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& THE MORAL INFLUENCE OF WOMEN

by Elder Bruce C. Hafen

As the traditional home of United Nations treaty making about human rights, Geneva has become the modern headwaters of thought about UN family policy. This grassroots World Congress of Families will add to those headwaters a crucial new stream—the mainstream. This group is sending to the UN, and to people everywhere, a family message of the heart from people representing the international heartland of democracy.

Family policymaking in the UN and elsewhere now emphasizes dysfunctional and alternative family types, while the traditional family withers as an endangered species. Exceptions have become the rule, as self-appointed lobbyists have replaced the UN policy agenda with their personal agendas. I find it ironic that now, when democracy is more widespread than ever before, the United Nations—a very undemocratic forum, far from the world's homes and families—would have allowed this rebellion.

I have long believed that the UN has value. I applaud the original declara-

tions on Human and Children's Rights adopted in Geneva years ago. But, I discovered that today's UN had lost the plot about family life when I was a professor of law and another legal scholar asked my opinion of the UN's 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). He prompted my study of the CRC.

In a UN publication I found this description of the CRC: "A new concept of separate rights for children with the Government accepting [the] responsibility of protecting the child from the power of parents." Notice that this "new concept" uproots one of the most fundamental natural rights about family life—that parents may rear their children as the parents see fit, as long as the parents are fit.

The 1989 CRC was written primarily by American lawyers whose arguments about child autonomy were rejected by the U.S. legal mainstream in the 1970s and 1980s. The United States still hasn't adopted the CRC—even though most other countries have. This odd outcome reflects the herd

mentality of naïve governments who fear criticism for not embracing an international treaty with the word rights in its title.

The CRC shows how political activists, who have lost their arguments in such democratic forums as parliaments and courtrooms, have learned to use the UN to exploit the naïveté of local governments. If the activists can clothe their extremist visions of personal relationships (this term is different from the word family) in the vague but lofty language of international law, they've built a Trojan horse that lets them slip undetected into a country's legal system and, hence, its culture.

The UN's current approach to motherhood and women reflects this problem. Recent UN documents have accepted the extremist claim of radical feminism that motherhood is an oppressive concept designed to perpetuate male domination. For example, many countries want to protect motherhood as intended by the original UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948: "motherhood [is] entitled to special

protection.” But today’s UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) criticizes these protections as “paternalistic” and as promoting a supposedly outdated concept of motherhood that discourages women “from seeking greater fulfillment in paid work.”¹ This bias misses the fundamental point that, as Harvard’s Mary Ann Glendon has said, “There can be no authentic progress for women without respect for women’s roles in the family.”²

We are now living through the biggest change in attitudes and laws about the family in five centuries. In his recent book, Francis Fukuyama regards today’s family disintegration as a central part of what he calls “The Great Disruption.”³ After centuries of seeing family bonds as valuable ties that bind, people now see those ties as sheer bondage.

Broad-scale forces are eroding our foundations of personal peace, love, and human attachments. Whatever held mother-father and child-parent relationships together feels weaker now.

Patricia Holland has said, “If I wanted to destroy society, I would launch an all-out blitz on women.” What did she mean? Men and women share common traits and often perform the same tasks. But some of their strengths are gender-specific. We are losing what women have traditionally contributed to cultural cohesiveness. Like the mortar that keeps a brick wall from toppling over, women have held together our most precious relationships—our marriages and child-parent ties. But now we’re seeing cracks in that mortar, which reveals things we have taken for granted.

Modern society has been devaluing female nurturing in several ways. Let us talk first about the devaluation of motherhood.

For most of Western history, the word motherhood meant honor, endearment, and sacrifice. If being “selfless” means women give up their inner identity and personal growth, that understanding of selflessness is

wrong. But today’s liberationist model goes too far the other way, stereotyping women as excessively independent of their families.

A more sensible view is that husbands and wives are interdependent with each other. For example, *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* issued recently by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints states that



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spouses are “equal partners” who “help one another” in fulfilling their individual roles. A good marriage enhances each partner’s opportunity for personal development.

The critics who moved mothers from dependence to independence skipped the middle ground of interdependence. Those who moved mothers from selflessness to selfishness skipped the middle ground of self-chosen service that contributes to a woman’s personal growth. Because of these excesses, debates about the value of motherhood have, ironically, caused the general society to discount mothers and women in general. The self-respect of American women is at an all time low despite the many victories for women in the last thirty years. Why? Because we’ve experienced not just a revolt against men’s oppression, but a revolt against women.

