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A Matter of Men and Children

By JACK KAMMER

"Nope. No men's issues here," I muttered sardonically to myself as I finished the newspaper story whose headline announced, "Children in Maryland trail most in U.S. in well-being." I was mimicking the popular view that the only gender issues worthy of public consideration are women's.

Consider the phrase "women and children." How easily it glides from our cultural consciousness into everyday thought and speech. Now consider the phrase "men and children," and observe how alien, how intrusive, how out of whack it seems. And so when we observe the problems of children we see no connection to the problems of men. "Nope. No men's issues here."

We publish graphs showing 13.4 percent of Maryland's offspring are living in poverty. We make ourselves aware that 27.5 percent of the state's children are living in single-parent families. We avoid the hard questions by invoking the euphemism "single-parent" instead of considering how many single-parent children are mother-only and how many fatherless children are impoverished.

But when we finally get around to observing the connection between fatherlessness and child poverty, all we can muster the insight to say is some hatefulness about "deadbeat daddies," swallowing whole the bogus statistics bandied about by those who harbor deep-seated beliefs about the moral superiority of motherhood, and who are quite content to allow fathers to sink ever deeper into irrelevance and alienation from their children, their communities and themselves.

We fail to see fatherhood as a natural resource which we have allowed to fall — and in some cases have kicked and pushed — into disrepair, disuse and disgrace.

And we publish graphs that show horrific numbers of teen-agers are dying violent deaths. Again we use a gender-neutral term — "teen" — as a way of avoiding the fact that the overwhelming majority of those dying are young men.

But if we force ourselves to observe the gender factor of the problem we explain it away by saying things that amount to nothing more than callousness: "It's that nasty testosterone," or "Boys will be boys," or "It's just those drug dealers popping each other off."

We cannot bring ourselves to see that testosterone in 1992 has not changed much from the days when our society was healthier and our men played a more constructive role in building it. We cannot acknowledge that when we allow little boys to grow up feeling that by virtue of their gender they have little to contribute to society, they must necessarily either succumb to a life of despair and worthlessness or adopt hyper-aggressive ways in response to our cultural biases about masculinity.

In one way or another over the past seven years there has been a struggling, underdog effort in Maryland to have the state acknowledge the social significance of men's issues. On March 15, 1985, the evening cousin of this newspaper ran a story whose lead said, "A proposal to create a state task force on manhood has drawn snickers from many lawmakers, but the idea received plenty of serious support from therapists, sociologists and professors who said men's problems are no joke."

But the General Assembly treated it like a joke. Since then, Maryland's social problems have only gotten worse.

The State of Maryland budgets $200,000 each year for the Maryland Commission for Women. Baltimore gives $175,000 for its women's panel. If the state would do only so much as to produce an executive order or legislative resolution acknowledging even the possibility of the value of a Commission for Men, if it would give the panel only a box of stationery, a meeting room and a telephone line, the group could hold forth a candle in the darkness.

A Maryland Commission for Men could begin to help the state's policy-makers stop bumping their heads on the ancient and deadly aphorism that "it's a man's world" and help them see that children's lives are much enriched when they include the presence of strong, healthy, appreciated American men, and that it is necessary and good to foster a desire and expectation in our boys to grow up just like that.

The Maryland Commission for Men is an idea whose time has come. No joke. Our kids aren't laughing.

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