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Image of family life out of sync with reality

by NCR Editorial Staff

The results of one of the most comprehensive studies of the status of women in the United States were released Oct. 16. The conclusions drawn from the data in "The Shriver Report: A Women's Nation Changes Everything," by Maria Shriver and the Center for American Progress, have the potential to change the discussion of public policy on a broad range of issues from the workplace to the family living room.

Writing about the report in her online column at NCRonline.org, Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister says, "Not since John F. Kennedy appointed Eleanor Roosevelt in 1961 to head his President's Commission on the Status of Women have we had a complete review of the circumstances defining the lives of women in the United States. Now we do." The data points to how radically our society has changed since 1961, and, as Chittister writes, "for the sake of the country as well as for its women, other social institutions are going to have to adjust to this new reality." Chittister served on the advisory board for this study.

The most society-changing statistics reported are something that many have known intuitively: Fully half of the U.S. work force is now women. More than 40 percent of those are the primary breadwinners of their families. Another 23 percent are co-breadwinners of the family, meaning that the family can't get along without their income. The stark reality is that women aren't working to earn a little extra money or for "fulfillment." They are working so families can survive.

Yet, the report also concludes that the "men and women who are riding the crest of major social change in America [do so] with little or no support." The report says, "The parameters of their jobs have yet to change to meet new demands." According to the report, "Americans across the board desire more flexibility in work schedules, paid family leave, and increased child care support."

Political and business leaders have failed families, the report concludes. (Read the report at

awomansnation.com.)

A third pillar of society -- the church -- is also coming up short with regard to the American family. An example: The bishops maintain a Web site, www.foryourmarriage.org, to encourage and support married couples. The Web site's "Marriage Tip" for Nov. 4, the day this editorial was written, is "Keep reasonable work hours. If you give all your time and energy to the job, what's left for the most important person in your life?" After reading the Shriver Report, this advice rings hollow.

Church leaders -- from the U.S. bishops' conference to the Knights of Columbus -- seem fixated on an image of family that no longer exists. As a first step to correcting that image, the bishops' Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth should make the Shriver Report mandatory reading in every diocesan family life office in the United States.

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