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**Rich in Things, Poor in Spirit: Is Economic  
Freedom Bad for Women and Families?**

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## DRAFT

### Abstract

This paper will address an emerging concern regarding whether economic freedom under a system of capitalism has liberated women “too much” by giving them more agency over work and family life decisions and eroding the family unit. There is a vast literature on feminism and socialism, which debates whether market or government-run economies are better for women and takes up topics including worker pay, social and economic equality, and the family. Additionally, the rise of the “new right” is generating a conservative backlash against economic freedom, acknowledging that the market provides material goods but destroys traditional family life. This paper will address the issues of women’s economic liberation in the context of the family in the United States from the mid-twentieth century. We will examine whether more economic freedom destroys families by taking women out of the house and into the labor force, replacing women's previous household work with machines, and yielding, among other problems, declining birth rates and increasing divorce rates. Has women’s economic freedom reduced the potency of the family as the core institution of economic life? I will examine whether economic freedom makes us materially richer but reduces social capital by destroying family life.

“Nowhere and at no time has there ever been a people which has raised itself without private property above a condition of the most oppressive penury and savagery scarcely distinguishable from animal existence.” Ludwig von Mises, 2005, 37.

“A servant is worth a household full of appliances.” -- Joseph Schumpeter

“Economic growth is a moral imperative.” Peter, Boettke, 2020.

“Liberalism does not ignore the meaningful life; it holds that more people can find meaning if they have the freedom to search for it.” Johan Norberg, 2023.

## **Introduction**

There is nothing new in the debate about the efficacy of markets and capitalism in general, especially concerning its effects on women and families. In the extended scope of human history, it is a recent phenomenon that we can obtain and attempt to further equal standing for women in social, economic, political, and cultural arenas. A mere two hundred years ago, I would not have been employed as an economist asking these questions, and I likely would have been dead by age forty-five. The incredible escape from grinding material poverty and gendered servitude seems impossible and miraculous. In the past seventy years, economic freedom has extended to American women, unlike previous centuries. The protection of private property rights and the rule of law necessitate equality before the law, something heretofore denied to women. Property rights are human rights, and as these protections have been extended to women over time, they have more agency and more freedom over allocating their time and talent, including vast opportunities for paid work outside the family home. These opportunities come with tradeoffs inside the household. No change is without costs, yet some argue, both on the political left and right, that economic freedom and market economies are to blame for the erosion of traditional

family life. The left argues that wealth redistribution and regulations are needed to fight women's inequality and the persistence of patriarchy, for which they blame capitalism (Holstrom, 1981, 2011). The new right argues that too much economic freedom has destroyed the traditional family and that free trade and globalization have resulted in decreased standards of living requiring two-income households, thus forcing women to work. Both the left and the right argue that greater government involvement is necessary. The far left argues that socialism will offer women egalitarian possibilities and rectify the gender wage gap. They argue for regulations and the use of the law to mandate maternity leave, college education, and better accommodations for women in general. Interestingly, the left and new right argue that capitalism, what we understand as economic freedom, is waging a war on the working and middle class (Brenner and Holstrom, 2013).

In both strands of the literature, socialist feminists and the new right believe capitalism exploits the family by changing the power dynamics. For Holstrom (1981, 2011), women suffer both under the expectations of unpaid household production and as losers in the workplace who are easily exploited and must be treated as a class to regain power. The new right argues that capitalism forces two-household incomes to survive, let alone thrive, and this has dismantled family life (Cass, 2018, 2020). Moreover, there is concern that other institutions have supplanted the family, leading teachers to act as surrogate parents because they are “minimally socialized” by their parents, who are too busy working Fischer (2022, 26). Both the left and the new right offer Marxist arguments about the exploitation that capitalism wreaks upon the family by reducing the laborers' disposable time (Marx, 2004).

The family is the core unit of society, and strong families have implications for the market, civil society, culture, and societal human flourishing. Women have historically played roles in leading

household production with little ability to outsource, giving them few alternatives for work outside the home. This, along with a lack of property rights and equality under the law, meant that the home could be a place of exploitation and abuse between husbands and wives. This dramatically changed in the United States over the twentieth century and continues to change into the twenty-first century. Increased outsourcing of the household production function has given women more opportunities for paid and unpaid work. Their range of choices has increased, which has shifted the division of labor within the home, which changes both the market for marriage and divorce patterns, especially since 1960 (Sawhill, 2014; Ellwood and Jencks, 2004; Murray, 2012). Some argue that modernity is destroying the American family and that an attack on the family exists even in modern political thought (Baskerville, 2013), leading to higher divorce rates and generations of latch-key and iPad children whose parents have outsourced parenting to technology and au pairs.

