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SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2009

TRANSCRIPT PROVIDED BY
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MS. ERBE: This week on *To the Contrary*, gay married couples increase as straight married couples decline in percentages. Then, the new alimony may be no alimony. Behind the headlines, sexism in health care for returning female veterans.

(Musical break.)

MS. ERBE: Hello, I’m Bonnie Erbe. Welcome to *To the Contrary*, a discussion of news and social trends from diverse perspectives. Up first, gays go mainstream. This week, a new book reports same sex couples show they are quite similar to heterosexual couples in terms of age, income level, and impact on children. And a new survey finds close to a third of same sex couple who identify as spouses are raising kids, that compared with 43 percent of heterosexual couples. The book reports children of gay couples don’t differ from children raised by heterosexual couples in terms of mental health, self esteem, life satisfaction, social skills, or number of friends. While gay marriage is legal in only five states, the number of same sex couples becoming parents is rising.

MS. ELLEN KAHN: (From tape.) The Cleaver family was really sort of the norm, represented kind of the normal family of that generation. I think that same sex couples are still really considered quite nontraditional, quite unusual, but again I think slowly we’re seeing that we’re becoming – we’re 8, 10, 12 percent of the population, so our families and our children will never be in the majority. But I think, again, we’ll be recognized as part of a community and not that unusual to have families like ours.

MS. ERBE: Meanwhile, gay marriage advocates suffered a major political loss this week as Maine became the 31st state to block gay marriage by popular vote. Some advocates blame the loss on two things – President Obama’s lack of engagement on this issue and conservative scare TV ads. But gay marriage opponents celebrated the vote. They hope it deters other state from approving same sex marriage.

So Dr. Avis Jones-DeWeever, Maine was a loss for gay rights advocates, but this report mainstream gay married couples with children, are we making progress or not in terms of accepting gays as normal mainstream members of society?

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: Well, one would hope that over time we are making progress further than we have several years ago. But I think the best thing that we can garner from what happened in Maine is that issues of expanding rights really are things that historically and contempararily unfortunately are things that never usually win popularity contests.

MS. CZARNECKI: I think this just means the majority of Americans still believe in the traditional view of marriage.
MS. BENNETT: Well, at the same time, though, the average American is more and more in support of gay couples and gay rights. I tend to think that what happens is the scare tactics on the right tend to be off-putting and they’re very effective when they’re not countermanded by something on the left quite frankly.

MS. DOMINGUEZ: I just find that whenever it comes to family values or social values, it generates a lot of activism on both ends. And I think what we’re seeing right now is just the bases on both sides are being really energized around these issues.

MS. ERBE: All right. You said that there’s no counter backlash, if you will, from the left supporting gay marriage and gay rights against the predominantly religious driven anti-gay movement. Are you sure there’s no – what about the human rights campaign? What about –

MS. BENNETT: I think they all do fantastic work, but I think – and now, quite frankly, I’m speaking as a former party leader from my district in Pennsylvania – very often, when people take an issue like this, there’re voices that use literally scare tactics that are completely incorrect, unfounded, untrue. And then when you’re in the right as we’re, it’s very difficult to come out with a countermanding defensive strategy.

MS. ERBE: Give me an example.

MS. BENNETT: Well, for example, on the gay rights thing they’re saying that these children are going to be taught that to become gay is okay in schools. That’s absolutely incorrect. Those are the tactics that were used in Maine. Well, how do you answer that, right? So I think that’s what we’re seeing is the scare tactics, the things that are undermining – quite frankly because the average American polls show is more in favor of gay rights and an expansion of their right to marriage.

MS. CZARNECKI: America is a traditionally – it’s a very religious – we’ve a very religious America and a lot of people who are church going still believe marriage is for the sole purpose of procreation. You’re going to get married. There’s an expectation you’re going to have children. And I think a lot of people hold –

MS. ERBE: Wait a minute – what about – why then – how do you explain the 20 percent of married couples now never have children?

MS. CZARNECKI: Sometimes you can and sometimes you can’t. The whole goal of marriage, if you’re looking at it from a religious point of view or cultural point of view is literally to have a family. Some people choose not to do that and that’s their decision. There’s nothing wrong with that. But I think a lot of people have this concept of marriage and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.

MS. ERBE: Okay, but gays are now having children and what strikes me as interesting about the new book and the new survey that came out that shows, here we have straight couples, having children out of wedlock more and more and more – 70
percent in the African-American community, 30 plus percent in the white community. We’re talking about more – almost beyond 30 percent of all children now in this country born out of wedlock. And yet the community that wants to get married and have children is mainly lesbian and gay couples. So why aren’t religious conservatives trying to build their pews, build their churches, build their party constituency, and supporting this.

