



The Inherent Vulnerability of Motherhood

by
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The Independence Myth. Adults, as well as children, believe myths. Some are not inconsequential and others blind us to the truth about reality. Nobody works at myth-making more assiduously — and cleverly — than the Hollywood movie makers who incessantly rationalize, whitewash and insidiously propagate their corrupt morals and deviant lifestyles. Some particularly diabolical myth makers deliberately construct and promote a false worldview. Therein embodies the threat of the corrosive fare they persistently bill as “just entertainment.”

Phenomenon, a 1996 John Travolta flick, recently reappeared on television. Like so many movies, it contains a ubiquitous character as the hero’s romantic interest: an emotionally wounded but very attractive unattached mother with improbably adorable, incredibly well-disciplined kids. Hollywood mindlessly promotes this paradoxical vision of the lushly attractive, caring unmarried mother who is not merely self-sufficient but aggressively independent to the point of being prickly — who is, nevertheless, still enormously attractive, so much so that the hero has an unrelenting desire to be her protector and provider. Clearly, the brute that deserted this paragon of beauty and virtue in the first place had to have been a blind idiot not to have hung on to such a priceless treasure.

The movie critic Roger Ebert says about *Phenomenon*, “It’s about change, acceptance and love, and it rounds those three bases very nicely, even if it never quite gets to home.” Really? Wonder what home would be?

Actually, *Phenomenon* is a not-so-very-subtle brief about the merits of overturning boundaries and the mindless hostility and cruelty of “common” folk when they encounter things they find unconventional or don’t understand.

Another critic, James Berardinelli, writes, “While suspension of disbelief is mandated for this sort of modern-day fable, *Phenomenon* demands too much. The silliness and general lack of respect for the audience’s intelligence exceeds reasonable levels. And, when it comes to manipulation to get the tears flowing, [the film director] Turtletaub’s handling of events is heavy-handed.” This, however, didn’t keep the film’s domestic box-office gross from topping \$100 million.

The Invincibility Myth. Another myth is brought to center stage by Helen Reddy’s newly released biography, *The Woman I Am* (2006). She is, of course, the artist who recorded the 1972 feminist anthem *I am Woman Hear Me Roar*. In case you’ve been living on another planet, these are the key lyrics:

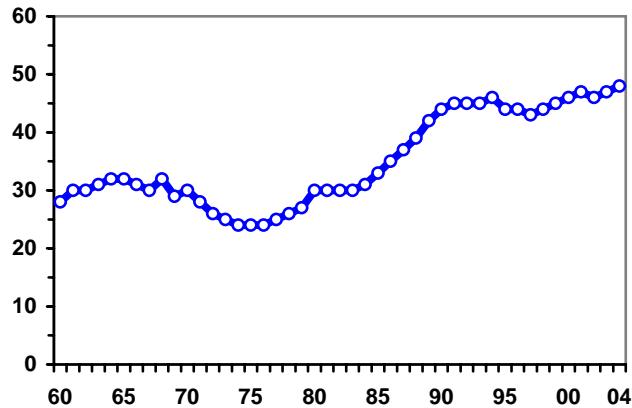
*Oh yes I am wise, but it's wisdom born of pain.
Yes, I've paid the price, but look how much I gained.
If I have to, I can do anything.
I am strong, I am invincible . . . I am woman..*

I Am Woman earned Reddy a Grammy Award in 1973 for Female Pop Vocal Performance; she concluded her acceptance speech at the awards ceremony by famously thanking God “because *She* makes everything possible.”

A prototypically dramatic PR blurb for her memoir states: “[A]t the height of her career, Helen’s world was shattered by the death of both her parents and, simultaneously, the news that she had a rare and incurable disease.” This account is calculated to engender a sympathetic response and to tease an impulse to rush out and buy the book to learn the full details of the tragedy.

The facts, as is often the case, are just a little bit different. Reddy was born in 1941 to an Australian show-business couple and began her career as a performer by the tender age of 4. In her late teens Reddy was briefly married to an older musician, with whom she had a daughter, Traci. In 1966 she moved to America as an unmarried mother with 3-year-old Traci in tow.

Figure 1.—The Unwed Birthrate per Thousand Women 20 and Up Continues to Rise



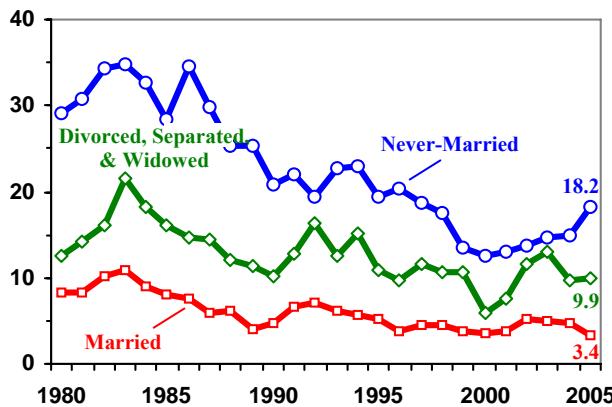
Note: These rates are the ratio of all unwed births to women 20 and older to unmarried women ages 20 to 44 (in thousands).