### **A Review of the Literature**

There is a great deal of literature that examines the impact of economic freedom, including the relationship between high levels of economic freedom and increased human freedom, including civil, social, and political freedoms (Gwartney et al., 2014; Gwartney & Lawson, 2003) that economic freedom reduces gender disparities (Fike, 2016), is positively related to growing per capita incomes (Faria & Montesinos, 2009; Dawson, 1998; De Hann and Sturm 2000; Gwartney et al., 2004) entrepreneurship (Gwartney et al., 1996; Nystrom, 2008), economic growth (Hussain & Haque, 2016; Justensen, 2008; Altman, 2008) investments in human capital (Feldmann, 2017), advanced worker productivity (Guerrero et al. 1, 2017; Heritage 2010), better employment opportunities for women in the formal economy (Wong & Stansel, 2016; Russell et al., 2020; Fike 2016; Stroup, 2011), greater government respect for human rights (Dreher et al.,

2012), greater subjective well-being (Wolfers and Stevenson, 2008; Fischer, 2008) and fosters social trust (Berggren et al, 2006). Economic freedom correlates with better family opportunities, including less childhood labor, lower childhood mortality, greater income equality (Gwartney & Lawson, 2004), and greater life satisfaction (Veenhoven, 2000; Ovaska and Takashima, 2006; Gropper et al., 2010).

Davis and Williamson (2022) point to the vast literature that examines the social and economic benefits of women's equality, including limitations on women's labor rights, which decreases female labor force participation and entrepreneurship and increases the gender wage gap (Htun et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2019; Malta et al., 2019; Amin & Islam, 2015; Gonzales et al., 2015; Zveglic and Rodgers, 2003; Ogloblin, 1999, 2005). Davis and Williamson (2019; 2022) find that "individualism is closely associated with personal autonomy and respect for individual rights, values that support a cultural understanding of women as autonomous agents and the moral equals of men." This contrasts with collectivist mentalities, which subordinate women's goals to what are deemed more significant social goals.

Moreover, increasing women's property rights increases the female labor supply (Hallward-Driemeier & Gajigo, 2015; Heath and Tan, 2019), raises innovation rates (Kahn, 1996), and alters investment risk preferences (Koudijs & Salisbury, 2020; Koudijs et al., 2021). Limits on the rule of law for women also restrict women's access to finance (Demirguc-Kunt et al., 2013) and limit financial innovation (Hazan et al., 2019).

No change or transition is without costs, and these massive material gains are accompanied by changing family habits and traditions, declining birth rates, changed rates of divorce, and more women working outside the home. The family matters not only socially and culturally but economically. Even Congress agreed, when it declared in 1996 as part of its legislative findings,

that marriage is the foundation of society and it promotes the interests of children. (Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act 1996). Declining birth rates in industrialized economies, therefore, are a concern for the future as people are the source of human capital, and aging populations are associated with slower growth rates (Maestas et al., 2016). Julian Simon (1996), arguing against the Malthusians, demonstrated that human beings are the ultimate resource, but they require economic freedom to create more abundance. Moreover, aging populations, accompanied by a century of growing government expenditures and debt, along with declining birth rates, present looming fiscal problems (Sheiner, 2017).

### **There is No Substitute for Economic Freedom**

Economists agree that growth is desirable. Economic Freedom provides the institutional nexus necessary for economic growth, which stems from rising worker productivity yielding income growth. Rising incomes extend our range of choices and further liberate us. Industrialized economies over the past two hundred years have broken from the shackles of the Malthusian equilibrium (Goldin 2016; Lucas 2004), which allows all people, but especially women, to have greater agency over their lives and to live longer lives. Economic freedom allows us to live longer and happier lives, yet income growth correlates with declining birth rates. US birth rates started to decline after the baby boom with some fluctuations after the 1970s and then began to increase before the 2008 recession, and have since declined (Pew, 2020). Does this signify “too much” growth such that we discount the value of family and children? This question will be addressed in future sections.

Economic growth requires productive people *and* institutions that unleash human creativity through entrepreneurial discovery and service. Economic freedom is essential. Goldin (2016, 62) explains, “The ability of nations to foster human capital accumulation depends on enabling

institutions. One set of these enabling institutions is the legal and extralegal rules that define property rights in man. Another set includes a host of related institutions such as the franchise, form of government (due process, the rule of law), and religion.” Property rights are human rights (Alchain,1993) because they operationalize human agency and induce social cooperation, across genders, races, and tribes. They allow us to say “yes, please” or “no, thank you” in cooperative ways (Otteson, 2019). Property rights within the context of the market economy allow each person to decide how and when they will ration their time, treasure, and talent. Along with the rule of law, this erodes endemic patterns of political and legal privilege (Candela and Piano, 2018). Individualism, a hallmark value of unconstrained markets and economic freedom, is associated with greater gender equality (Davis & Williamson, 2022). The catallactic process of commerce brings women into the community. It gives them the opportunity to serve others with their human capital, to be served by others, and yields growing economic productivity fostered by individual entrepreneurship.

Economic freedom leads to greater autonomy, personal choice, and the ability to choose and take risks according to desires, preferences, and situations (Gwartney et al., 2004). Unconstrained markets break down traditions and customs that uphold primitive and punitive discriminatory practices; as such, markets are moralizing spaces (Storr & Choi, 2022) in which reciprocal trust and service are encouraged, and patterns of discrimination erode over time. Nobel laureate Gary Becker (1971) pointed out that markets make people pay for discrimination because it places a monetary consequence on missed opportunities to transact with productive people.

