Rural women work harder — for less

Making workplaces flexible, expanding options and financial assistance for child care, raising the minimum wage, and diversifying the rural labor market would all support working families in general, and rural women in particular, according to a new report from the Casey Institute at the University of New Hampshire.

The all-women’s expert panel — the first major study of women’s employment trends to track differences between rural and urban women — because rural women work harder but have less to show for it.

Even college graduates work more but earn less in rural America, say the report — “Working Harder, Making Less: Women in Employment 1970-2007.” In rural areas, college-educated women reap less of an “education dividend” than their urban peers, earning an average of 81 cents to every dollar that urban college graduates get.

The types of jobs available in rural areas compared to cities may explain some of the disparities, the report says. Women held by highly educated urban women (having earned a master’s degree or higher) include well-paying sales and lawyer positions, whereas two low-paying jobs — preschool and kindergarten teachers — are among the top eight for master’s-level women in rural areas.

In rural America, 70 percent of married mothers with children under six work outside the home, according to the study. “Mom is no longer home in the kitchen, and dad is no longer on the tractor or in the mines.”

Rural and urban women are just as likely as their urban counterparts to pay for day care, say Smith, but they earn less, have fewer occupational choices, and have seen their family income decline as men’s wages have not kept pace with inflation.

Using employment estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey, Smith documents five major changes in the nature of women and work: An increase in women’s employment; the phenomenon of “nontraditional” jobs choosing to leave the workforce to tend to kids or homes; a rise in women’s earnings and narrowing of the gap with male workers; an increase in the workforce participation in the traditional family structure of bread-winning husbands and stay-at-home wives.

Part of the difficulty stems from an economic shift — an illusion, really — that took decades to unfold. Since the 1960s, more women entered the labor force — a great thing. However, they were paid less than men working in comparable jobs, but additional household income seemed to be a net gain.

That gain hid the fact that the average household income was stagnant or falling, though.

Women started sharing the bread-winning role, meaning that women shouldered a bigger part of providing for families. While 46 percent of husbands were sole providers in married-couple families in 1970, that share dropped to 24 percent by 2007. By 2007, a large majority of couples were dual providers, a trend with both rural and urban married-couple families. In fact, it’s been those increases in women’s earnings that are keeping families from slipping because the husband’s earnings have lost their edge.

However, when the second family income started failing to meet household obligations, men and women alike started working overtime whenever possible, or took second jobs to make ends meet. Average incomes still stayed flat or fell behind, but more hours meant more money.

Then the burden of multiple jobs and long hours couldn’t keep up, so folks — urban and rural alike — began to resort to charging purchases, and credit-card balances grew, home equity loans and mortgage-tied lines of credit increased, and households debt became unmanageable.

Now employment itself — at any price — is drying up, especially in rural areas.

“Rural mothers with young children are more likely to work for pay than their urban peers, as well-paying, traditionally male jobs in farming, mining or mills disappear,” says Smith, a research assistant professor of sociology at UNH.

The report made its recommendations to address women’s changing roles in the workplace and in the family, with particular focus on rural women.

“Rural families are particularly challenged in balancing work and family responsibilities,” Smith continued. “Many rural communities lack stable employment and opportunities for mobility and confront persistent poverty, particularly among mothers with young children.”

So whether the next country girl you see is a high school working as a cashier, a young mom working as a painter, a woman whose kids are grown waiting or re-entering the workforce in a small business, or a mature professional employed at a bank, engineering firm or some Six Sigma management, let us know. They’ve kept the economy afloat and now they’re in the same leaky boat as everyone else.

Let’s hope the slogan of the last 57 years — “do more with less” — will change, and soon.

And here.

The full report is online at http://caseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/Report-Smith-Workinggirl.pdf

Bill Knight is an award-winning journalist who teaches at Western Illinois University. Contact him at bill.knight@hotmail.com.

Killing doesn’t work, Let’s try something else

How many people must be killed and maimed to create peace? As crazy as this question sounds, it is precisely the one that must be asked in the current era of violence.

