

MOTHERS

*and*

DIVORCE

*Legal, Economic, and  
Social Dilemmas*

TERRY ARENDELL

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# MOTHERS AND DIVORCE

LEGAL, ECONOMIC,  
AND SOCIAL  
DILEMMAS

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*Terry Arendell*

*Foreword by  
Arlie Russell Hochschild*

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*To Herbert Blumer,  
in appreciation of his lifelong commitment  
to the study of human group life*

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# Foreword

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Many well-intentioned self-help books on divorce cheerfully direct the divorcée to a fresh start, a creative new life-style, and new vistas of self-development. “Divorce may be hard,” these books imply, “but a sunny disposition will make things right.” However, the sixty divorced mothers in Terry Arendell’s sensitive portrait were more preoccupied with paying for food and shelter than with a “creative new life-style.” The problem of the divorced woman is not her personal attitude, Arendell argues, but her position in a larger economic arrangement between the sexes. Yet just this arrangement is hidden from view by popular notions about divorce.

In certain popular films (such as *An Unmarried Woman* and *Hannah and Her Sisters*) the heroine safely remarries, so that we never actually see how divorce affects the class position of women who remain single. Like popular literature on divorce, these films suggest that the trauma of divorce is basically psychological, that it is similar for men and women, and that it is temporary.

Contrary to popular assumptions, Arendell’s book shows that for women, the central trauma of divorce is basically economic. It is much worse for women than for men. And the trauma is often permanent. Divorce usually pushes women down the class ladder—sometimes way down. It is not simply that women drop down a social class as they experience the psychological trauma of divorce. The class drop *is* the trauma.

The frightening truth is that once pushed down the class ladder, many divorced women and their children stay down—because many women find it extremely hard to find jobs that pay adequately, be-

cause they are the sole parent to their children, and because many do not remarry. Indeed, one out of three divorced mothers never remarries. Most divorced women remain unmarried much longer than divorced men, and many women remarry only to divorce again. If current trends continue, half of the young women who marry today will eventually divorce. In this sense, the divorced woman's story is becoming the married woman's cautionary tale: "If it happened to her, it could happen to me." For the stably married, divorce happens to "other people." But covertly, ubiquitously, other people's divorces influence one's own marriage. Since most women have more to lose economically through divorce, women have more at stake in marriage. In this sense, divorce acts as a control on married women.

Scholarly studies on divorce, social class, and gender seem to fall into two camps. In one, we find statistical studies on the feminization of poverty, such as "Women, Work, and Welfare: The Feminization of Poverty," by Diane Pearce. These studies focus on an empirical and implicitly structural trend in our society toward female impoverishment, but they do not connect that trend to the everyday lives of real women. In the other camp, we find psychological works, such as *Going It Alone*, by Robert Weiss, or *Surviving the Breakup*, by Judith Wallerstein and Joan Kelly. These studies treat the everyday problems of real women and children, but they detach those problems from overall architecture of gender relations. Between these two camps, we find Lenore Weitzman's *The Divorce Revolution*, which focuses on the legal aspect of no-fault divorce and its economic consequences, and which, because of its approach, forms a nice complement to Arendell's book. Arendell combines the virtues of both camps.

Using divorce as a mirror for marriage, Arendell exposes a key dilemma—for women, a crisis—in the economic relations between men and women. Simply stated, that crisis is this: women still do the unpaid work of rearing children. Since the mid nineteenth century, most American women above the poorest class were economically supported through traditional marriage in order to care for home and children. In a chill economic light, traditional marriage is what the economist Heidi Hartmann calls a "mechanism of redistribution." Men support women to rear children and care for the home. Most men could get the money to support women by earning wages in a workplace that presumed male workers would redistribute part of

their wages to women. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, unions fought for higher “family wages” for men on the grounds that men needed more money to support the women who reared their children. Since this “redistribution” was assumed to occur, it seemed reasonable to many that men should get first crack at better paying jobs, and even earn more than women for the same work.

Virtually all high paying jobs did indeed become male. For many generations women were denied access to high wage jobs on the grounds that they “didn’t need the money,” or that they would take time off to care for their families. Many women, like those who speak through this book, stayed home to raise their children. Many others took time off, or accepted lower wages in the belief that they would be compensated financially by a “redistribution” of the male “family wage.” Thus, the economy placed men and women in separate and radically unequal class positions, with only marriage to equalize them. Conversely, marriage became the main way a woman could avoid or escape the lower class station to which most female work otherwise assigned her. In sum, marriage came to protect women from a class division between the sexes built in to the outside economy.

