

# Introduction

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**T**he denigration and demonization of single mothers has deep roots in American culture. Mothers without husbands have been looked upon with suspicion and hostility since the time of the earliest settlers. Today's concerns about the weakening of the traditional family and about related issues such as single motherhood, divorce, sexual permissiveness, teenage pregnancy, and abortion have formed a central theme in American society for generations. Both the early Settlement Laws and the Colonial Poor Laws of seventeenth-century America punished husbandless women and unwed mothers, differentiating between the “deserving” and the “undeserving.” During the early years of the twentieth century, programs to help the poor stated that only “fit and worthy” women would receive help; these generally were white widows.<sup>1</sup>

The recent period of intensified concern about single motherhood was spurred by the ascendancy of conservative ideology in the United States as marked by the election of Ronald Reagan as president. Rapid social change during the 1970s and 1980s—increasing numbers of single mothers, especially women having children outside marriage; a significant increase in teenage pregnancy and birth; a continuing high divorce rate; and fundamental changes in the roles and status of women—contributed to the anxiety about social issues. Reagan's infamous labeling of poor women as “welfare queens” was accompanied by significant cut-backs in essential social services, particularly for poor women and chil-

dren. In the early 1980s Medicaid, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the food stamp program, maternal and child health services, and day care were all slashed. These cutbacks increased the number of poor people and had a particularly devastating impact on female-headed families. Consequently, during this period there was a significant increase in both the “feminization” and the “minoritization” of poverty.<sup>2</sup>

Since the early 1990s, single mothers have continued to be systematically stereotyped and stigmatized. Poor single mothers have once again been vilified as being lazy, irresponsible, dependent, deviant, and, above all, living off the hard work of others. Single mothers, particularly those who have children outside of marriage, have been blamed for virtually all the nation’s social problems—the “breakdown of the family,” the crime rate, drug and alcohol addiction, illiteracy, homelessness, poverty, and students’ poor academic performance. Perhaps the most denigrating and dehumanizing attacks on single mothers occurred in 1995 on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives when, as part of an effort to reduce the money spent on social welfare programs, two members of Congress compared welfare recipients to animals. This campaign was fueled by conservative Republicans, spearheaded by Newt Gingrich and buttressed by the work of the social scientist Charles Murray, who labeled out-of-wedlock births “the single most important problem of our time” as he railed against the “culture of illegitimacy.”<sup>3</sup> Bill Clinton seemed to support the negative view of welfare recipients when he made his now-famous promise in 1991, during the presidential campaign, to “put an end to welfare as we know it.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1992, the then vice president, Dan Quayle, set off a firestorm by condemning Murphy Brown, the central character in a popular television sitcom, for having a baby outside of marriage. Interestingly, during the episode in which Murphy Brown decided to have the baby, she debated between having an abortion and bearing a child. Quayle was surely not calling for her to terminate the pregnancy; he was clearly criticizing her for not being married before becoming pregnant. In the same speech, Quayle also suggested that unmarried women with children were at least

partially responsible for the “lawless social anarchy” that erupted in the May 1992 riots in Los Angeles following the acquittal of the four police officers who brutally beat Rodney King. Several months later, an influential and widely read article by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead titled “Dan Quayle Was Right” was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Whitehead claimed that studies show that children who grow up in single-parent families are at significantly greater risk than children raised in two-parent families for a variety of problems, such as developing emotional and behavioral difficulties, dropping out of school, becoming pregnant as teenagers, abusing drugs, getting into trouble with the law, and being victims of physical or sexual abuse. Whitehead stressed, moreover, that children of divorced, separated, or never-married parents are far more likely to live in poverty, fail in school, commit crimes, and engage in “aggressive, acting-out behavior” and in “assaults on teachers, unprovoked attacks on other children, [and] screaming outbursts in class.”<sup>5</sup>