One writer surmised that jobs traditionally filled by heroic, nurturing women—social workers, teachers, nurses, and of course, mothers—are now perceived as second-rate. Devaluing motherhood devalues “everything else women do”; devaluing “the primary work of most women throughout history” tells women “that it is really women who” aren’t worth serious consideration.⁴ When a mother feels support from her husband, her family, and her society, she feels like a mother of hope—who values herself enough to nurture a child of hope. Children of hope create a society of hope.

Society has also devalued women’s role in maintaining society’s standards of sexual behavior. The key to sexual fidelity was once the intuitive sexual self-control of women. Most women’s sexuality reflects an inner moral compass that can point true north, like a natural magnet. Of course, just as a natural magnet can lose its power through damage or trauma, women can lose their natural moral magnetism. But throughout history, women have tended to be society’s primary teachers of sexual mores.

Women have too long endured the unfairness of a cultural “double standard” that tolerated promiscuity in men while condemning it in women. Sociologist David Popenoe writes that “men the world over are more sexually driven and ‘promiscuous,’ while women are more concerned with lasting relationships.”⁵ A double standard that winks at this male tendency enough to excuse it is unequal and unfair. Society could have responded to this inequality by demanding sexual fidelity of men. But instead, our generation romped into history’s most staggering sexual revolution, seeking male-female equality by encouraging women to imitate the promiscuous tendency of men. Sadly, the biggest losers in this process are children and women.

This brings us to the third area of devaluation: Society has stopped prizing women’s innate yearning for permanent marriage bonds. The social

wreckage produced by today's confusion about sex, women, men, and marriage is well known. Two experts describe this as a remarkable collapse of marriage, leading to growing family instability and decreasing parental investment in children.⁶

A woman's desire for marital permanence really is the mortar holding together the bricks of social stability. When marriage is secure, a wife stands at the center of moral gravity for her family's universe, holding her husband close with the gravitational pull of a natural magnet.

"Strong mothers build secure homes; fathers and father's sons maintain secure neighborhoods."⁷ Sound marriage requires us to value the complementary contributions and roles of both equal partners to the union.

More broadly, women have a gift for nurturing all human relationships. Recent research shows that women will often sacrifice an achievement for the sake of a relationship, but men will more likely sacrifice a relationship for the sake of an achievement.⁸

Most radical feminists would reject the concept that women are civilizing agents. They resist this concept because they believe that acknowledging any inherent differences between men and women will lead to negative gender discrimination that will place women in subservient roles.

The women's rights movements of recent years opened many valuable doors to women and pricked the consciences of many men who had exploited women's willingness to give up worthwhile achievements by making unnecessary sacrifices for relationships. But the gender equity pendulum of the past era has moved our attitudes too far, devaluing and damaging the culture's support for motherhood, sexual fidelity, marriage, and women's distinctive voices.

It is now time to swing the pendulum of attitude back to magnetic north and to nurture our children and society with women's civilizing influence. Surely society can restore the confidence of women in their own instincts without coercing them into

being non-entities. Surely we can invite men to emulate the ethic of care they see in their mothers, their wives, and their daughters. We have already learned the hard way that women, children, and the entire culture are worse off when we seek gender equality by encouraging women to adopt permissive male lifestyles.