The position of women in the economy has changed little: today women earn fifty-nine cents for every dollar a man earns for full-time work. A female college graduate earns less than a male high-school dropout.

But divorce has begun to rupture the redistribution of wages that once made economic inequity seem fair. Many divorced men still earn a “family wage” but do not redistribute it to their children or the ex-wife who still cares for them. Today, Arendell indicates, men tend to consider the “family wage” their own property, to spend on themselves or on the second family they begin or acquire when they remarry.

Of course, not all men earn more than women, and not all of them refuse support to their children. But Arendell’s data form a distressing fit with findings from other studies that show that the vast majority of divorced men neither financially support nor directly care for their children after divorce.

This predominant male response to divorce has wiped out many gains of the women’s movement. A newer, more pervasive, more im-

personal form of oppression is partly replacing an older, more personal form. In the older form of oppression, men dominated women within marriage: in the newer form, they dominate women outside it. In the older form of female oppression, a woman was forced to obey an overbearing husband in the privacy of an unjust marriage. In the newer form, the working single mother is economically abandoned by her former husband and ignored by society at large. In the older form, women were socially limited to the home but economically maintained there. In the newer form, women do the work of a housewife and mother but are not paid for it.

Three factors—the belief that child care is female work, the lack of ex-husbands' support, and an economy where men outearn women—increasingly divide the sexes into separate social classes. This class separation between men and their ex-wives and children is new, and it is growing.

Terry Arendell gives this “new” oppression a human face. With a brilliant capacity to keep on listening and empathizing, Arendell invites us into the kitchen and the living room for intimate talks about things that matter to single mothers—the discouragements of long work days and poor pay, the loneliness of being single, the pain of watching a child's induction into poverty, and sometimes the surprise discovery of the courage to face it all. Anyone concerned with social justice in America should be touched and convinced that something must be done. One way to start is by reading this book—and passing it on.

*Arlie Russell Hochschild*



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# Acknowledgments

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I first became interested in the formal sociological study of the American family and changing gender roles in a graduate seminar conducted by Arlie Hochschild. It is entirely appropriate that the Foreword to this book should be written by her, for she has been intimately involved with it since it began as a dissertation research topic; she ardently supported my efforts to revise an unwieldy manuscript into a concise book, and she offered valuable comments and insights on countless successive drafts. It is a great joy for me to be able to acknowledge here, in print, how much my life has been enriched by her dedication to scholarship, her skill as an inspiring teacher, and her warm friendship.

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## Popular Assumptions, Personal Experience

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Divorce, once a relatively rare event described in negative and stigmatizing stereotypes, has now become commonplace. Between 1970 and 1980, the divorce rate more than doubled, and more than a million divorces occur every year. (See Appendix B, Tables 1 and 2.) Researchers with the U.S. Bureau of the Census estimate that 49 percent of all married men and women will divorce.<sup>1</sup> The continuing high divorce rate may well be the most dramatic change in family life in twentieth-century America.

One major effect of the continued high divorce rate has been the dramatic growth of families headed by mothers. (See Appendix B, Table 3.) The most systematic and comprehensive data available on changing family life, the University of Michigan's Panel Study of Income Dynamics (a nationally representative survey of five thousand families), found that after only seven years, over a third of the families being surveyed had a different person as head-of-household and that divorce was *the* major factor in family headship change.<sup>2</sup> Today over six million families with children are headed by a single mother. The number of children who live with a single mother who is either divorced or separated is nearly ten million. In fact, approximately one in six children lives with a single parent as a result of divorce or marital separation; and more than 95 percent of these children live with their mothers.<sup>3</sup> (See Appendix B, Table 4.)

Directly related to the dramatic increase in female-headed households has been the impoverishment of women.\* Numerous studies

\*I have deliberately avoided the phrase "the feminization of poverty" coined by

have concluded that women, together with their children, are being pushed into poverty while men are moving into higher income brackets. (See Appendix B, Tables 5 and 6.) In 1981 the National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity reported: "All other things being equal, if the proportion of the poor who are in female-headed families were to increase at the same rate as it did from 1967 to 1977, the poverty population would be composed solely of women and their children by about the year 2000."<sup>4</sup> In 1983 over 40 percent of all female-headed families were below the poverty level (\$10,178 for a family of four), and many more of these families were living marginally close to it.<sup>5</sup>

The impoverishment of women has been given increasing attention by the media, state and federal agencies, and independent policy-making bodies. For example, the state of California held comprehensive task force sessions in 1984 aimed at examining this social and economic trend.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the trend shows no signs of abating, and no substantial programs have been implemented to weaken or eliminate the factors that support it.