“Family values” became a ubiquitous slogan, instantly signaling an ideology that adamantly opposes abortion, promotes heterosexual marriage, criticizes the divorce rate and its effects on children and on the larger society, and generally looks back, nostalgically though not accurately, to earlier eras of traditional family and gender relationships. In a speech in March 1995, Newt Gingrich, then the Speaker of the House of Representatives, recommended returning to the values, norms, and social sanctions of Victorian England in order to modify antisocial behavior: “They [the Victorians] reduced the number of children born out of wedlock almost by 50 percent. They changed the whole momentum of their society. They didn’t do it through a new bureaucracy. They did it by reestablishing values, by moral leadership, and by “being willing to look at people in the face and say, ‘You should be ashamed when you get drunk in public; you ought to be ashamed if you’re a drug addict.’”<sup>6</sup> Of course, Gingrich was also saying that American society must send the message that people should be ashamed to have children out of wedlock and that we should not be afraid of using shame to change behavior. One is reminded of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*; stepping out of prison

into the Massachusetts marketplace with that “mark of shame upon her bosom,” so that “she will be a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter will be engraved upon her tombstone.”<sup>7</sup>

The relentless stereotyping, stigmatizing, and demonizing of the poor, especially poor women, during the early to mid-1990s culminated in the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. This legislation was signed into law by President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, on August 22, 1996. Euphemistically praised as “welfare reform,” the act ended the sixty-one-year-old federal guarantee of aid to poor children. This legislation was based on the assumptions that welfare benefits lead to debilitating dependency; that jobs are indeed available for those who wish to work; that these jobs would provide a road out of poverty; and that only through work outside the home can the poor become responsible citizens worthy of respect. Such views, not so long ago considered the harsh and punitive positions of those on the extreme right, have become mainstream ideas in the United States over the past two decades. Poverty is seen as the result of personal failings rather than as a consequence of the U.S. social and economic system, and therefore government-supported efforts today are frequently aimed at modifying individual behavior rather than at making fundamental changes in the social structure. Since the passage of the welfare legislation, millions of poor women have been forced to work outside the home, often in jobs that pay poverty wages and without regard for the availability of decent, affordable child care.<sup>8</sup>

With the election of George W. Bush as president in 2000, an increasingly conservative agenda has once again taken center stage. The federal government has provided more and more resources to establish programs for young people that simply encourage abstinence from sex until marriage rather than teaching the facts about reproduction, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases. Instead of investing significant amounts of money in job training, higher education, and child care, the Bush administration has encouraged poor women to marry as a strat-

egy for moving out of poverty. The ideology underpinning much of the Bush agenda is that the individual has the power to succeed if only she or he works hard enough and makes the personal decisions deemed correct by the administration and its ultraconservative supporters. Accompanying this emphasis on individual responsibility and traditional values has been a marked disinclination to see a role for government at any level to provide support and services for individuals and families. Thus, while life has become increasingly difficult and complex over the past decade, as more and more jobs have disappeared, as those that remain often pay far less than a living wage, as millions must survive without essentials such as health insurance, and as the gap between rich and poor widens to Gatsbyesque proportions, families have largely been left to fend for themselves. Mother-only families have not only had to withstand a relentless barrage of criticism but have also seen social and financial support diminish significantly.

Who exactly are single mothers today? First, it must be emphasized that women become single mothers in a variety of ways: through separation from their husbands, through divorce, through widowhood, and through having children outside of marriage. No one scenario or set of circumstances explains the diverse, complex lives of single mothers. It must be stressed as well that millions of single mothers never intended to live their lives raising their children without the support of a partner. When they find themselves alone and in charge of their family, many recognize for the first time the harsh reality of being a single parent in the United States today.

The dramatic change in American family structure over the past half century has been well documented. The percentage of women with children under 18 not living with a husband rose from 10 percent in 1940 to 24 percent in 2000. The sharpest increase occurred between 1960 and 1990; since then the percentage has remained stable. Not only the statistics but the causes of the increase in single-parent families have changed significantly. During the first half of the twentieth century the

primary cause of single parenthood was parental death; by the end of the century most absent parents were living, but they were living elsewhere. Moreover, while single-parent families have become more common in all demographic groups, the greatest increases have been among less-educated women and among African American families.<sup>9</sup> In 2002, 16 percent of white, non-Hispanic children were living only with their mother, one-quarter (25 percent) of Hispanic children were living in mother-only families, and among black families 48 percent of children were living in mother-only families. Thus, as the twenty-first century begins, one-quarter of all children—and nearly half of black children—are living in mother-only families.<sup>10</sup>

If we examine the data on U.S. mothers by educational level, we find that the percentage of mothers in the bottom third of educational attainment who were not living with a husband rose sharply during the second half of the twentieth century, as did the percentage of mothers in the middle third of educational attainment. In contrast, the percentage of those mothers in the highest third of educational attainment not living with a husband has remained stable since 1980.<sup>11</sup> Those women least prepared by their education to manage economically on their own are most likely to have to do so.