Economic freedom is demonstrative of an opportunity society in which human capital freely flows to its most highly valued use. Economic freedom is measured across five key areas: the size of government, property rights, regulatory burden, freedom to trade internationally, and



sound money. As Smith (1982) first argued, private property rights were vital to unleashing personal contributions to the common good. They are also necessary to unleash greater gains from increasing productivity. Property rights could accomplish what no well-meaning economic architect could. Private property rights change relationships between self-interested people and allow us, in the pursuit of our profit, to serve strangers. Private property rights foster commercial exchange and widen circles of exchange, in which women ultimately, although past the time of Smith's writing, become active protagonists in their own stories through the process of commerce.

### **More Property Rights, More Bargaining Power**

As women gain rights to own and sell property, they have access to the market economy and the labor market. Lemke (2016) demonstrates that inter-jurisdictional competition granted married women in the United States property rights, and by the turn of the century, these married women had economic and legal rights.

Unleashing what Baumol termed "entrepreneurial capitalism" generates a dynamic and innovative economy (Baumol et al., 2007). The twentieth century was revolutionary for American women. After World War II, women unleashed their labor on the market. From 1950 to 1998, female labor force participation rates surged across all age categories except those over 65. In 1950, only one in three women participated in the labor force; by 1998, it was three of every five women. Young women aged 24-35 doubled their labor force participation rates from 34 to 76 percent (Fullerton, 1999). Goldin (1989) finds labor-force heterogeneity (among married and single women) over the twentieth century and that married women who enter the labor force tend to remain in it over the life cycle of their labor-force history.

Over the same period, female college attendance rates surged. In 1970, 58 percent of enrolled college students were men, and 42 percent were women. By 2025, this will invert with an expected 57 percent female and 43 percent male; these numbers hold for both four-year and two-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). This affected the labor force, particularly around 1979 when the percentage of women who were teachers, nurses, librarians, and social workers began to decline. The percentage of women who are doctors, lawyers, professors, and managers started to grow until the mid-1980s when the latter category was a more significant percentage of the female labor force than the former (Goldin, 2006, 13).

Marriage and divorce rates changed dramatically over the same period. In 1950, 82 percent of women were married and spent 88 percent of their adult lives in marriage. In 2000, 62 percent of women were married and spent 60 percent of their adult lives married. This happened while life expectancy increased (Greenwood and Guner, 2009, p. 231). Nobel Laureate Angus Deaton (2013) speculates that today, an average Caucasian female has a fifty percent chance of making it to her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Revolutions in private property rights changed women's economic status and potential. It also allows all of us to live longer, more satisfying lives. Technological change, which allows households to make different outsourcing decisions in consumption and capital goods, changes marriage decisions and household time investments (Ogburn and Nimkoff, 1955; Becker, 1965; Cowan, 1983). From 2011 to 2021, female marriage and divorce rates declined (US Census Bureau, 2023). Women are increasingly more educated and spend their time differently than in 1965. This was fostered and fueled by cultural, legal, and technological changes.

American women have shed their colonial role of "Republican Motherhood" (Kerber, 1976), wherein the role of the mother was to raise her children and to lead the household production

function. This meant long work hours in the fields and the household entirely controlled by her husband. Husbands had so much control that some women celebrated “spinsterhood” to escape male dominance and paternalism. We are now in a new stage for women, the postmodern “I am Every Woman” life. It took two hundred, and it is still evolving. It is not only laws and norms that have changed, allowing women autonomy in both the home and the marketplace, which heretofore were unobtainable, but technology, spurred by the increasing worker productivity. Women can now choose careers and family, yet the biological role of the mother has yet to be replaced by men. Women value career *and* family, and determining what to outsource within household production function is a crucial yet complex set of decisions for women and families. Having more access to resources allows parents to make more investments in their children (Kearney, 2023). This effectively changes both the income and substitution effects within household production by lowering opportunity costs. Single-parent families often are lower-resourced in terms of time and income because there is only one parent, which means they cannot as effectively outsource and are particularly burdened by the high cost of childcare, for example.

### **Do Love and Marriage Still Go Together Like a Horse and Carriage?**

As the de jure property rights franchise has extended to women over the past seventy years, the de facto norms have also changed. This changes marriage and family and yields different incomes in upper-income versus lower-income families. The 1955 song “Love and Marriage,” popularized by Frank Sinatra, uses a now antiquated analogy of the horse and carriage, which once were complement goods. The automobile changed all of that. Nevertheless, do love and marriage still go together? Men and women are better off materially than they were in 1965. Labor productivity across genders has grown with the availability of resources increasing. Thus,

we now live in a time of super-abundance (Tupy and Pooley, 2022); because of this, love and marriage can be more complementary than when we got married strictly based upon mutual comparative advantage. Additionally, expanding the education franchise has benefitted women the most because they have historically been the most discriminated against (Norberg, 2016).

Norberg (2016) further argues that as long ago as the sixteenth century, publishers began to market to women smaller versions of books that could be hidden from their husbands.

