

A G.I. BILL FOR MOTHERS

Ellen Goodman

On Monday Helen Feeney took one last shot at Veterans' Preference and missed.

To no one's surprise, the Supreme Court upheld its own June ruling. It is, they said, perfectly legal for the government to give veterans a lifetime edge on the public jobs list. That, for the moment, is that.

Now, after years of bucking veterans' preference, it may be time for women to adopt it.

Veterans' preference laws were based on the notion that a soldier reentering the job market shouldn't suffer because of the time he spent serving his country. Eventually, many of these programs became a kind of lifetime affirmative action for a generation of soldiers. But the basic concept was and is a worthy one. The government should have a right to help those who helped the rest of us.

Well, there is another group of Americans who have also taken time out of the work force in order to provide what is generally considered a social good. They are also at a disadvantage when they try to get back in. And they are called mothers.

This, according to Barbara Mikulski's favorite fantasy, should--in the best of all possible worlds--qualify them for their own sort of veterans' preference, their own G.I. Bill for Mothers.

"One of the fundamental tenets that underlies my thinking," says the feisty U.S. Representative from Baltimore, "is that what we explicitly state as our values, we implicitly deny in our social programs. If motherhood is an occupation which is critically important to society the way we say it is, then there should be a mother's bill of rights."

The basics of the G.I. Bill of Rights gave veterans the chance to pursue higher education, to get a mortgage, to get credit for their army years in their pensions, to have the right to return to a job, to have V.A. medical care, and to have a point preference in the job market.

"We gave them that to compensate for the lost time they gave to their country. Now if we transpose that to women, then we ought to provide them with the same sort of rewards for their time out and caring for their children.

"Clearly, not all women need that aid, but many do. We keep inventing new programs to help these women--displaced homemaker programs and all the rest. They're considered gifts when they ought to be a matter of rights," says Mikulski.

Not even this gutsy lady plans to present such a bill. If she did, you would hear a shriek from the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli. "It is not," as she says, "a perfect plan." In fact, it isn't a plan at all, but a point of view.

Still, it isn't a bad place from which to oversee the plight of the woman at home. It has become commonplace lately to cluck about the status of the homemaker. Feminists and antifeminists alike are busily portraying themselves as the Friends of the Homemakers, as if the women were baby seals about to be clubbed to extinction by the opinion makers.

For years people condemned working mothers for neglecting their children and then swung around and condemned full-time mothers for neglecting their minds, their pocketbooks or their futures. We have now settled for the notion that whatever a woman decides is fine, as long as she truly chooses it. We give lip service to choice, as if the choices were free ones instead of tough ones.

The hardest aspect of homemaking isn't the job description, but the insecurity. If one generation looked for security in a marriage certificate, this one looks for it in a resume.

The homemakers I know who are most at ease are those who know they can reenter when they want to, or when they have to. The young women who have the greatest sense of choice about mothering are those few who have been told the door to the office will still be open. Only they can look at mothering as "time off" or a second career rather than a permanent job disability.

It is odd that the choice to be comfortably at home, in that most private of relationships, depends on access to the public world. But that is the message from the home front. We have veterans here, too, who need more than thank-yous.

Write on one of the following:

1. How persuasive a case does this essay make for extending certain kinds of preferences to mothers?
2. When (if ever) should preferences be extended to some individuals in our society?