Why worry about the significant increase in mother-only families in the United States? Many observers, of course, are concerned about the psychosocial aspects of child rearing. They feel that children do better with two parents, when more than one adult is intimately concerned with and responsible for a child's well-being, and they also believe that young people of both sexes benefit from having a male role model in the home. A two-parent family, moreover, can provide a buffer for both parents and children—offering someone else to go to in times of conflict, someone else with whom one can discuss problems, options, decision making. Others—an uncle, a grandfather, an older sibling, a male friend of the family—can, and often do, play these roles, but they may be viewed by all involved as a substitute, lacking real authority and in all likelihood not as fully committed as a parent.

A key problem that the majority of single mothers face is economic. Because they must all too often manage on one income rather than two, because many fathers do not or cannot pay child support, because women who work full-time, full year still earn only 80 percent of what men who work full-time, full year earn, because single mothers are frequently forced to work part-time either because they need to be home to care for their children or because the jobs available at their skill level are part-time—for all of these reasons, mother-only families are often disadvantaged economically.<sup>12</sup> And economic disadvantage leads to a host of other problems, including inadequate housing, inferior educational opportunities, increased health problems, and a lack of health insurance. In 2002, for example, the median family income for all mother-only families was \$22,637, approximately one-third the median income of two-parent families, \$65,399. Even among white, non-Hispanic, mother-only families, in 2002 the median income was only \$26,337, one-third the income of comparable married-couple families, \$72,133. The gap between black married and mother-only families is similar: married-couple black families earn nearly three times the income of black mother-only families—\$56,863 versus \$19,189. Hispanic two-parent families have a median income of \$39,617, essentially double that of mother-only Hispanic families (\$19,455).<sup>13</sup>

Poverty data for mother-only families corroborate these income figures. In 2002, nearly 40 percent (39.6 percent) of female-headed families with children under 18 officially lived in poverty. This rate was nearly five times that of married-couple families (8.5 percent). Almost half of all black, non-Hispanic families and Hispanic female-headed families with children under 18 live in poverty (45.5 percent and 47.8 percent, respectively). Children under 6 live in the harshest economic conditions: more than half of all black, non-Hispanic, female-headed families with children under 6 live below the federal poverty line.<sup>14</sup>

Economic inequality translates into very different patterns of socialization of children, very different social skills and attitudes toward adults, toward social institutions, and toward their own entitlement. As Annette

Lareau points out in her ethnographic study of the impact of social class on children's lives, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, "inequality permeates the fabric of . . . [American] culture." She describes how the different child-rearing philosophies of middle-class parents, on the one hand, and working-class and poor families, on the other, lead to "*the transmission of differential advantages* to children" (emphasis hers). Both white and black middle-class children exhibit a greater "sense of entitlement"; in contrast, working-class and poor children are more likely to exhibit a "sense of constraint" in institutional settings.<sup>15</sup> The importance of class differences in American society is widely dismissed and even denied, and the dominant ideology stresses the existence of equal opportunity, of "a level playing field"; yet Lareau's study vividly demonstrates once again that economic inequities not only matter but are subtly and often not so subtly transmitted from one generation to the next in the socialization process.

Concern about single motherhood has also been fueled by the extraordinarily high number of teenage girls who become pregnant in the United States. While the phrase *children having children* has been widely used to dramatize and deplore the U.S. teen pregnancy rate, in reality the vast majority of teens giving birth are between the ages of 15 and 19. The other common myth about teen pregnancy is that a large percentage of teenage girls intend to become pregnant: on the contrary, nearly all studies indicate that the vast majority of teen pregnancies are unintended. Moreover, while the U.S. rate has been considerably higher than that of comparable developed countries, in recent years it has declined significantly. At its peak in 1991, the birth rate for all adolescent mothers ages 15 to 19 was 62.1 births per 1,000 females; a decade later, in 2001, that rate had fallen to 43.6. This decline is apparent in all racial and ethnic groups. For example, among non-Hispanic whites the rate peaked in 1991 at 43.4 and fell to 32.5 in 2000. For non-Hispanic blacks the rate, significantly higher than that of all other groups, declined from a high of 118.9 in 1991 to 81.9 in 2000;



among Hispanic teens the rate fell from 107.7 in 1994 to 94.4 in 2000.<sup>16</sup>