Demonstrating that the profit motive is blind to gender. Literacy and education were not only essential to the female emancipation project but also to changing culture, norms, and traditions.

According to Deaton (2013), in the 1950s, two upper-middle-class college students found each other in college and married. The woman graduated from college and never worked; she went to household work, and they started a family. Highly educated people got married, but women did not enter the labor force in large numbers. Today, those same people marry each other but delay marriage, and both head to the workforce (Deaton, 2013). At high-income levels, many household production can be outsourced to machines due to access to increasingly low-cost technology or to lower-skilled laborers. Technology such as washing machines, robot vacuums and mops, dishwashers, microwave ovens, electronic pressure cookers, air fryers, and cell phones all push out the household production possibility frontier. The Instapot and air fryer allow you to produce at home what previously could only be obtained at a restaurant. The labor hours required to produce a gourmet meal at home have declined, so we get more from fewer work hours. Moreover, as disposable income rises, families can outsource the entire meal and eat out more often, which they do. According to the USDA, Americans today spend 40 percent of their food budget eating out, up from 25 percent in 1970 (Todd and Mancino, 2010).

Incidentally, we have much greater access to calories. The average American consumes 20

percent more calories today than in 1970 (Desilver, 2016). We have more access to food energy and require less of it. We can now outsource housecleaning to maid service, dry cleaning, or what was previously done at home with iron can be taken to a cleaner for two dollars per shirt. Women across all income quintiles are emancipated from the laborious work of doing laundry by hand.

Expanding private property rights to women has unleashed their human capital outside the home and yields higher returns to their labor and growing family incomes. Women now have more bargaining power within the home, which changes their marriage decisions. In 1965, almost 90 percent of women aged 25-29 were married, which is down to 32 percent in 2021 (Brown, 2021). According to the US Census Bureau (2021), the median age of first marriage for women is increasing, from about 21 to 28 years old over the same period. When surveyed about why they are delaying marriage, 29 percent say they are not financially prepared, 26 percent say they have not found the right person, and 26 percent report that they are too young and not ready to settle down. These are dramatic economic and cultural changes. Women's expectations about their future earnings are part of what delays their marriage decisions. Formerly, they married early to ensure their financial stability and, for the same reason, did not exit bad marriages. The same survey reports that in 1965, 58 percent of women of the Silent Generation, in their early twenties at the time, were not participating in the labor force. Today, 71 percent of young Millennial women participate in the labor force. One reason for this is greater access to higher education. Millennial women are four times more likely to have a bachelor's degree compared to their counterparts in the Silent Generation. This is not limited to women; Millennial men are twice as likely to have a college degree (Fry et al., 2018).

In 1965, a female college student had different goals and different constraints. She went to college to find a like-minded husband and married young for financial security. Today's women have the security of their earning potential, so they marry for different reasons. Marriage has shifted from a strictly comparative advantage story to a production and consumption story.

This changes inter-household bargaining and blurs the lines of domestic comparative advantage. Gone are the days of women waiting at home in a pressed dress, waiting on their husbands with dinner in the oven and a martini in hand. However, while the median age of marriage among native-born white women has jumped from age 23 to age 27 over the latter half of the twentieth century, women still value family. Women born from 1958-1978 value career and a family, aided by technologies such as IVF distinguishing them from their predecessors, women born from 1944-1957, who chose career then family and consequently had fewer children because they waited too long (Goldin, 2021). Today, college-educated women are more likely to be married than less-educated women, and college-educated women have the highest chances of remaining married (Wang, 2015). The tradeoffs are different between upper- and lower-income groups. Lower-income women are more likely to marry earlier if they marry and more likely to get divorced. Divorce rates are higher than in 1950, and divorce negatively affects children and families (APA study). Higher divorce rates are correlated with women gaining autonomy in divorce law. We can celebrate that freedom while mourning divorce as a breakdown of the family unit, which leaves strained familial relationships. In divorced families, income declines by up to 45 percent (Page & Stephens, 2002).

The most significant decline in overall marriage rates since the 1980s can be explained by a reduction in marriage among adults without a four-year degree. Kearney (2023, 100) explains this is due to economic and social factors. She suggests that in that time, the economic position

of men without a four-year degree has declined, making them less reliable income earners and “less suitable marriage partners.” The “marriage divide” remains. College-educated and higher-income individuals are more likely to get married and stay married than their less-educated and lower-income counterparts (Wilcox & Wang, 2017; Murray, 2012).

Low marriage rates and high divorce rates among low-income Americans (Bramlett & Moscher, 2002) have led to many suggestions for government interventions to support traditional values in marriage for low-income couples based on faulty assumptions, including that they do not value marriage (Trail & Karney, 2012).