MS. CZARNECKI: I don’t know. I can’t answer that, but I can tell you what the book coming out and the research showing that the kids being raised by gay couples versus traditional families, they – the research – I was surprised by some of the findings there. They’re like any other normal kid. I think this research and probably more that we’ll be doing in the future will make it more accepting for gay couples to adopt children. I know roughly it’s a – 30 percent roughly of gay couples who have children. I think the skepticism that may be in a lot of our social service agencies when consider this may be – make people get over that hurdle.

MS. ERBE: And at least in the case of lesbian couples, a lot of them are not adopting them. Look at the daughter of former Vice President Cheney having her second child. Is that going to help Christian conservatives and conservative Republicans accept – is she herself doing anything to get the party moving forward as opposed to trying to go back to the ’50s on gay rights?

MS. CZARNECKI: I don’t think she’s leading the party in a lot of respects and trying to say, this is how it should be. This is my life. She’s doing it –

MS. ERBE: How about just leading by example, though?

MS. CZARNECKI: I think she is and I think people respect her for that. And I think that there is probably more tolerance than there was five or 10 years ago. And there’s going to be even more in the future. And I think there’s more of an acceptance of it.

MS. DOMINGUEZ: I think so too, but I think it’s still a fringe issue. When you think about same sex couples, compared to heterosexual couples, they only make up about 1.16 percent of all couples. And I think there’s still a lot, obviously a lot of fear of the unknown, and a lot of anxiety around what kind of exposure are my kids going to have, especially when you come from a relationship of traditional values. So I too think that even thought it’s given a lot of press, a lot of attention to it, they’re still in the communities – Nebraska, some of these other places – you just don’t have that kind of exposure. So you don’t know what’s going on. And I think that’s generating a lot of fear and anxiety.

MS. BENNETT: But again, the average American supports this. And I really think –

MS. ERBE: I’ve also seen data saying that the majority of Americans don’t support gay marriage.
MS. BENNETT: – they support gay rights and the expansion of gay rights in general, but not specific marriage. But I think this is a perfect example, quite frankly, of scare tactics being used to upend something that the general will of the country is probably in general support of. And isn’t it an irony that there is Dick Cheney’s wife – daughter, excuse me, right – openly gay and having children. Here we are. So what’s going on?

MS. CZARNECKI: But you can’t dismiss the fact that 31 states by a popular vote have said they do not want to support gay marriage.

MS. BENNETT: But this is not an – when you talk about popular vote, you’re talking about grassroots, hard fought efforts in those states where you’ve got scare tactics being used by one side and I think not an adequate response to those scare tactics.

MS. ERBE: But what –

MS. BENNETT: I don’t have any answers. I do not have any answers.

MS. ERBE: – you can’t raise questions unless you have answers to them. (Laughter.) Do you have an answer?

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: Well, I just think – this issue, I think it’s very important with regards to popular vote. If there was left up to the popular vote, none of us at this table would probably be voting today. You really need to think about the history of rights expansions in this country and none of them have come by popular vote. The bottom line here is that before we go preaching to other people about marriages, I think the heterosexuals need to do a little bit something in terms of negating their 50 percent divorce rate.

MS. DOMINGUEZ: But we still haven’t even finished passing a law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. I think the whole country is in favor of that. So let’s start with the basics first. Let’s get rid of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Let’s make that a law. And then – then perhaps some of the things will follow.

MS. ERBE: All right. From gay marriage to divorce. All is fair in love and divorce? Not so according to a growing number of opponents of alimony calling for changes in divorce laws. To them, alimony is an outdated and unfair practice that ignores the fact women now make up close to half the U.S. workforce. Several states are considering revamped alimony laws that place time limits on payments or in some cases end payments altogether if an ex-spouse lives with a new partner. Experts say the recession and the pending retirement of baby boomers may be driving state lawmakers to reconsider alimony.
The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers surveyed its members earlier this year. Forty two percent of attorneys reported a spike in the number of cases in which clients wanted to amend alimony agreements. Backers of current laws call alimony vital to low and middle income women, many of whom sacrificed careers for marriage and family.

So why this spike in the number of payers of alimony wanting to amend their agreements?

MS. CZARNECKI: It’s because of the economy. I happen to know a fellow who had been paying alimony for a number of years and he – he has been out of work for the past year. He simply can’t afford it. His wife refused to go back to work, even – they’ve got small children, but it’s a tough situation economically. And that’s why you’ve seen such a dramatic increase in people wanting to pay less.