**T**his study is a realistic, detailed examination of the lives of single mothers from their perspectives, intended to correct the harsh, hostile, often erroneous, sometimes venomous stereotypes about single mothers endlessly reiterated by pundits, politicians, and members of the media. Bizarre examples of highly unusual behavior are all too often put forth and deplored as though they were the norm and then are taken as typical of all single mothers. Moreover, these often outlandish examples are presented as the true experiences of the entire group, used to reinforce the prevailing stereotypes and to formulate social policy. This book examines the real lives of a variety of single mothers: how they grew up, how they became the sole or primary caregivers of their children, how becoming a single parent disrupted their lives and affected them, and how they subsequently rebuilt their social, emotional, and economic world. Its focus is on the impact of single motherhood on the women themselves—not the impact of single motherhood on the institution of marriage or the effect on children of growing up in a single-parent household. When people are able to tell their own stories, they can place themselves at the center of the narrative, becoming the actors rather than the portrayed. As Carolyn Heilbrun has observed, “Power is the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter. This is true in the Pentagon, in marriage, in friendship, and in politics.”<sup>17</sup> This book is written to provide single mothers the opportunity to take their place in the discourse about the nature of single motherhood, its complex causes, and its equally complex consequences, and to aid them in having their part matter.

The broader questions of how we perceive our lives, how we construct the causes and effects of events, and how we present ourselves—both to ourselves and to others—are also complex. In *The Triumph of Narrative*:

*Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture*, Robert Fulford declares, “Most of us feel the need to describe how we came to be what we are. We want to make our stories known, and we want to believe those stories carry value.” Fulford stresses that one of the goals of stories, or narrative, is to try to come to terms with and “at least partly *contain* the terrifyingly haphazard quality of life,” to feel some sense of control over the course of our lives. We are, in some sense, “organizing the past so that it makes acceptable sense . . . *bearable, endurable* sense” (emphasis his).<sup>18</sup> Through narrative or stories or recollections about our lives, we explain our lives to ourselves and to others. Through narrative we come to know one another, to understand the principles by which we and others live. As Pirandello stated, “I construct myself continually and I construct you, and you do the same.”<sup>19</sup> Our stories and anecdotes are often symbolic, illustrating a larger point that may not even be articulated—communicating our values, our belief system, who we feel we are, who we want to be, how we want to be seen. Joyce Carol Oates has underscored the importance of these stories to who we are, asking “For what is ‘identity’ but our power to control others’ definition of us?”<sup>20</sup> The power to control our narrative is intimately connected to the way others perceive us, which in turn is a key determinant of the way we perceive ourselves. This book therefore presents these women’s narratives of their lives largely in their own words. Single mothers are entitled to define themselves, to present themselves as they choose rather than being seen and put forward as a category—and a generally denigrated one at that.

The heart of the study draws on interviews with fifty women who have been single mothers at some time in their lives. The interviews were done over a three-year period, from July 2001 through June 2004. While the women vary in ethnic, racial, and class background and in age, all of them met one key criterion: each became a single mother without intending to do so. Women who planned to give birth or adopt children without a partner have been excluded from this study—not because their stories are not important and instructive but because I believe their experiences are very different. The women who are included took many

different paths to becoming a single mother. Some have been separated from their husbands, divorced, or widowed; others were single at the time of conception but assumed that their male partner would be available for some level of support—emotional, social, financial—as well as at least sporadic fathering. Some of the women have since married or remarried, but all had sole or primary responsibility for the care of their child or children for a significant span of time.

Some might question the appropriateness of examining such a wide range of women in a single study. Why include both unmarried women who became single mothers and those who have been separated, divorced, and widowed? After all, women who become pregnant outside of marriage may well have very different experiences, with qualitatively different relationships with their partners, than women who took the step of marrying but whose marriages faltered. Similarly, why include widows, whose marriages ended through no doing of theirs or their husbands, and who therefore have had significantly different experiences, possibly leading to different feelings about themselves and their status as well as to different perceptions about them by others? It is my view that mothers from this wide variety of backgrounds have more shared experiences than experiences that separate or differentiate them, and that to de-stigmatize and move toward greater understanding of their lives and their experiences we must surmount the usual barriers of marital status, class, race, ethnicity, and age in order to study these commonalities. Virtually all the women interviewed for this study experienced a severe and often abrupt disturbance in their lives. They married expecting to stay married or even to live happily ever after. They did not anticipate separation or divorce, and surely not widowhood. The single women assumed they would not become pregnant and, if they did, that their male friend or lover would be around in some capacity; their plans for their future lives were based on these assumptions. Once their lives were profoundly disrupted, the women experienced genuine loss. The nature of the loss differed, depending on the circumstances of their lives, but all experienced it—including the women who themselves chose to end rela-