The rise in single parenthood is driven by births out of wedlock rather than divorce, and the difference across white and black families is significant; 54 percent of black children live with a single mother compared to 15 percent of white children. It is easy to diagnose the problem—single parenthood makes parenting and upward mobility more challenging. No-fault divorce law allows women greater autonomy when they are stuck in harmful or abusive marriages, which is a good thing. However, it also cheapens divorce, making it easier to give up on a marriage that is worth fighting for. The good news is that our culture has not given up on marriage; it is still profoundly valued. Many disagree over what, if any, the government’s role should be in both either procuring or sustaining marriages<sup>1</sup>. Evidence across various studies shows that children of single-parent and disrupted households fare worse than children with two parents (Kearney, 2023). High school graduation, mental health, risky behavior such as smoking, and early childbearing are all negatively associated with a father's absence. Moreover, children raised apart from biological fathers in single-mother, cohabiting-parent, stepparent families, blended

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<sup>1</sup> This raises the important issue of what type of two or more parent households are best for children. That is a topic for further research and arguably, not much is now known on how lesbian, gay and polyamorous households will perform in terms of children’s overall well-being.

families, or multigenerational families are often unstable (McLanahan et al. 2013; McLanahan 2011; Tach et al. 2011; Tach 2012). The rise in single-mother households is both an economic and a cultural problem. It is a product of changing norms around cohabitation and early marriage. Kearney (2023) suggests that it is also an economic problem due to a reduction in male wages, which creates a “marriageability problem” at lower income levels. This is the thesis for many government interventions suggested by Cass and others on the new right. However, while male wages stagnated from the 1970s to the 1990s, hourly and annual earnings are at all-time highs today. Today’s men are at least as “marriageable” as in 1979 (Winship, 2022).

### **Can’t Buy Me Love**

The family is where we raise children, love each other, and develop the Smithian notion of sympathy that extends beyond the immediate family. The erosion of the family is to ensure social and economic malaise. The family is essential, and mothers are indispensable in the family and the household production function. As we grow in wealth individually and corporately, we can outsource more through trade. This is indisputably a good thing and, most importantly, for low-income families who suffer greater time and income constraints. Breaking out of autarky happens first in the household and then happens regionally and nationally. Outsourcing through trade allows us to experience *catallaxy*—the process of commercial exchange—by which we bring people into the community. We grow those whom we are served by and serve.

However, the most important things that happen within the household cannot be outsourced. We cannot pay people to love our children for us; we cannot substitute quality time with our children. Alexa may be able to set an alarm for bedtime, but it cannot lovingly tuck a child into bed, making them feel secure and loved. We can outsource much, but the role of parents has not been displaced by technology or lower-skilled labor. While nannies make it possible for mothers



to leave the home for work, true parental love cannot be outsourced, and if it is, it comes with a great consequence. The New York Post (2006) lists “The Outsourced Parent” with costs. We can hire people to carry our child via surrogacy (\$80,000), night nurses duties including changing diapers, burping and feeding (\$166,075 per year), potty train (\$3700), even teach your child about the birds and the bees (\$396), and later take them on college visits (\$2000) and much more. If you outsource everything, you miss the deep bonds that develop with your child—you cannot buy real love, no matter how much money you have.

Economic Freedom gives women and men the freedom to outsource much of what traditionally tethered women to the home while giving them options not to outsource what matters the most.

Technological change and changing norms have allowed women to escape a life with few options. However, many have reported on the loss of social capital (Carney, Putnam, etc.) and the decay of what we once called traditional family values. Hymowitz (2008, 199) argues that free markets erode moral character by “stirring up desire” and their celebration of hedonism, which hurt low-income communities the most. Michael Novak (2008) claims that what corrodes moral character in commercial society is not commerce and growth itself. However, commercial success means younger generations take for granted the virtues necessary for prosperity, including innovation habits and “focus on the future.” Moreover, research shows that economic freedom is associated with less materialism, not more (Teague et al., 2020). Economic freedom does not destroy virtue or blind us to greed. Adam Smith pointed out that over two hundred years ago, our insatiable desires and our limited abilities to experience tranquility. Wealth does not change our nature, but it can further our need for instant gratification. Culture, too, has changed, and with it, the composition and behavior of families.

### **The Ongoing Policy Debate**

Some argue for more government intervention in the family as a means of protecting it and, in some cases, preserving it. This debate has been ongoing for decades, the central question of which must be: is it less affordable today to raise a family for the middle and working classes? The prevailing view on both the left and the right is that it has become much more difficult because the economy has left men unable to support their families (Winship, 2022). Incomes and wages are increasing, yet some essential costs have increased: childcare, college education, and healthcare. The CPI for all prices has increased 74.4 percent since 2000, a big hit to working families. It is, however, 97 percent cheaper to buy a television, toy prices are down by 72 percent, and computer software is almost 70 percent cheaper. However, college tuition has increased by 178%, college textbooks are up by 162%, hospital services by 220%, medical care services are up by 138%, childcare costs are up by 115%, and food costs have increased by 82% (Perry, 2022, Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2023). These cost increases hit working- and middle-class families where it hurts and give them little room for alternatives—putting these critical needs out of reach for many. What has also changed dramatically are preferences about when to have children and how many to have. This leads to two overlapping policy debates: can we use the government to stimulate more children per family, and can the government intervene to increase income mobility?