One primary factor in the increased impoverishment of women and their children is divorce. In other words, the rise in both the total number and the relative proportion of poor women is directly related to the high divorce rate. More specifically, the increase of poverty among women is related to the way divorce occurs and thus to its consequences. Equal numbers of men and women divorce, but it is women who are made poor as a result of divorce.

Divorce does indeed affect women and men differently: for women the standard of living declines, and for men it rises.<sup>7</sup> Studies show that men recover economically and in fact improve their financial condition after divorce. For example, Lenore Weitzman's 1981 California study shows that after divorce women experience a 73 percent loss in their former standard of living, and men experience a 42 percent improvement in their standard of life.<sup>8</sup> Further, women generally experience no appreciable economic recovery from divorce unless they remarry.<sup>9</sup>

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Pearce (1979), because, although it has caught public attention, it is misleading in that it does not suggest that women are actively being pushed into poverty by social forces. Rather, it suggests that women are taking over poverty! The phrase as it is commonly used ignores the fact that both income levels and the rate at which men are actively pushed above poverty continue to vary according to race. The impoverishment of women also varies by race.

Thus the number of women and children living in or near poverty continues to grow, largely as a result of divorce. Since neither the divorce rate nor the ranks of the poor appear likely to decline significantly, we are faced with a problem of major proportions. Millions of Americans confront economic uncertainties and difficulties that limit their access to the necessities of life. Why has our society—and why have we as individuals—remained so unmoved by the plight of divorced women with children? Why have we done so little about it?

These questions are difficult to answer, for three general reasons. First, various commonly held assumptions discount or ignore the economic and social effects of divorce, including the different ways divorce affects men and women. Second, we receive a great deal of our information about divorce in predigested form, as statistical data. But statistics provide only abstract descriptions of who divorces and what happens as a result; they give us no vivid pictures of personal experience. Third, even those of us who have divorced are tempted to see our own experience as idiosyncratic, even unique. We usually fail to recognize the similarities between our situation and that of others.

Throughout this book, reports of personal experience and recent sociological research will be brought to bear on seven popular assumptions about divorce. These assumptions are widely shared and have some limited basis in fact. But they also represent precisely the sort of thinking that must be challenged if we are to reach an honest understanding of divorce. It will be useful to state them briefly at the outset.

*Divorce is equally hard on men and women.* Certainly, ending a marriage through divorce is a major life transition for both spouses. As Judith Wallerstein and Joan Kelly have stated: "Divorce is a process which begins with the escalating distress of the marriage, often peaks at the separation and legal filing, and then ushers in several years of transition and disequilibrium before the adults are able to gain, or to regain, a sense of continuity and confidence in their new roles and relations."<sup>10</sup> Researchers have concluded that it takes more than two years for an individual to regain emotional equilibrium after a divorce.<sup>11</sup>

In national studies that examine people's views on life experiences, divorce has consistently been ranked second among forty-two stressful life events.<sup>12</sup> Only the death of a spouse ranks above it for

impact, and even that ranking has been challenged: "Despite the perception that death of a loved one should be harder to adjust to than divorce from a previously loved one, data on the physical and mental health status of the widowed and divorced indicate that there is generally more physical and mental health disturbance among the divorced than [among] the widowed."<sup>13</sup> Emotional stress is viewed as a normal part of divorce. It has social legitimacy, and many divorced persons do not hesitate to seek counseling or therapy for help in sorting out their feelings.\*

*Children of divorced parents are likely to have serious problems.* Divorce research has always stressed the psychological effects of divorce and single parenting on children.† In the 1950s and 1960s many researchers argued that divorce and the subsequent mother-headed family fostered juvenile delinquency, homosexuality, and neuroses in children.<sup>14</sup> Although most scholars and clinicians have now abandoned such arguments, they remain embedded in popular notions about the fate of the child from a "broken home." In fact, much contemporary research continues to assume that the female-headed single-parent household is a "deviant pathological" form.‡ Divorce is thought to be harmful to children at least partly because mothers are unable to raise children successfully without a father present in the home.

*Reformed divorce laws have given equality to women.* It is widely believed that recent legal reforms aimed at eliminating the law's traditional gender bias in divorce have succeeded, so that in theory and in practice, divorce law is now gender-neutral. Indeed, the

\*The rapid growth of the counseling profession is doubtless due in part to the increase in the divorce rate. Sardoff (1975) found that in no-fault states, the number of available counseling services increased and more people sought counseling.