MS. ERBE: Is alimony outdated?

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: I don’t think so. I think they will be outdated once women are no longer paid less than men for doing the same work. Obviously, it was put in place for a reason – to make sure that people have some means of support because oftentimes people would delay their own economic advance in order to support someone else’s career. It’s only fair.

MS. DOMINGUEZ: And I think a lot of the women, after 20 years from divorce, are still suffering the effects of past discriminatory practices, when they weren’t allowed to enter, even with degrees and that kind of thing, they weren’t allowed to enter at the workplace. So I think we still have seen the lagging effects of that type of thing. But I agree with Karen. I think it’s an economic issue. And in fact, I have a couple of family members that are going through a divorce and the women end up having to do the opposite and pay alimony. So I think it’s becoming more balanced.

MS. ERBE: And let me ask you that. More and more women are paying alimony these days. I don’t know the percentages, but it was unheard of two – how many?

MS. DOMINGUEZ: Three percent.

MS. ERBE: Three percent, okay. So why then do men, who are the primary movers in amending the alimony agreements to try to cut the payments, et cetera, if women are starting to pay more alimony, why not just keep alimony but make it based on who makes more money?

MS. DOMINGUEZ: Right, I think that’s going to be the trend, at least – at least in court cases that we’re seeing, we’re beginning to see women contribute more towards – in fact, 3 percent of the women make up the CEO levels in corporate America and a lot of their husbands don’t work. They stay home with their kids and that kind of thing. If
anything were to go awry, I would bet that those women are going to end up paying alimony.

MS. CZARNECKI: The interesting thing here though – alimony is outdated in many respects, but it depends who you are. If you’re a woman who’s been married 30 or 40 years, you’ve given up everything – your career, your life. You’ve raised the children. I think you’re entitled to lifetime payments. My concern is the fact that a lot of these new proposals, legislatures, they want to cut off alimony retirement as if people don’t need payments when you turn 63 or 65 or the retirement age.

MS. ERBE: But let me ask you this and this is kind of a too long a question for a short discussion. But giving up their lives, how many women would say that they gave up everything to have children as opposed to it was a choice and it was what they wanted to do with their lives.

MS. CZARNECKI: It is a choice, but when you make decisions based upon husband and a wife, who’s going to pay the bills? Who’s going to take care of the children? We’re not going to hire babysitters if I’m going to stay home. There’re a lot of decisions. If anybody has been out of the workforce for 10 years, tries to go back in, and doesn’t know how to use email or the internet, doesn’t know how to use PowerPoint – you’re taking yourself out of the workforce for a number of years, it’s very hard for you to catch up and you’re going to start at a much lower paying job. It’s not going to put you in the position that you were in when you were married. So there are many, many considerations. And if, for example, you’ve spent 30 years taking care of children and a household and elderly parents and everything, there’s no – what’s reasonable? The courts are not going to consider whether seven years is enough to get back on your feet. I don’t think so.

MS. BENNETT: Yes, you just can’t make that. And we must be honest. We all know women and I have a friend, Larry (sp), that’s happened to, right? She’s married 30 years, very successful husband, beautiful home. He kicks it at the curb, goes for the younger wife. The best job she can get at 45 years old was working in a camera store at Christmas time and that’s what she’s going to support herself on? And he’s sitting on all the retirement. I think really what’s at issue here –

MS. ERBE: But maybe wasn’t a problem earlier in that marriage then in that there should have been an equitable distribution of – don’t you have to have a prenup or at least discussing – put the retirement in two names?

MS. BENNETT: But the reality is we have these situations. And unless we have proper alimony, then guess who ends up holding the freight? It’s the government. So I think what we have to do is you have to have an appropriate disbursement based on the income, irrespective of sex quite frankly. I think that’s really critical because otherwise the government is the one that ends up holding the bag and the husband or the wife in some cases gets off scot free.
MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: I totally agree. Ultimately it means whatever choice that you made in terms of your family decisions to raise your children, you made it because that’s what you thought was the best thing to do. When circumstances change beyond your control, then I think you deserve to be compensated if you made significant sacrifice to give your children what you did and that was your full attention.

MS. CZARNECKI: Wouldn’t we probably need better legal advice, though, because oftentimes in a bad marriage the woman will say, “I don’t want anything. He can have his pension. He can have his retirement.” And the thing is later on when you’re 60 and he’s got a good retirement, you have nothing.

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: Right.

