



Soldiers, Students, Seniors and Single Moms: Why Women Are Most of 47%

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Note: This is part one of a two part series.

I know you want to talk about Mitt Romney's weekend release of his 2011 tax returns, but bear with me:

Way back in 1971, Philosopher and Ivy League professor John Rawls, published an opus on political philosophy and ethics, called, A Theory of Justice. Rawls makes a compelling case for a social contract in which fairness reigns supreme. In order to get there, he asks readers to imagine a space free from any prejudicial interplays or external influences, called the original position, in which all human beings exist behind a veil of ignorance, and are therefore unaware of their own socioeconomic class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, ability, etc. Rawls proves that in a ceteris paribus world, free from war, famine, political unrest, historic disagreements, and so forth, human beings who are unaware of the advantages or disadvantages that might befall them by being light or dark skinned, male or female, straight or gay, citizens or immigrants, and anything else about themselves that might confer or remove privilege, would choose to create a society in which everything is as fair as possible. Without exception, everyone is afforded equality of opportunity. And if inequity arises, it can only be allowed to continue if it proves to be of benefit to society as a whole. If things become too unequal, and members of the society are harmed because they don't earn enough money, or they are denied the education, healthcare, resources and pathways to achieve social mobility, or other forms of success, government must intervene in order to correct whatever is preventing fairness.

Rawls' society in which what is good and just, is what is fair, sounds awesome, right?

The problem is that we don't live in a world of ceteris paribus, at least not in the sense that we as Americans can create a nation whose well-being is wholly dependent on what we do within the borders of the United States. We can drill for oil in an attempt to lower gasoline prices, for

instance, but both the left-leaning Center for American Progress, and the right-leaning Cato Institute, agree that what we pay at the pump has much more to do with rising demand in the developing world and the latest rounds of unrest in the Middle East—a zone that arguably hasn't known stability since the days of the Ottoman Empire. We can double-down on either Keynesian or supply-side economics, writ large, in an attempt to accelerate the pace of growth in our economy, but if Europe walks away from the Euro as a common currency, for example, it will mean dampened exports and corporate profits, weakened employment/consumer/investor confidence, shrink our gross domestic product, cause the national unemployment rate to rise to 9% or more, and produce a double-dip recession—although the US economy is lackluster, it is has grown and produced private sector jobs, and so technically the recession that began under George W. Bush ended during Barack Obama first term as President. And these examples don't even take into account what could happen if we were to suddenly find ourselves grappling with a series of increasingly costly natural disasters. The steps we can take to prevent harm are under our locus of control, yet there is no way to fully inoculate ourselves from the impact that something outside of our locus of control might have on us. This does not mean that we are helpless, weak beings, who occupy space in a chaotic, uncontrollable world. But it does mean that some elements of our well-being and success are related to factors beyond our locus of control.

When Mitt Romney asserts that 47% of Americans are, “dependent upon government... believe they are victims... believe they are entitled (emphasis Romney's) to healthcare, to food, to housing, to you name it... people who pay no income tax,” and concludes, “my job is not to worry about those people [because] I'll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives,” he is saying two things: One, the world is a perfectly fair place for everyone. Two, there are people in the United States that are not dependent on government. Both of these assertions are not only demonstrably untrue; they are laughably false.

Let's ignore the fact that Romney's 47% statistic ignores the burden of other federal taxes, principally payroll taxes which are levied on the first \$110,100 of wage income for social security, and all wage income for Medicare. In fact, 80% of all American taxpayers pay more in payroll taxes than federal income taxes as a percentage of income. What this means is that a large share of all households paying no income tax are working households with substantial payroll tax bills. In addition, as many as 15 million households, or individuals, owe no income tax because they took a hit as a result of the global financial crisis, and either saw their earnings fall below taxable levels, or saw their incomes disappear all together, along with their jobs. It seems practically impossible to label workers, and those whose earnings are stunted by a climate of high unemployment, as anything but the antithesis of people who avoid personal responsibility. But I digress.

Let's also ignore the fact that half the households in Romney's 47% of Americans statistic, pay no income tax because the standard deduction puts them below the taxable threshold, that three-quarters of the remaining 38 million households consist of either elderly retirees, or families that receive that receive the earned income tax credit to offset the cost of the social security tax on wages, because they are both members of the active workforce, and the chief providers of care to dependent children. And the remaining piece consists of students carrying the financial burden of their own education, and active duty military personnel who are not

required to pay income taxes on what they earn during tours of duty in combat zones. One of the great ironies is that the top 1% of filers rake in 23.9% (\$258 billion) in reduced taxes thanks to the deductions and inclusions for which they qualify. So while Romney criticizes the 47% for their sense of entitlement and dependence upon government, it is Romney himself, and his fellow elite earners that take the greatest share of the public sector (taxpayer) supported spoils. But let's ignore this irony as well.

Finally, let's ignore the fact that according to the (right-leaning) Cato Institute, even before injecting hundreds of billions of public sector (taxpayer) dollars into private sector as part of the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) signed into law by George W. Bush, nearly \$100 billion in federal tax dollars went to corporate welfare in the form of direct subsidies annually, while fewer than \$60 billion total were expended toward to Temporary Aid to Needy Families, (TANF) food stamps, housing subsidies, and the rest of it. Never mind that this one of those Inception moments where you realize that since Romney's father, George, was on welfare after returning to the US from Mexico, (a fact corroborated by Romney's mother, Lenore) he belongs to the victim-playing, entitled, personal responsibility averse, government dependent 47%, but Romney took more than \$10 million of public sector (taxpayer) bankrolled bailout money, therefore taking much more in corporate welfare than his father received in social welfare. Add in an additional layer: Based on what we currently know, Romney has paid zero percent income tax on wages—the 13 percent he claims to have paid on all of those tax returns he won't let us see comes from income on capital gains—despite the fact that the marginal tax rate is 35% for top earners. This means he depends on the government to help him avoid over \$4 million in taxes every single year; he feels entitled to pay a little more than \$3 million, instead of the \$7.5 million he owes. If we try to wrap our minds around these paradoxes and juxtapositions, our brains will explode. Let's ignore them.

