

What's in store for women if "traditional family values" become the law of the land once again? How have women fared in the "traditional family" the organized Christian Right is trying to resurrect?

The word "family" comes from the Latin *familia*, which refers to servants owned by a householder. Traditionally (under English common law which is the foundation for our legal system today) women were no more than chattel, the property of first their fathers and then their husbands. Husbands were expected to chastise their wives, using the "rule of thumb" to determine the size of their weapon of punishment. Women did not do much better under the U.S. Constitution, which defined all women, as well as men of color, as less than human.

Traditionally, rape laws existed only to protect the value of a virgin to her father, and to ensure that a husband's inheritance passed only to his own progeny. Until the end of slavery, the rape of African-American women was not a legal offense, and in fact was encouraged as a method of producing more slaves. During Reconstruction, rape laws became a primary means of stigmatizing and controlling African-American men, who continue to be disproportionately prosecuted for a crime which crosses all racial and socio-economic lines.

Traditionally, a marriage license has been a license for sex on demand for the husband. It's been less than 20 years since marital rape has been acknowledged as a crime, and it's still legal in a handful of states. Regardless of the status of the law, most juries still believe that women should be sexually submissive to men, especially their husbands.

Traditionally, children also have had no legal rights or protection from physical, sexual and emotional abuse within their families. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" coupled with the wife's duty to "love, honor and obey" have assured men the complete authority to reign as "king of the castle" over their *familias*, the servants of the household. This authority has traditionally been promoted and protected by all of our social institutions: legal, religious, educational, medical, economic and political.

During the past 20 years, the battered women's and anti-rape movements have challenged these "traditions." We have built our own institutions; over 2,000 women's crisis centers provide an alternative to hundreds of thousands of women each year. We have challenged and changed every existing mainstream institution as well. The abuse of women and children is now out of the closet, and while it still rages on at epidemic levels, it is a secret no longer. Women are speaking out louder every day. And women speaking out about the violence in their lives disturbs the social order. The organized right wing wants to challenge all of this; they desperately want to maintain a social order which rests on white male supremacy. The Christian Right's call for "traditional family values" represents their desire to turn the clock back on women's rights to the 1940s when white male entitlement to

control both public and private life was unquestioned. While those times are depicted as simpler, happier times when families were intact, for women and children they were times of unspeakable terror, when battery, rape, incest, alcoholism and economic servitude kept them prisoners in their own homes. Today, men as a group still maintain supremacy. But their authority is no longer unchallenged.

Of course, men on the left as well as the right act individually to maintain collective male supremacy through battering, rape, and sexually degrading women at

ful options for women and assures that female status will be determined by male behavior, while making it seem as though women hold the key to their own salvation if only they would choose to be virtuous. At the same time, this construction perpetuates the demonization of people of color, Jews, and gays and lesbians who are seen as outside the "traditional" norm and intent on corrupting the morals of chaste women and youth. Just as the criminal justice system and the popular media disproportionately identify African American males with rape and gay men with child

other pieces of progressively-intended legislation, it may become the vehicle for conservative measures intended to maintain, not change, the status quo. With their origin in protecting property rights, rape and crime laws today can still serve as the excuse for narrowing civil liberties by promoting "law and order" over meaningful social justice remedies. Many reactionary organizations seeking to dismantle the Bill of Rights have found rape to be an effective and emotional flag to wave to rally their troops, and are now competing with feminist rape crisis centers for funding and credibility.

Since the Christian Right cannot possibly turn the clock back to a time when the abuse of women and children within the family was a family secret, they have adopted a strategy of reframing the issues to serve their own interests, while seeking to discredit the efforts of the women's movement. The lesbian-baiting which the DOJ en-

gaged in with the NCADV has been directed against battered women's shelters and rape crisis lines on the state and local level across the country. Congress is refusing to fund state domestic violence coalitions because they are perceived as biased advocacy groups. Tired of being marginalized, some domestic violence programs formerly committed to social change are now speaking the same language of "codependence," "impulse control," and "family systems dysfunction" which can be heard on televangelist counseling shows daily.