† According to Goetting (1981), the areas most heavily researched have been delinquent behavior; physical health, especially the incidence of diabetes; cognitive performance and school success; personality traits; ability to form close relationships with others; heterosexual behavior; mental health and psychosomatic illnesses; and adult marriage and sexual behavior, especially among females.

‡ Crossman and Adams (1980:205) provide a review of recent research. The long-held view that the absence of a father adversely affects children has increasingly been challenged. For example, a study of nearly nine hundred school-aged children found that single-parent families were just as effective in rearing children as traditional two-parent families. After controlling for socioeconomic variables and matching groups of

legal process of getting a divorce has now been simplified in all fifty states. For this reason, many people believe that men's and women's options for obtaining divorce are not only equal but also more flexible and varied than they previously were. It is assumed that personal freedoms and individual rights are now given priority over the state's traditional interest in preserving marriage, and that this trend represents a gain in civil liberties for men and women alike.<sup>15</sup>

It is believed that because society places great value on a wife's mothering activities, and because the law recognizes the contributions of each spouse to the marriage and family life as being equal, recognition is given in divorce settlements to men's and women's different family activities. In other words, it is thought that a primary aim of divorce law is to treat a divorcing husband and wife equally, so that they can live in comparable situations after divorce.

*Community property laws treat wives and husbands equally.* It is commonly thought that in terms of property settlements, divorcing spouses are treated equally in states that legally adhere to community property principles. Divorcing women are believed to be better off in states that follow community property statutes rather than common-law principles. It is also believed that because the traditional biases that favored men in marriage—such as laws that gave them control over their wives' earnings, property, and legal identity—have been diminished, so that women have gained equality with men in settling property matters at the time of divorce.

*Divorced fathers pay heavily to support their ex-wives and their children.* It is often believed that most divorced fathers continue to share the costs of raising their children, and also that women who really need financial assistance after divorce receive it through spousal support payments. (In California's no-fault divorce statutes of 1970, "spousal support" replaced the familiar term "alimony.") Apparently, some people even believe that the need to make support

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children in father-present and father-absent families, they found no significant differences between the two groups (Feldman, 1979:453). Another scholar argues: "Studies that adequately control for economic status challenge the popular homily that divorce is disastrous for children. Differences between children from one- and two-parent homes of comparable economic status on school achievement, social adjustment, and delinquent behavior are small or even nonexistent" (Bane, 1976:111).



payments forces many men to increase their earning activities, sometimes so much as to limit their involvement with their children.\* Many still believe the stereotype that men “get taken to the cleaners” in divorce, a belief that is fueled by media coverage of wealthy celebrities who divorce and their focus on the huge spousal support demands often made by attorneys for the wife. Justifications for nonpayment of support are also fairly common. Some fathers’ rights groups have even argued that men fail to pay support because they are denied access to their children and that they have little involvement with their children after divorce because their former wives prevent it.†

*Divorce affords great opportunities for personal growth and development.* This assumption has been widely popularized by psychologists and self-improvement groups. Here is a typical expression of it from *Divorce: The New Freedom*, by Esther Fisher: “Divorce is a dynamic process that can precipitate your growing away from childish dependency toward mature independence. . . . Finally, as a mature growing person you no longer believe in magic but in yourself. You recognize life is an endless struggle and accept its challenges. Having found yourself and having become aware of who you are with all your limitations and all your good qualities, you have the strength and judgment to cope with the many problems life presents. You begin to see what lies ahead as a difficult but exciting and romantic adventure which will demand much giving, loving, taking of responsibility, faith, hope, and trust in yourself and in others. You are no longer bored. Instead you discover an exhilarated feeling of being liberated as you become more and more involved with life and the master of your own destiny.”<sup>16</sup>

\*In *Single Father's Handbook: A Guide for Separated and Divorced Fathers*, Richard Gatley and David Koulack (1979:25) write: “The increased financial burdens of separation and divorce, for instance, are normally carried by the children’s father. You may be kept too busy trying to meet these obligations to find time for the kids. Even if you don’t have to put in overtime or take another job to make ends meet, your job may permit very little free time to be with your children.”

†From Gatley and Koulack (1979:26) again: “Alarm about not having the kids, or about having lost them permanently, is an extremely common reaction among separated fathers who have had a sort of reawakened awareness of their children. Often these feelings are accompanied by angry feelings that the children’s mother is somehow holding the kids for ransom. If you don’t pay her child support or alimony, or be nice to her, you won’t be able to have the kids this weekend.”