Let's focus on the fact that Mitt Romney writes off more women than men, and more people of color than whites when he makes his standard of concern an annual salary or statement of earnings that places one squarely in the middle class—which Romney defines as up to \$250,000 per year—or in the elite of American socioeconomic life. Let's focus on the fact that he writes off more red states than swing states or blue states with his 47% statistic. And let's focus on the fact that he passes damning judgment on those who are not affluent. In essence telling them: Because you shirk personal responsibility, claim victimhood, feel entitled to healthcare, food, shelter, and so forth, without having to work for these, you are a welfare-state slave. If you hadn't chosen to be so feckless and lazy, you could've been rich and free, like me.

I'm sure you remember Hilary Rosen's statement on Anderson Cooper's 360 show on CNN, "[Ann Romney] has actually never worked a day in her life. She's never really dealt with the kinds of economic issues that a majority of the women in this country are facing... [Mitt Romney] seems so old-fashioned when it comes to women... He just doesn't see us as equal." The Romney campaign focused on the "never worked a day in her life" part of the quote and accused the Obama campaign of hating stay-at-home moms. The Obama distanced itself from Rosen, and reminded voters that Romney was in cahoots with the GOP Congress and state legislatures responsible for waging the War on Women. And cable news, print publications, and the media, writ large, went guano-crazy over the whole thing. They loved it; couldn't get enough of it.

I raise this because a few things came out of that media firestorm: First, everyone made an admission that child rearing is no cakewalk, and because moms do much more than dads in the aggregate, they deserve recognition for bearing a disproportionate burden. Second, although surrogates for the Romney campaign never ceded the point, the preponderance of pundits and journalists concluded that if Rosen indeed intended to make the case that it is harder to raise children as a single parent, in a low income household, as a person of color, as an immigrant, and/or in another circumstance that might confer or remove privilege, the empirical data is on her side. There are statistically significant differences between the opportunities and outcomes women with children enjoy when compared across differences in socioeconomic class, race, legal status, level of education, and so forth. Sexism, patriarchy, racism, kyriarchy, and a slew of other isms and archys are quantifiable and qualifiable.

In 1973, the Supreme Court affirmed a woman's right to choose whether or not to carry a pregnancy to term. And although it has since restricted this right, it remains mostly true, in this country, women are able to choose whether or not to become mothers. But an individual woman does not choose every aspect of the world into which her child is born. She certainly does not choose the fact that as a mother she, and not the child's father will be legally expected to provide every financial, emotional, educational, and medical need. There is no universal law defining what children are entitled to from their biological fathers, or the male caregivers in their lives. If one parent has full or even partial custody of a child, and she (or sometimes he) needs the other parent to provide time, money, or anything else toward that child's maintenance and support, the parent in need must win a court case in order to make that happen. It's not something that just occurs organically.

But if you're a single mom and your kid violates a curfew law, and when detained is found to be holding a controlled substance, the default is for you to be legally liable for both. The child's father will not be named in the case, much less charged. If you're not only a single mom, but also homeless, and you enroll your child using the address of a babysitter, so that your offspring can attend the best school possible, you'll be charged with felony larceny for stealing \$16K worth of "free" educational services, and sentenced to 12 years in jail. The child's father will not be named in the case, much less charged. There has been a demonstrable rise in the number of single female-headed households in the US, and over the last two decades, the demographic breakdown for the fastest growing group these households belong to is: White women, twenty-something years of age, with some college education, but no four-year degree. 40% of all female-headed households live in poverty. Women are poorer than men regardless of racial/ethnic group, and Latinas, Native American, and Black women are the poorest of all.

I offer these examples and statistics to prove that while any individual—in this case, a single mom—certainly is an agent who can choose to empower herself, and choose to improve her circumstances, and her child's circumstances, yet as a matter of incontrovertible fact, there are always going to be things outside of her control. As a case in point, she has almost zero influence over the fact that as a single mom, she is many times more likely to belong to the 47% of Americans who do not pay income taxes, written off by Mitt Romney, because his wealth, racial identity, and gender privilege lead him to presume she does not comprehend the "dignity of work." She did not choose to create a society in which both men and women are both equally capable of being parents, but do not have an equal responsibility for both unpaid work as

homemakers and caregivers, much less economic support. She did not write public policies that presently do not facilitate equally shared parenting, without penalty to employment, advancement, benefits, and so forth. Single women currently incur all of the consequences when their sexual behavior results in pregnancy. Single men do not. Until such a time that a universal mechanism exists for establishing paternity and legally requiring fathers to contribute their time and money toward the clothing, feeding, housing, care, education, and development of their children, all of these charges will legally remain, almost exclusively, the terrain of moms. By seeking to improve not only her well-being, not only the well-being of her child, but also the well-being of others, a single mom can help transform the US into the nation it should be. Yet she did not make the country as it is. She did not choose the current—much less the historic—inequalities, ambiguities, and uncertainties that lead to the overpopulation of women and people of color in poverty.

She did not choose any of what makes her a likely member of Romney's discarded 47%.