Economic Freedom has led to an increase in the quantity of consumer items available at lower costs. It has also led to wage increases and what we attribute to growing labor-hour productivity. The perception among many on the new right is that we are worse off than in the 1970s, yet the data do not support this. The cultural question is trickier. We have shown that marriage and divorce rates are down, but so are birth rates. It is easy to see that more economic freedom would bring even better income and consumption outcomes. However, can the government intervene to

stimulate more children? Conservative think tanks have been addressing these questions for decades.

In 2000, the Heritage Foundation released a policy brief wherein they argued that the Federal and state governments should take an active role in protecting the traditional family, including setting target numbers for divorce rate reductions, offering “marriage training” with federal funding, offering a one-time tax credit to “always-married families” when their children turn 18, requiring divorce education, eliminating no-fault divorce, and lengthen the mandated process of obtaining a divorce by two years (Fagan & Rector, 2000, p. 2). Kearney (2023) suggests that to help working-class marriage rates best, we should expand the Earned Income Tax Credit, reduce incarceration, and boost prisoner reentry programs. Indeed, reducing incarceration rates for victimless drug crimes would help low-income families stabilize while also providing the social benefit of reducing incarceration costs across the country.

Today’s national conservatives renew claims to invite the state into the family to protect it. For example, Oren Cass, in his “The Once and Future Worker,” would destroy the family in his attempts to salvage it. His arguments, in part, stem from his desire to return to the economy of the 1970s (Cass, 2018), where he claims men could provide for their families and women could remain at home—thus protecting not only the traditional family unit—but the mobility of men in the labor force. His arguments suggest that economic freedom has given us lots of cheap stuff but has taken our virtues and eroded our institutions.

Cass and King (<https://americancompass.org/the-family-income-supplemental-credit/>) argue for a “Family Income Supplemental Credit” (FISC), which he suggests is not a “child allowance” but rather a stipend paid only to working families and further suggest this as a necessary step in the aggressive expansion of the social compact. He rightly critiques the welfare state as a

destructive social and economic force (Cass, 2018), yet this proposal would only increase the welfare state and obfuscate family tradeoffs. Economics teaches us that we need value creation, not welfare creation, through technocratic planning. Cass et al. would bring even more state intervention into the complicated and highly personal family unit. These proposed solutions are what Mises would describe as “the system of interventionism.” Cash stipends to families may sound good on paper, yet the state rarely gives cash without strings, and the strings are the problem.

Olasky (1994) effectively showed how US welfare programs destroyed black families by creating incentives for out-of-birth wedlock. These types of interventions fail both theoretically and empirically. Welfare must observe the truths of economics, the realities of incentives, and the knowledge problem. Here, the Catholic social teaching of subsidiarity is aligned with the Hayekian knowledge problem. Even the most well-meaning public bureaucrats or non-profit philanthropists cannot overcome the knowledge problem, and as such, local knowledge must precede action. We can know what the problem is without knowing how to solve it.

Cass takes the technocratic approach to fix what he views as the primary problems: the erosion of trust, the breakdown of the family, and declining middle-class living standards by inviting government into the family. On this last point, he could not be further from the truth. It is far better to be a middle-class family today than in 1950. The cost of resources in terms of worker productivity has dropped meteorically. The Simon Abundance, which measures the price of commodities, shows that resources became 396 percent more abundant between 1980 and 2017 (Pooley & Tupey, 2018). However, when the franchise of economic freedom includes women, everyone is better off. This is because we can access cheaper and better goods and services and more choices. This gives new opportunities for families to carve out a life and production

function that works best for them. Moreover, the higher incomes for women give them the choice to opt out of professional working life to pursue motherhood; this has been dubbed “The Opt-Out Revolution” (NYT, Belkin, 2003). Economic freedom not only gives us “stuff,” it gives us agency. This necessarily means that family life will function differently than before. Mothers may never pick up a vacuum because they can hire someone else to do it or purchase a robot and push a button. Being able to outsource more does not diminish the stressful load that families carry, and making the best choices about what to outsource versus what to “produce” remains a constant challenge. Studies suggest that married people with children have less time than single non-parents but are happier (O’Rourke, 2023), and this is likely because they have more autonomy about how to spend their time. After all, the household production function is not solely based upon the division of labor by historical gender roles, generating more solidarity among couples rather than less.

### **Advance Economic Freedom by Removing Regulatory Obstacles**

Often, economics demonstrates that we can do more by doing less by removing obstacles that stand in the way of thriving families. Regulatory burdens mainly harm working-class women and families by increasing the cost of goods and services and making it harder for women to contribute to the family income by hindering work. Regulatory codes governing business, labor, and credit markets determine who can do what, when, and under what circumstances.

