

## Book Reviews

**Taking A Stand: A Review of Nancy E. Dowd's *In Defense of Single-Parent Families*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. 200 pp.**

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*In Defense of Single-Parent Families* is yet another contribution to the growing body of knowledge on single-headed households. The number of lone-parent families may be on the rise, however, a remarkably consistent view of single-parent families as 'problem families' continues to dominate the literature. Researchers have, for the most part, painted a gloomy picture of single-parent families by focusing on the negative repercussions of such family structures. Poverty, family breakdown, juvenile delinquency, and crime are among some of the social malaise frequently attributed to lone-parent families. Moreover, given that the overwhelming majority of single parents are 'mothers', women have inevitably become the targets of blame for the emergence of such social ills. Consequently, in employing a major part of their efforts at discrediting single-parent families, researchers have scarcely acknowledged the value of single parenting.

Nancy E. Dowd, an American law professor and single mother (by choice), has recognized the need for feminist research in this area and, as a result, has taken on the challenge of moving considerably beyond the commonplace assumption that single-parent families are dysfunctional because of inherent fatal flaws in their structure. As revealed by the title of her book, Dowd delivers a poignant defense of single-parent families by claiming that all families, regardless of their 'form', face significant conflicts vis-à-vis work and family responsibilities. As a matter of fact, the author ventures to say that many dual-parent families in reality operate as single-parent care-giving households. *In Defense of Single-Parent*

*Families* thus asks us to ponder the ultimate purpose of the 'family', and as a result, place value not on one family form (e.g., the nuclear family) at the expense of other forms, but rather recognize the merits of all types of families.

Dowd develops a very powerful and provocative argument in defense of lone-parent families by, first, exposing the many myths and misconceptions surrounding this particular type of family and, second, juxtaposing these myths against the realities of what we 'know' about single-parent families. She then demonstrates how these myths are incorporated in the legal system which, in a catch-22 fashion, further stigmatizes lone-parent families. In the first part of the book, the author addresses some of the more common assumptions held in society about single-parent families — namely, that (1) single parents cause poverty; (2) children need a mother and a father for healthy development; and (3) single parents are sinful and immoral. She then goes on to successfully convince her readers that these undeniably powerful beliefs about single-parent families are not only manifestly false but detrimental to both the single parents (usually women) who are stigmatized as a result of their status, and the children who are unfairly penalized for what society views as their parents' mistakes.

What makes this book particularly strong is the author's use of sociological research in dispelling some of the misconceptions about single-parent families. Dowd argues that the problems incurred by single-parents do not stem from their decision to 'purposely' deviate from the revered two-parent heterosexual family, but rather are the result of structural mechanisms deeply embedded in society. The plight of single parents, therefore, is largely attributable to systemic problems such as:

gender discrimination in wage rates, continuing sex segregation in jobs, structural constraints against combining work and family in much of the wage labor market, and an unwillingness to mandate child support or provide meaningful family support outside patriarchal structures (27).

While this may in fact be true, Dowd clearly points out that it is the prevailing myths about lone-parent families that continue to inform and justify the punitive social and legal policies aimed at such family types.

If good use of sociological research makes the book strong, what makes it particularly interesting to read is the way the author combines the sociological literature with an insightful legal analysis of lone-parent families. In the second part of the book, the author maps out the context of work and family and illustrates how - through the divorce, employment, and welfare structures firmly in place - the law condemns rather than supports both divorced and never-married single-parent families, contributing to the impoverishment and further stigmatization of these families. Dowd convincingly argues that the legal rhetoric of "equality and choice" makes family 'form' the scapegoat for economic inequality and oppression and thus conveniently ignores the structural problems which operate in a context of gender, race, and class inequality.

In particular, the law ignores the limited choices for constructing work and family relationships. Those limited choices contribute to the creation of poverty and its associated ills. In this way, the law stigmatizes single parents by the structure and goals of family, employment and welfare law (54).

Moreover, in her discussion of how the law punishes single-parent families, Dowd tugs at our heartstrings by bringing to light the fact that those who are most affected by the existing legal structures of divorce, employment, and welfare are the blameless children who are raised within such families. Hence, for the sake of the children, future generations, and all of humanity, the author pleads with us to recognize single-parent families as "families of worth and value" and "demonstrate not only that stigma has no basis and only does harm, but also that single-parent families have unique characteristics, positive attributes which can contribute to all families" (102). To not do so is to bring about what the author refers to as "social suicide" (xv).

This commendable book concludes with the author's recommendations for drafting a policy of support for single-parent families. Believing that single-parent families of any kind deserve to be valued and supported affirmatively and believing that policy should be attentive to gender, race, and class differences, Dowd essentially brings forth four recommendations: (1) a system of economic support which most closely adopts for all single parents the model of Social Security benefits for

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widows and widowers; (2) a call for support of care-giving work, both by empowering sole or primary care-givers and by providing necessary support - economic and social - for primary care-givers regardless of family form; (3) a restructuring of the workplace for all parents to the extent that parents are expected to engage in wage work; and (4) replacing welfare with universal family support. In order to ensure the implementation of the aforementioned recommendations, Dowd goes so far as to sketch, in the last chapter of her book, "how one might reconceive constitutional doctrine to ideologically support single-parent families, and to enshrine that value so strongly that policies which stigmatize would be constitutionally invalid" (147). Although skeptical that any of these recommendations will be implemented given the current political climate, Dowd nonetheless alludes to them in the hope that they may fall on the ears of those in a position to effect change.

One would be hard-pressed to find fault with this book. Without a doubt, *In Defense of Single-Parent Families* deserves to be on every policy-maker's bookshelf. However, what this book lacks, and what I believe is crucial in an analysis of single-parent households, is attention to 'voice'. Single parents need to be heard. The levels of stress experienced by single parents and their methods and chances of success in dealing with them, for instance, are among some of the issues that can and should be addressed in face-to-face interviews with single parents. If we are to aid lone-parent families through social policy, we must provide single parents with an opportunity to share their sentiments. In every other way, this book is important because it deals with both short-and long-term issues confronting single-parent families.