These efforts to dilute, distort and derail the gains of the women's movement are a threat to the social justice to which everyone is entitled. As long as one half (the female half) of the members of any disenfranchised group are subject to physical, sexual and economic degradation, that group's own liberation struggle will be impaired. As long as the "traditional family" which was white and heterosexual, its closets bursting with skeletons, is held up as the norm, the oppression of all outside that norm will be justified. And as long as the "decay of traditional family values" can be blamed for all of today's social and economic ills, the real beneficiaries of the white male supremacist world order will continue business as usual.

## Traditional Family Values and the

# War Women

By Holly Pruett

home, at work, and in the community. The left as a whole has largely trivialized or ignored violence against women as a fundamental human rights issue. But unlike the left, the right has an explicit agenda of rolling back the gains of the women's movement to restore control of the family to the patriarch.

Within the general climate of woman-hating, the organized Christian Right has staked out several distinct approaches to attacking women's rights. Their most visible strategy is their assault on women's right to reproductive self-determination. Equally dangerous and perhaps more insidious is the "father's rights movement" which targets both women and children. And finally, the Christian Right has sought to control, distort, derail and exploit the women's movement itself.

The Christian Right's assault on women's reproductive self-determination operates on a number of different levels, from the backroom power brokering that placed the Human Life Amendment on the Republican party's platform to the street-level confrontation of Operation Rescue. Throughout, their depiction of women as irresponsible sexual actors reveals their underlying agenda of maintaining traditional male control over women as sexual commodities. A full page *USA Today* advertisement, "In Defense of a Little Virginity" (run by Focus on the Family), blames "safe sex gurus," Planned Parenthood, and "the homosexual agenda" for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, and claims that only "abstinence before marriage, then marriage and mutual fidelity for life" will protect "our best and brightest."

Those women who don't practice abstinence and marital fidelity get what they deserve, according to "traditional family values" thinking. Accordingly, Christian Right activists have moved aggressively to shut down school-based health clinics, require parental consent for abortion (but not other health care services), impose unreasonable burdens for the reporting of rape and incest where abortion is allowed under those circumstances, and (in Pennsylvania) reinstated "spousal" (read husband-owner's) consent for abortion.

By marketing the age-old madonna/whore identity of women, the Christian Right justifies the elimination of meaning-

abuse, many anti-abortion zealots would like the public to think of reproductive rights activists as all lesbians and Jews.

Directly attacking the women's movement through efforts to coopt, distort, and control its institutions, its message, and its gains, is central to the agenda masked by the "traditional family values" battle cry. Just as the battered women's movement had gained enough early momentum to create a federal office addressing domestic violence, Reagan came into office and closed it down. When the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) had obtained Department of Justice (DOJ) funding, the Christian Right intervened. They pressured the DOJ to restrict the free speech of activists, prohibiting the use of funds to address battering in lesbian relationships or the connections between racist and sexist violence. Not surprisingly, the DOJ subsequently awarded Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum a domestic violence grant, while the NCADV struggled and subsequently split over the pressures of choosing its political battles.

Government policy has been similarly affected on the research front. The National Mental Health Institute explicitly shifted its grant focus away from societal determinants of violent behavior towards studies which would illustrate the individual pathology of affected individuals. Instead of directing attention to the underlying power imbalances which uphold white male supremacy through institutional control and physical violence, many mental health professionals instead blame the epidemic of "family violence" on the "breakdown of traditional family values."

Today Congress is moving slowly on the Violence Against Women Act, created by battered women's and anti-rape advocates. But like many

## SOUND BITES FROM BIGOTS

"From abortion, to lesbianism, to pornography, modern feminism seeks to create an environment where self-centered women can indulge in whatever activity they desire without being held accountable for the consequences."

— Rebecca Hagelin,

Columnist for the Christian Coalition and Washington Bureau Chief for New Dimensions magazine