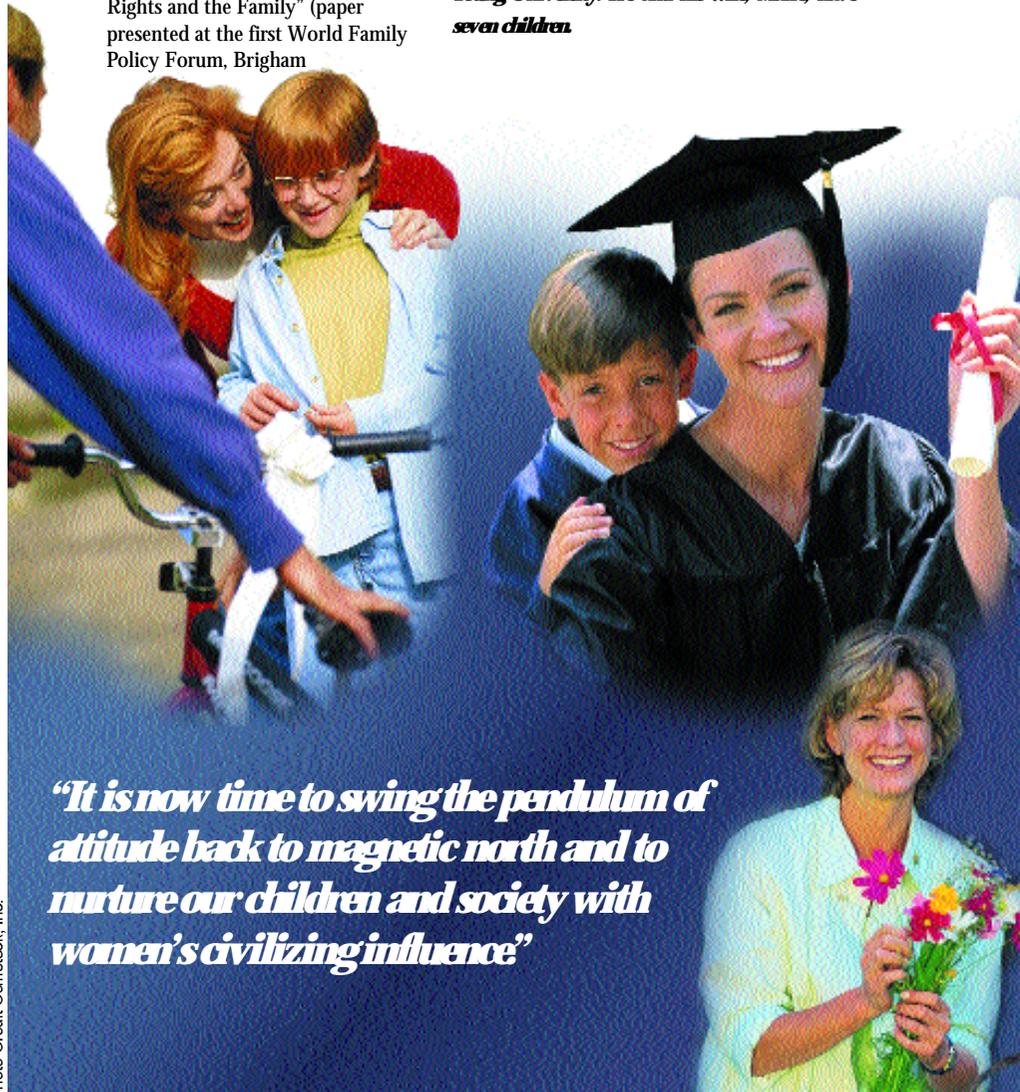
Therefore, as this World Congress sends a message from the mainstream into Geneva's headwaters of thought about family policy across the globe, let us call for a more responsible form of gender equality that celebrates and preserves the natural moral influence of women. It is time to equalize the sexes by asking men once more to follow the moral leadership of women, by honoring the equal yoke and life-long commitments of marriage. That kind of progress will make the world of the twenty-first century not only more equal, but also infinitely more civilized.

1. Kathryn O. Balmforth, "Human Rights and the Family" (paper presented at the first World Family Policy Forum, Brigham

Young University, Provo, Utah, January 15, 1999) 8-9.

2. Mary Ann Glendon, "The Pope's New Feminism," *Crisis: A Journal of Lay Catholic Opinion* 15 (3), March 1, 1997.
3. Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
4. Orania Papazoglou, "Despising Our Mothers, Despising Ourselves," *First Things* 19 (January 1992):11-19.
5. David Popenoe, "The Essential Father," from *Life Without Father* (The Free Press: 1996), 173-74.
6. Jean Bethke Elshtain and David Popenoe, "Marriage in America," Institute for American Values (1995).
7. David Gutman, "The Paternal Imperative," *The American Scholar* 67(1) 118, 124 (Winter 1998).
8. I first heard this phrasing from Jeannette Hales Beckham. It is supported by studies reported in Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). mf

Bruce C. Hafen, JD, Elder Hafen is a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He has served as Provost and Dean of the Law School at Brigham Young University. He and his wife, Marie, have seven children.



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