

Social and Economic Justice - 1987

God has shown what is good and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.
(Micah 6:8)

Issues

- 1) The stability and economic security of the family farm which is being threatened with extinction.
- 2) The rise of teenage pregnancies and their effect on the continuing cycle of poverty and illiteracy.
- 3) The urgent need for job-protected family (parental) and emergency medical leave.

Background

Through the programs of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, the women of Reform Judaism translate the principles of Judaism into action and concern:

The Farm Crisis in the United States

Economists note that the recession of the early 1980's hit rural areas harder than urban centers. In many rural counties farm failures and an ailing energy industry caused a double blow to rural communities. Since 1981 more than 500,000 farmers, 95,000 main street merchants and 2,000 farm implement dealers have gone out of business. As farm foreclosures and bankruptcies increase, the family farm, rural communities and institutions face severe financial adversity and their survival is at stake.

A recent report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on the financial conditions in agriculture concluded that there is no end in sight for the financial stress that the farmer is currently facing. The farmers' problems have three main causes: excessive supply continues to cause grain prices to fall; because commodities are being dumped on world markets at low prices to allow the U.S. to remain competitive, farmers are receiving much less for their crops than their actual production cost; and farm programs in the U.S. have become very costly to the government. The current farm program which costs about \$27 billion annually permits U.S. commodity prices to fall so that they remain competitive on world markets. The government pays high subsidies to protect farmers' income from low prices.

Legislation must address the problems of farmers without permitting the costs of programs designed to protect the farmer to spiral out of control.

Teenage Pregnancy and Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

The shocking statistics indicate a national tragedy in the making. Of the average four and five year olds in America today, we are told:

- one in four is poor;
- one in five is at risk of becoming a teenage parent;
- one in seven is at risk of dropping out of school and will not be able to read or write;
- one in three is nonwhite or Hispanic of whom two in five are poor.

Of every 100 children born today:

- twenty will be born out of wedlock;

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- thirteen will be born to a teenage mother.

Children whose basic health needs are being met, who are properly nourished and who are receiving adequate early childhood services, are children who have the better capacity and opportunity to learn well and develop strong basic academic skills. The level of a person's basic skills is tied directly to his or her prospects for future achievements; the likelihood of teenage parenthood impairs the ability to be a self-sufficient adult who can support himself or herself and provide security for the family. It is estimated that 13% of the 17-year-olds in the U.S. are functionally illiterate. They don't have the skills to obtain employment and they can't read or fill out a job application. There is a strong relationship between poor basic skills, teenage parenthood and poverty.

The cycle of poverty and weak basic skills or illiteracy continues as poor children give birth to children. Young women, ages 16 to 19, with weak basic skills who live in poor families are six times more likely to have children than young women with above average skills who are residing in households with a sufficient income to meet their needs. In 1980, ten thousand of the nearly 600,000 babies born to adolescents were born to children under 14 years old. These children are four times as likely to be poor than other children. These adolescent mothers, who have a limited education and few job opportunities, may face a lifetime of welfare.

Parental and Medical Leave

Dramatic changes in the composition of the work force during the past thirty years have placed a tremendous strain on families. In the majority of American families both parents are now working outside the home. Sixty percent of mothers work today, a threefold increase over the past thirty years.

Employers have generally failed to adapt their family and medical leave policies to meet the changing needs of their employees. The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world that has not yet addressed these issues in public policy. A minimum standard for personal and emergency medical leave will promote the economic security and stability of families. The pending Parental and Temporary Medical Leave Act of 1987 and the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 allow both mother and father to take a period of unpaid leave from their jobs in order to participate in the early care of newborn or newly adopted children or to attend to a child with a serious health condition. Leave to care for dependent parents is also included, as is temporary medical leave for employees because of a serious health condition. The employees are entitled to medical leave with the guarantee of the same or an equivalent position upon returning to work.

Federal, state and local government employees are covered as well as employees in the private sector who work for firms which engage in interstate commerce and employ a specified number of people.

Resolutions

The Farm Crisis

The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods calls on:

- 1) Federal, state and local officials to address the urgent needs of farmers and those who reside in rural communities and to provide emergency survival assistance for those who need food, clothing, shelter or health care;
- 2) Sisterhood members to work in coalition with other groups to assist or organize, through the volunteer sector, programs to provide similar emergency services;
- 3) Congress to be certain that any legislation designed to help the farmer must provide a price which covers the cost of production and allows at least a minimal profit;
- 4) The private and public sectors to initiate a program which will allow repayment of the enormous farm debt and which is fair to both farmers and their creditors; debt adjustment with an immediate moratorium on foreclosures and repossessions should be part of this program.

Teenage Pregnancies and Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods recognizes its responsibility to the children in our society and urges the members to act decisively in their communities and school districts to organize and cooperate with programs to help break the cycle of poverty, illiteracy, teenage parenthood and unemployment in the following ways:

To reduce teenage pregnancies:

- 1) Encourage local Sisterhoods to enter into dialogue with their rabbis and Religious School committees so as to strengthen the specific teaching of those Jewish values which apply to human sexuality and family life.
- 2) Encourage local Sisterhoods to advocate for Family Life/Sex Education curricula in their school districts, both public and private, as a step toward preventing teen pregnancies and keeping teens in school.
- 3) Encourage local Sisterhoods to advocate for and actively support school based clinics which offer comprehensive health services, including birth-control information and access to contraceptive services.
- 4) Encourage local Sisterhoods to become involved in campaigns to strengthen enactment of federal family-planning programs, thereby stressing family planning and the prevention of unwanted pregnancies in teens.

To break the cycle of poverty:

- 1) Encourage member Sisterhoods to support or establish a Head Start or similar program to meet the social and educational needs of poor preschoolers.
- 2) Encourage local Sisterhoods to cooperate fully with volunteer tutors in support and implementation of programs in the school district which provide remedial and counseling services; where such programs do not exist, to serve in an advocacy role to see that they are made available.
- 3) Encourage local businesses, community organizations and religious groups to take part in voluntary programs to provide activities, employment opportunities and job training for students and drop-out teenagers.

Parental and Medical Leave

The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods urges:

- 1) That legislation be adopted to establish a minimum standard to provide employees with job-protected medical and parental leave, whether paid or unpaid.
- 2) That our Sisterhoods examine the practices of employers in our own congregations and communities to work toward eradicating outdated employment practices and implement new policies that meet the needs of today's families.