The new right decries an economy that has supposedly left men behind and argues for stimulus for families. A better solution would be to remove obstacles to even more significant income growth for working-class families. Winship (2022) offers important insights about the culprit:

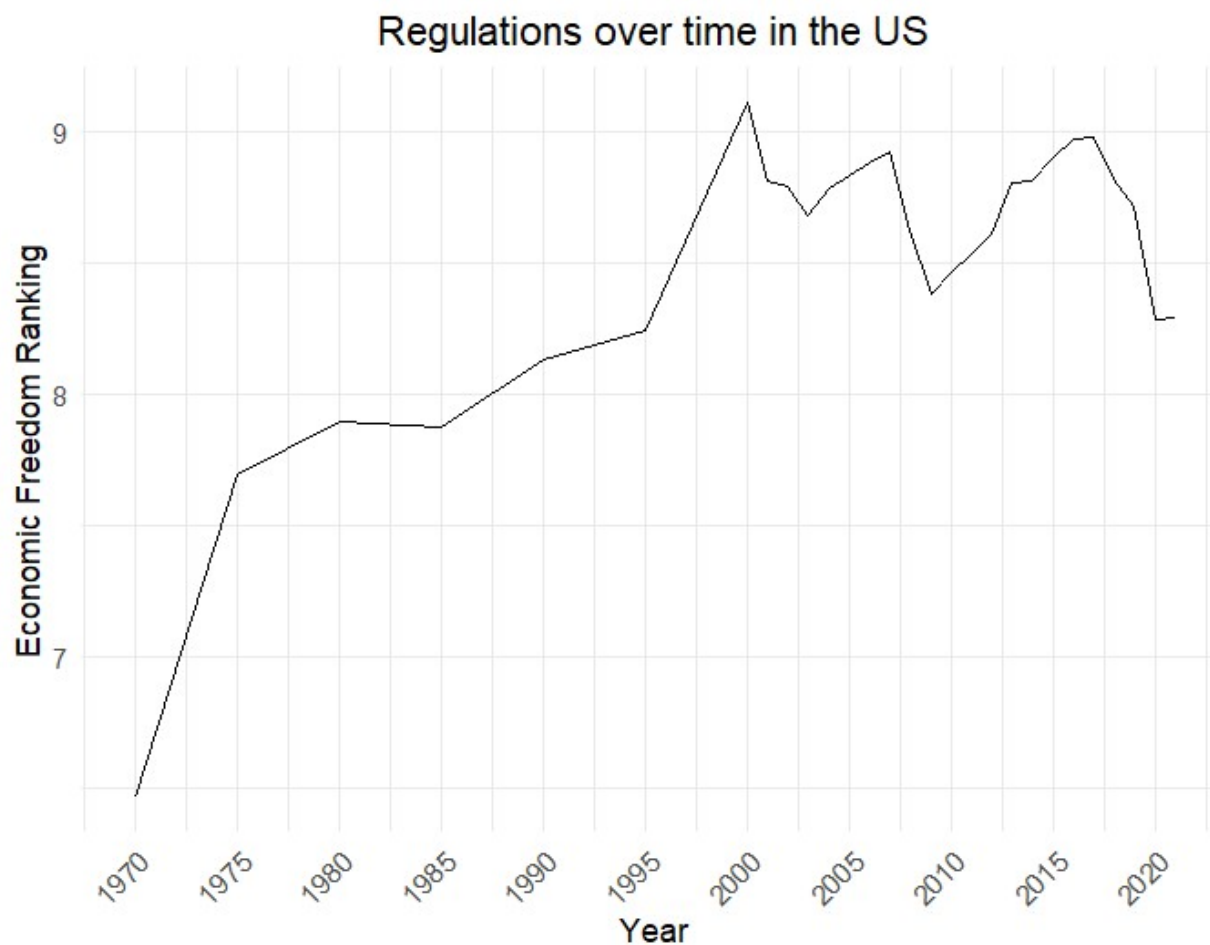
To the extent that men’s pay has not improved at the rates seen in the 1950s and 1960s, declensionist views may get the diagnosis backward in essential regards. Rather than economic

problems hurting men's ability to provide for families, trends in men's pay may reflect choices men and women have made in response to rising affluence. Some of these choices are cause for concern, such as replacing husbands' earnings with the expanded safety-net benefits a richer society can afford. But some choices reflect important gains, such as wider professional opportunities for women and the greater flexibility that has afforded husbands.

Government programs, along with burdensome regulations, crowd out work and income growth opportunities. Ironically, overwhelmingly, the people enacting these regulations are men, according to the Center for American Women and Politics (2022). These regulations are done in the name of safety, equality, or fairness, but they tend to disproportionately harm women, who are in many of the people they profess to support. Regulations impinge on private property rights and the freedom to exchange. They harm families through their effects on wages, prices, and employment (Chambers, et al., 2019) and regulations disproportionately harm small business owners (Bernal, 2022).

According to the GW Center for Regulatory Studies, the number of pages in the Federal Register has grown substantially since 1950. The 2023 report argues: "The number of pages in the Federal Register—the daily journal of the federal government in which all newly proposed rules are published along with final rules, executive orders, and other agency notices—provides a sense of the flow of new or changed regulations issued during a given period. These regulations might increase or decrease regulatory burdens, making this an imperfect—but frequently cited—measure of regulatory burden."

FIGURE 1



All regulatory burdens in the "Regulation" Area found in the 2023 Economic Freedom of the World Report.

