 200th time.

But those who want the government lecturing poor women about marriage make two mistakes. First, they often ignore that it is the conditions in a home where there is a successful marriage that are also creating positive effects for kids. And similarly, they forget that it is the conflict and, often, violence in homes where couples divorce that create the reported increased "negative" outcomes for kids.

It is also important to note that most kids of divorced parents are doing great and actually report that they'd much rather have divorced parents than parents who are in conflict.

Marriage, simply put, is not the solution to poverty. And creating pressure and financial incentives for abused poor women to stay with their violent partners can't be what President Bush means by "compassionate conservatism." And make no mistake about it – the proposed legislation will do exactly that, regardless of what proponents continually say. This legislation is dangerous. It will likely keep some women in abusive relationships and will take money from programs that have proven records of actually reducing poverty and helping parents – good schools, good child care, and a living wage.

Victims of domestic violence who receive welfare need help achieving the economic independence that will allow them to escape abuse and live in dignity. They do not need programs that coerce them to stay in abusive relationships. No woman should be forced to choose between safety and being able to pay the rent or feed her children.

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