Source: Births are published by the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics, and estimates of the number of unmarried women are published by the U.S. Census Bureau.

In short order Reddy met, moved in with, and eventually married Jeff Wald, an agent. After finding little success in New York, she first tried Chicago in 1967, and then moved on to L.A. in 1968. She was signed by Capitol Records in 1970 but by 1975, despite nearly a dozen hit singles, her singing career was essentially over. Her last Top Ten hit was 1975's *Ain't No Way to Treat a Lady*.

One rather disingenuous biographer gives this account of what followed next: "Disenchanted with life in general during the '80s, she performed infrequently." That statement papers over quite a lot. In fact her marriage to husband No. 2 began to unravel in the early 1980s, egged on by his cocaine habit and aggressiveness. Reddy and Wald had a son, Jordan, who became so unmanageable by age 10 — not that much of a surprise considering his role models — that Reddy called her estranged

Figure 2.—Percent Unemployment for Mothers with Children Under 6 Years of Age by Marital Status



Note: These rates are percents of women 16 years of age and older in the labor force. Included within the group who are widowed, divorced, separated are those women who are married but whose spouse is not present.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Labor Force Statistics Derived from the Current Population Survey, 1948-87*, Bulletin 2307, August 1988, and later unpublished data relating to the Marital and Family Characteristics of the Labor Force from the March Current Population Survey.

husband to come get him out of the house she was sharing with her "boyfriend." So much for the Roaring Woman's "invincibility."

The Realities Facing the Average Unmarried Mom. What does the average unmarried mother — without the income from several hit Gold records — face in trying to provide for herself and her children? Never-married mothers typically have less education than the unmarried mothers who are divorced, and the odds of the former getting child support are minuscule. With limited education, she's lucky if she can find a job that pays enough to cover the rent and put food on the table without having to resort to food stamps. Health insurance through her employer is harder and harder to come by. And then there is the problem of finding adequate child care, particularly for the working mothers with children under school age.

For those at the very bottom of the economic ladder, there is some government help with medical costs; children under age six in families with incomes below 133 percent of the federal poverty line (\$20,841 for a family of three) are eligible for Medicaid coverage, as are children 6 and older in families with income below 100 percent of the federal poverty line (\$15,670 for a family of three).

Government provides some funding for child care. Federal and state spending for subsidized child care has quadrupled in the last decade from \$3 billion in 1996 to \$12 billion in 2005 as part of the effort to move welfare recipients into the work force. Even with this large increase, the expanded funding for child care subsidies provides for only about 2.5 million children. Even with the nearly 60-percent decline in the welfare caseload since 1994, there are still about 4 million children in families receiving income assistance.

Even if the cost and availability of child care were not critical factors (which they certainly are), the vulnerability of unmarried mothers would remain. When, *not if*, a child comes down with some infection — not a particularly rare event in the life of a small child, particularly those being exposed to many other children in the typical child-care or pre-school setting — even those women whose health care and child care are fully funded by the government have a problem. The average low-income, working, unmarried mother with a sick child often has no option but to take time off from work.

Doctors have witnessed a flood of working mothers demanding antibiotics for their children in order to get them readmitted to day care as quickly as possible. Dr. Michael Blum, medical officer in the Food and Drug Administration's division of anti-infective drug products, says, "Resistance [has] increased to a number of commonly used antibiotics, possibly related to overuse of antibiotics. In the 1990s, we've come to a point for certain infections that we don't have agents available."

Thus the average low-income unmarried mother is highly vulnerable when facing a sick child. And that vulnerability tends to make unmarried mothers in general less reliable workers in comparison to women without children or to married women with a spouse who is willing and able to help juggle family responsibilities. The unemployment rates of women with children under 6 years of age broken down by marital status clearly reflect this fact (see Figure 2).

From 1980 to 2005, the unemployment rate of single (never-married) mothers of children under 6 has been almost four times higher than that of married mothers; similarly the unemployment rate of divorced, separated and widowed mothers has been a little over twice that of mothers who are married. **Despite the Hollywood myths and the feminist rhetoric, being a mother of small children is a vulnerable time for women, and the presence and support of a husband is vital to the welfare of her children.**

Despite these realities, the out-of-wedlock birth rate continues to climb. While the birth rate for unmarried teenagers has declined nearly 25 percent since 1994, rates for unmarried women age 20 and older have continued to edge upward (see Figure 1). The rate for unmarried women 20 years of age and older was higher in 2003 than the previous peak of 46 per thousand reached in 1994; based on preliminary data from the National Center for Health Statistics, the unmarried birth rate for women 20 and older increased in 2004 over the previous year. This rising tide of unwed births continually adds to the ranks of vulnerable unmarried mothers.

This damaging trend has led Dr. Wade F. Horn, Assistant Secretary for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services, to rebut the current mythology of unmarried mothers' adequacy to go it alone, saying: "[G]iven the research evidence indicating the benefits to children associated with being raised by their own married parents, the continued increase in births to unmarried parents and the number of children living in single-parent households is a serious concern."