tionships they felt were dysfunctional and those who eventually created far more positive and rewarding lives for themselves and their children.

Many of these mothers also showed a powerful and often courageous resilience as well as the strength and ability to find new ways out of their exceedingly difficult and often wrenching situations. After they entered the world of single motherhood, the women all had to face putting their lives back together—making new living arrangements, dealing with financial issues, balancing work and nurturing, finding adequate child care and after-school care, figuring out the role of extended family and friends, exploring the often delicate problem of having a social life, and sometimes dealing with their own self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, and sadness. They all were forced to grapple with these issues regardless of how they became single mothers. To be sure, more affluent women have considerably more choice in solving these fundamental problems, but they too usually agonized about how to handle it all, about what was the “right” path for them. I felt that in the long run, we had more to learn by including women who became single mothers through many different routes than by considering each group in isolation from the others.

The women in this study all live in New York City or in the New York metropolitan area. They are racially and ethnically diverse. They include non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, Latinas, women of Caribbean heritage, Asians, and one woman of mixed black and white parentage. At the time of the interviews, they were separated, divorced, widowed, and never married. Several married for the first time or remarried after they became single mothers. In economic status, they range from poor to upper middle class. Using the standard sociological measures of education, occupation, and income, approximately one-third of the women are poor, near poor, or working class; another third middle class; and the final third upper middle class. Nearly half of all the women work in jobs that provide human services—some with a professional degree, most without. Several of the women work in nonprofit institutions; a number of them originally trained as or over the years have become trained as academics, physicians, and lawyers.

At the time of the interviews the women ranged in age from 23 to 89. The majority were in their 30s and 40s, a slightly smaller number in their 20s and in their 50s, and another group was over age 60. The older women could reflect on their backgrounds, their early assumptions and expectations, their lives over the decades, the factors and events that led them to become single mothers, and how their lives evolved as they matured and their children grew up. The interviews with the younger women, by contrast, focused far more tightly on their backgrounds, how they became single mothers, and their current lives. Clearly, we do not know at this time what directions the lives of the younger women will take. While a growing literature has been developing on lesbian parenting, none of these women identified herself as lesbian. Because all women who planned to become single mothers were excluded from the study, no single gay women who chose to adopt or bear a child were interviewed.

Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face at a location convenient for the interviewees. Many took place in the women's homes, some in their place of work, a few in my office at Hunter College, and still others in a (relatively) quiet corner of a restaurant over a long breakfast, lunch, or dinner. These women are extraordinarily busy people, and I tried to inconvenience them as little as possible. Because of their hectic schedules, a few of the interviews were conducted over the telephone. In general, the telephone interviews worked very well; the women seemed engaged and eager to talk. Many people are so comfortable communicating by phone—even about very personal matters—that the telephone interviews seemed to flow as well as, and sometimes even better than, some of the face-to-face interviews, though of course eye contact and the observation of body language were missing from our interaction.

All of the women I interviewed were told of my previous writing about poverty among women and children and of my concern about the stereotyping and stigmatizing of single mothers. The cutbacks of social supports to those who had the least and the increase in poverty among women and children during the Reagan years, particularly during the early 1980s, led to my book *Women and Children Last: The Plight of Poor*

*Women in Affluent America*; the harsh debate about the growth and impact of mother-only families that took place prior to the historic welfare legislation of 1996 prompted a sequel, *Keeping Women and Children Last: America's War on the Poor*. I explained to the interviewees that this book was intended to portray single mothers primarily through their own words rather than through the perceptions of others. None of the women was paid for the interview, though obviously I did pick up the check if we were talking over a meal in a restaurant. The sample was found through word of mouth. I began by telling colleagues what I was working on and asking them for referrals to single mothers who fit the criteria of the study. The women who were interviewed then referred others, and so on. Out of all the people I called to request an interview, only two changed their minds after agreeing to talk with me; both of them were in the throes of breaking up with their partners and felt they simply were too emotionally distraught to discuss their experiences at that time. I did not call them back to reschedule. Almost all of the other women I approached readily agreed to be interviewed. In the initial telephone contact I explained my policy of confidentiality—that I would change all of their names in order to protect their privacy; I stressed this policy again during the interviews themselves.

