

The State of Justice

The State of Justice this month commends to your reading a new book by Joan Blades and Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner called, “The Motherhood Manifesto, What American Moms Want and What To Do About it.” (Nation Books, New York, 2006)

While we spend a lot of time speaking in this country of “family values,” this book demonstrates with poignant logic the deficiencies of our social policy in providing any real assistance, financial or otherwise, in the American family’s efforts to raise the next generation, and the laggard response of policymakers to real “family” concerns in America, where all childbirth and child-rearing are treated as the private concern of parents, and often single moms, rich or poor.

Where is Plato (who thought the raising of children was of paramount importance to the survival of the state) now that we need him?

This is not universal policy, as the book shows. Many industrialized nations provide for some form of child care allowance, or some extended time off with pay, for new mothers, recognizing the value to society of child rearing. Nearly all industrialized nations provide health care to all children, while in the United States some 12% of all children (closer to 17% in West Virginia where 26% of all children live in poverty) are without health insurance.

Unfortunately, the book makes clear that just like with health care, the United States lags behind many other industrialized countries in social policy that actually aids families (rather than lecturing to them) and worse, with the global downward spiral of wages for all working people in this country, many if not most working moms (and since 1999 at least, most moms are working moms) are having a hard time juggling the realities of work and

raising children.

The book cites the work of Harvard Law School Professor Elizabeth Warren that “Having a child is now the single best predictor that a woman will go bankrupt. In fact, this year, more children will live through their parents’ bankruptcy than their parents divorce.” The book also references the work of Ann Crittenden, author of the Price of Motherhood: “Social policy does little to reward mothers for their economic contribution. Nannies earn Social Security credits; mothers do not. They earn a zero for every year they spend caring for family members.

This means that motherhood is the single biggest risk factor for poverty in old age.”

Then too, the authors cite Census statistics that show that significant wage disparities still exist between women and men’s pay scales, most significantly when the women are also mothers. All told, the

book does not give a rosy picture of the prospects of working mothers and their families in the short term.

But rather than wallow in negativity, the book encourages in the last chapter, aptly titled “As Mothers go, So Goes the Country,” organization and promotion of “parent friendly” legislation, and good suggestions for solutions for some of the more intractable failures of a system that too often speaks, but only speaks, of promoting family values.

We can’t speak for Oprah, but WALS highly recommends.

Commentaries

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