The regulatory burden measured by pages in the federal regulatory codes has grown by 160 percent (CEI, 2019). This is negatively correlated with economic growth. Coffey et al. (2015) show that economic growth was reduced by 0.8 percent per year from 1980 to 2012 due to "regulatory accumulation," reflecting regulations' buildup over time. Occupational licensing harms women by raising barriers to entry, particularly for lower income, working mothers. 64% of all state-licensed occupations are predominantly female (Deyo, 2022); women pay a high price for working. Moreover, they pay twofold: higher consumer prices for regulated industries

like childcare and more stringent requirements for work eligibility in those same fields (Deyo, 2022).

Examples include private in-home childcare services, which often are a way for mothers to both provide childcare for others and their children and simultaneously grow their incomes, as well as preschool teachers, which afford women more flexible schedules and often allow them to bring their children to work for a reduced cost. Preschool teachers rank number one in average and number of regulations required to perform the work (Knepper et al., 2022). Public preschool teachers lose an average of 2,050 calendar days and pay an average of \$500 to be qualified to work. In-home childcare providers rank 25 and lose 48 days to qualify for work. Licensing requirements cost the economy \$2 billion annually and reduce entrepreneurship (Kleiner, 2018). Moreover, they create winners and losers, and in these two examples above, they discriminate against low-income working women. Occupational licensing is associated with higher levels of student debt (Bae & Timmons, 2021).

In other examples, occupational licensing exacerbates historical gender and racial inequities, for example, female hair braiders. For example, hair braiders have increasing cosmetology school requirements, 63 percent of cosmetology students have Pell Grants, and 61 percent have Federal Student Loans. Most cosmetology students come from low-income backgrounds, and in one study, only 31 percent of cosmetology schools graduated students on time (Menjou et al., 2024).

Women participate in the labor market at a lower rate than men, with 57 percent of women working compared to 69 percent of men. For mothers, labor force participation is 70 percent compared to 93 percent for men (BLS, 2023). This is a remarkable change that evolved over the twentieth century. The gig economy can provide opportunities for women and mothers to work according to their needs and schedules. Uber, Lyft, Grubhub, Instacart, Amazon Flex, and Rover



(pet assistance) are some of the highest-paid “manual labor” gig economy jobs (Weiss, 2023). The gig economy also includes high-income workers making over six figures. It allows women and working mothers to have flexibility. Despite arguments that gender gaps persist for women in the gig economy (Liang et al., 2018; Barzilay, Ben-David, 2017), it is an avenue for empowerment. The gig economy has low barriers to entry and offers flexibility and choices for women to increase their income or opt out of full-time work (Slaughter, 2015a, 2015b).

As economic freedom expanded for women in the US over the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, household production has drastically changed. Expanding women’s economic and property rights created new incentives to invest in female human capital (Geddes et al., 2012). Economic growth allows all people to outsource more than ever, yet no transitions are without costs.

Family structure changes with income growth and more opportunities for women to work outside the home. Studies show families eat dinner together less often, but they continue to value it (Kitanovska, 2022), and if both parents work full-time, some childcare will be outsourced. High-income households have less divorce and more cohesive family units (Murray, 2012) because they can choose to outsource what is less valuable produced at home. Economic freedom affords income growth and opportunities to make family life successful; it is the antidote for family breakdown rather than its source.

### **Conclusion: Familial Protectionism Does Not Work**

We need more economic freedom, which will support agency in marriage and childbirth and will generate wealth so that more families can be two-parent and high-intensive parents. The new right may have the purest of intentions when it suggests the state should disincentivize divorce

and fatherlessness and incentivize marriage and children. However, the knowledge problem here is apparent. How will the bureaucrats know what marriages are worth saving or who should get married in the first place? How will they know how many children to encourage? This is the inverse of China's one-child policy—discouraging children by law is just as ethically and economically problematic as encouraging children via monetary incentives. It invites that state into the family. Moreover, economics suggests that household outsourcing enriches rather than robs family values.

Those who worry about the benefits of economic freedom for women might not deny any of the above data. Incomes are higher, women have more autonomy, and everyone has more stuff. Cass and others agree but see it as part of the problem. Cass argues that economic freedom has essentially emasculated the working-class man. He sees women's advancement occurring at the expense of men, leading to a reduction in birth rates. For Cass and others, economic freedom is a zero-sum socioeconomic game. Women gain at the expense of the family and society. In this regard, they view this increase in wealth and ability to outsource more as a need for protectionism—familial protectionism, wherein they ask the state to step in and support working-class families.

The family remains the most essential unit both socially, spiritually, and economically in society. Families are worth fighting for. The economic hardships facing families today are exacerbated by decades of government interventions both in welfare and subsidy programs, but simply in cronyist industries which act as sanctioned cartels. The reason that college and healthcare are more expensive than ever is that they are lethargic quasi-state bureaucracies riddled with high costs and inefficiencies. State regulation through occupational licensing keeps working families down. We do not need family protectionism through more significant state intervention in the

family. What working- and middle-class families need is more agency empowered by economic freedom.

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