



The Other Half

Unmarried Women, Economic Well-Being, and the Great Recession

Liz Weiss and Page S. Gardner July 2010

Introduction and summary

New information is emerging about the economic importance of unmarried women and the vital contributions they make to our economy. Almost half (47 percent) of all women in America today are unmarried—divorced, separated, widowed, or never married.¹ Unmarried women now make up nearly a quarter (24 percent) of our total adult population, and they head 3 in 10 households.² Unmarried women are raising one-quarter (25 percent) of all American children under 18 years old.³ Unmarried women are workers and homeowners, our neighbors and community leaders, our family members and friends.

Yet even as unmarried women make important contributions to our communities and economy, they continue to be limited by their economic circumstances. Economic status is associated with marital status, and unmarried women on average earn less and live in households with less income than unmarried men or married couples. Unmarried women have significant debt, and they have much lower median net wealth than couples or unmarried men. Overall, unmarried women have less economic security than others.

The Great Recession that began in December 2007 has heightened the importance and urgency of addressing and improving the economic security of all Americans, and unmarried women in particular. Unmarried women have, like all Americans, been hit hard by the recession—with many experiencing unemployment, mortgage foreclosures, and increased food insecurity. These circumstances also affect many of the one-quarter of American children raised by single mothers. When single mothers lose their home, suffer from hunger, or can't find a job, their children also lose their home, go hungry, or suffer from greatly reduced household resources.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has helped to temper the impact of the recession by saving and creating jobs and boosting social service programs, and unmarried women have benefited from many of ARRA's provisions. This success underscores the critical role public policy can play to ensure that all people and all families are economically secure in the long term, regardless of their family status or composition.

Improving the economic situation of unmarried women will help our national economy overall. Policymakers should focus on policies that will increase unmarried women's wages and spending potential, reduce their debt and increase their wealth, and improve the lives and futures of the children they are raising. Policymakers must ensure that their efforts to lay the foundation for long-term economic growth allow all Americans—including unmarried women—to participate in and benefit from our economy and its recovery. This will, in turn, benefit our country as a whole by tapping into this group's as-yet unrealized economic potential.

Citizenship and unmarried women

A note about the data

Some of the data included in this report, specifically for household income and poverty rates, are reported for U.S. citizens only. Immigration status can take on many forms. Because it is a complicated policy issue, we focus solely on citizens for this data to simplify the analysis. The data in this report will not match other studies' data for these variables, including Census publications, but it highlights the fact that unmarried women who are citizens live in households with lower incomes and have higher poverty rates than married women, married men, or unmarried men who are citizens. Unmarried women's economic security is not due to recent immigration to our country, but rather other underlying factors.

About the Center for American Progress

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values.

We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

About Women’s Voices. Women Vote

Unmarried Americans are the fastest-growing large demographic in the country and a majority of Americans will live with an unmarried head of household.

But despite their numbers, unmarried Americans are under-represented in national elections and their voices are not being heard in our democracy.

Women’s Voices. Women Vote was created to activate unmarried Americans in their government and in our democracy.



Center for American Progress
1333 H Street, NW, 10th Floor
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: 202.682.1611 • Fax: 202.682.1867
www.americanprogress.org



Women’s Voices.
Women Vote

Women’s Voices. Women Vote
1640 Rhode Island Avenue, NW, Suite 825
Washington DC 20036
Tel: 202.659.9570 • Fax: 202.659.9585
www.wvvv.org