The format was an open-ended interview that included several general themes. Using a conversational format, I asked each of the women to tell me something about her family background, about her childhood and her educational experiences, and then to describe what happened subsequently in her life. Once we got past their early lives, the women usually took control of the narrative. I asked relevant questions, but how to tell their stories—what to include, what to omit—was fundamentally their decision. Since I knew very little about them except that they unintentionally became single mothers and lived in the New York City area, they had the power to present their lives as they experienced and perceived them. It has been said that “narrative is always political because people choose which narrative to tell,”<sup>21</sup> and that is exactly what I wanted—these women’s versions of what happened to them, how their

lives evolved, and how they coped with events, conflicts, feelings, disappointments, struggles, and accomplishments.

The interviews generally lasted from one to two hours. They were not taped. Using my early training in listening and note taking as a psychiatric social worker as well as my extensive experience interviewing for previous studies, including work done in China and other countries, I took as complete notes as possible, filled them in immediately afterward, and then transcribed them, usually within twenty-four hours. Each woman is describing her own specific experience; as in my previous work, none of the narratives is a composite. While the fifty interviews form the basis of the study's overall analysis, more than half the women are profiled in depth in this book. They were selected both because they most clearly and vividly illustrate the central themes that emerged during the analysis and because they represent the diversity of age, race, ethnicity, and life experience of the entire group of women. It must be stressed that these women were at different points in their lives. Many were living through single motherhood at the time of the interviews and were describing ongoing events, conflicts, and problems. Others had been single heads of their families fairly recently, but had since remarried or their children had become adults; therefore their status changed as they moved on to the next stage of life. Still others were older women who were looking back at their lives as single mothers from a distance of many years. Many interviews present a snapshot, a moment in time; others give us the panorama of a lifetime.

With the exception of its introduction and first and final chapters, this book is largely organized around the narratives of single mothers. Chapter 1 discusses the intense criticism, particularly in recent years, of single parenthood and its presumed effects on the children and on the larger society. Chapter 2 describes the diversity and complexity both in the causes of single motherhood and in the lives of single mothers; it suggests that rather than being a negative force in American society, millions of single mothers actually embody the finest American values. The simplistic stereotypes that shape how single mothers tend to be perceived by

the wider society clearly have little or no relevance to the women portrayed in this chapter and indeed to most of the women interviewed for this study. The many different permutations of loss—loss of a partner, loss of income, loss of self-esteem, loss of emotional and social support, loss of youth prematurely—which are all-too-common characteristics of single motherhood, are detailed through the lives of several women in chapter 3. Chapter 4 discusses the remarkable resilience and strength of many of these single mothers, who overcome extraordinarily difficult circumstances and go on to transform their lives. In chapter 5 several of the women describe and analyze the individuals, social institutions, and belief systems that have been essential to their survival over the years. But while many of the women have been truly heroic in creating and sustaining meaningful lives for themselves and their children, others have undergone such severe trauma or live in such trying material and personal conditions that they are having and may continue to have significant difficulty in putting their lives together in a positive, meaningful way. These derailed lives are discussed in chapter 6. Chapter 7 attempts to describe the disconnect between male and female socialization, expectations, and behavior and to analyze why men and women respond so differently to intimate heterosexual relationships and to the enormous responsibility of caring for children. And finally, chapter 8 utilizes the experiences of these women as well as comparative international data and policies to illuminate alternative ways of thinking and programs that would strengthen the well-being of all families.

It is important to keep in mind that life happens bit by bit, event after event. We may fantasize or plan our lives in large sweeps of time, but when we are living them one thing leads to another, gradually, sometimes almost without our realizing what is happening. Many have taken the status of single mother and then attributed to the individuals so labeled a set of personal characteristics that we have come to associate with that status—a set of negative attitudes and behaviors that seem to explain the status and that are summed up in a stereotype. But what these narratives demonstrate is that the negative, stigmatizing characteristics that so