More than eight hundred Palestinians and thirteen Israelis have been killed in the past two weeks alone. In 2008, nearly 500 Americans soldiers were killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. During the same period, some 6,000-9,000 Iraqis were directly killed (with countless more dying due to lack of food or medicine). I don’t understand how the continued killing of humans is an action for peace. If it does anything, it creates conditions favorable for more violence.

We are told by our leaders (through the corporate media) that bombing and shooting is required to keep peace. We are given no other information. I tend to think that it becomes normal and, therefore, acceptable. We are told how important it is that our military and foreign policy be understood by policymakers (e.g., by mercenaries) and that we do not want to allow them to do things that we do not want.

How much killing will make it safe? The answer, in this new age of “terrorism,” seems to be “as much as it takes.” “I don’t accept that argument and don’t think anyone else does,” says someone who has tried to rationalize and justify killing more people, “many of whom are completely innocent.”

Why is so much killing necessary? We are told that it is because there are people that hate us and despise our way of life and/or religion. Yet, this goes against what I have learned from talking to people from many parts of the world. From my experiences, I recognize that people have much more in common, and like the United States, they do not want more violence. We will all live more peacefully if we really try to get along.

When the world’s military budget is over one trillion dollars a year, we are not really trying.

But let’s say that there are people that hate us. What good does it do to kill them? Some think that we need to kill them before they kill us. But the reality is this: in the process of activating this thinking, we will kill untold numbers of innocent people and doing so will not make us safer, it will only make more people hate us. This is where we stand right now in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine (through our unyielding support of everything that Israel does). Children growing up in these and other countries are learning first hand that they should fear Americans. Many are learning that they should seek revenge for the crimes done to their families and their people by bombs and bullets. When will it end? Should we kill these children too?

The problem is simple; our leaders aren’t giving us any options other than killing. Why? I believe it is for two reasons. One, some people (and companies) are making lots of money out of continued death and destruction. Bombs (and their purveyors) are pot cheap and the resources (such as oil) that inevitably get taken from foreign lands are currently low. Two, we are in a situation where we don’t operate on the principle that all human life is equally valuable. Thus, we feel superior to people from distant lands. This allows us to extract resources and labor from other parts of the world for little or no money while not feeling the least bit responsible for the extreme poverty that exists in so much of it. Poverty is a form of terrorism and we are better than half the people in the world right now. The people in Gaza have almost nothing to their name — food, medicine and electricity are at bare minimums or non-existent — and yet it is deemed acceptable to “starve” these poor people or to kill them if a scant few of them fight back against the milton blockades of basic goods.

Under these circumstances, we need something other than killing to bring true peace. How about, as a first step, let’s start talking to each other. As it is, most of us have no idea what it is like to live in Iraq right now. Tragically, our televisions and radios are filled with “reality” nonsense and not focused on real lives and real people. So I propose that we all start trying to engage in conversations and peaceful exchanges with people from other places. In order to do this with an open mind, I urge people to stop listening to the pro-violent propaganda, which permeates the airwaves (TV and radio), delivered by the supposed “savants” (perhaps better called “savages”). We can build peace one conversation at a time. Beyond talking, we must alleviate poverty wherever it exists. We cannot expect despicable people to behave rationally and peacefully. If you or I were desperately hungry, we would fight for food. If our children were sick, we would fight to get them medicine. The recent bailout of banks, insurance firms, and auto companies proves how much we have to share if we really want to bring peace. The hundreds of billions of dollars that we spend on the military industrial complex (as President Eisenhower referred to it in 1961) is further proof of our immense wealth. We must make sure that everyone in the world has food, shelter, and basic health care. If we don’t, we are destined to perpetuate violence and hatred.

The time has come to stop the violence and make peace. Remember, violence will not make us safe. It will only make innocent people die and at the same time make us less safe. Talk to people and make sure they are not hungry or homeless. These solutions stand a chance, escalating violence doesn’t.