MS. CZARNECKI: Can you go back 20 years later and say, “Oh, by the way, I had a bad lawyer and didn’t negotiate that.” You have to have better financial discussions at the time of divorce.

MS. BENNETT: And – go first.

MS. DOMINGUEZ: No, I was just going to say. Let’s not forget that 20, 25 years ago, a woman was equally as invested in her husband’s career. So they expected to go to all this social function, to do all the entertaining, do all these things. That’s part of their investment as a family. So that’s key.

MS. BENNETT: Well, if we look at this as a governmental investment, let’s look at the statistics. Women still earn $0.75 on every dollar that a man does and classically do not have pensions, do not have provisions for their retirement and are far away less than men. So I think alimony is a structure that needs to stay, but we need to make it sensitive.

MS. ERBE: Gender neutral?

MS. BENNETT: Gender neutral.

MS. ERBE: All right. Thank you. And you’re welcome for those two words. (Laughter.) Behind the headlines, health care for female veterans. The Veterans Administration reports a 12-percent rise in the number of female patients since 2006 as more and more women join the services. This Veterans Day, we examine a new report finding women often have difficulty accessing proper health care services in a system that has traditionally catered to men.

(Begin video segment.)

MS. CAROLYN SCHAPPER: I walked out of my office building one day and there was a fence. And there was a woman standing by it who had a scarf on. And immediately my mind thought, “oh, it’s a detainment camp and there is an Iraqi woman
in a detainment camp.” And I was like – only took a half a second. It’s all it is. And you go, “wait a second. I’m not Iraq. That’s not a detainment camp. It’s just a woman with a scarf.” So things like that, things you can’t control.

MS. ERBE: Carolyn Schapper served as a human intelligence collector and interrogator in Iraq for a year. She’s one of 300,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Among women vets, PTSD, hypertension, and depression are the top mental health diagnoses. But since women can’t technically serve in combat, Schapper says women often find it hard to prove and get coverage for mental health issues.

MS. SCHAPPER: But most women, if they stay on base or they didn’t write up their own reports or their commanders simply didn’t give it to them have no way to prove that they were in combat. And the VA has to look at that. They have to determine is this woman telling the truth and does she deserve health care. Well, my opinion is that if a woman is willing to go into the VA, which is not easy, because there’re so many hurdles to get over, and is willing to open herself up like that; most likely she needs some sort of help.

MS. ERBE: For some women, PTSD can be triggered after sexual trauma. Nearly one third of women soldiers report experiencing sexual harassment or other military sexual trauma while serving. This can make it all the more difficult to seek treatment in a majority male environment. Schapper describes going to the VA for care as both overwhelming and intimidating.

MS. SCHAPPER: Generally, just to be less visible I will try to dress down. I’ll try to cover up that I’m a woman. And just so I can get through there with the least amount of comments. A lot of women if they have experienced military sexual trauma are hesitant to go at treatment. One, because the hospitals are generally overwhelmed with the veteran males and they don’t feel comfortable in those environments and they don’t know who their provider will be. It’s very possible their provider will be a male, which is also another reason for discomfort.

MS. ERBE: A federal study found none of the VA facilities it visited fully complies with the privacy standards for women. Only 14 percent of VA facilities provide women’s health gender specific care. Schapper hopes the new report by the advocacy organization Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America will shed light on what she calls the injustices women vets face after returning home.

MS. SCHAPPER: For so long our issues were pushed aside because we’re only 15 percent of the military force. So it makes sense to take care of the whole, take care of the greater numbers. But they were letting us slide. And so this report brings out that all to issue and I think it’s wonderful timing because some – we’ve just got the advanced appropriations for the VA health centers. And hopefully the VA will be able to plan better and provide better services for the women.
(End video segment.)

MS. ERBE: So Sam Bennett, what’s the answer here? Is it to allow women into combat, which they’re already in? They just – they don’t give them combat pay. They give them equivalent pay named something else. But just to allow them formally into combat so they won’t have these issues of not being able to qualify for mental help?

MS. BENNETT: Well, they’re already in combat because we’re so strapped. We’re grabbing them and throwing them in anyway. So we need to recognize that. And absolutely VA needs to deal with this. I’m the daughter of Marine officer. I was ROTC in college and I’ve been working for a decade with young women ROTC cadets in my hometown. And women bring something important and valuable to the military and they absolutely deserve this health care.

MS. ERBE: So then why is the VA, at least according to the woman we interviewed, making it so tough for them to get help with PTSD?

MS. BENNETT: Why does that surprise us? Let’s look at the culture in general. And she talked about social trauma, all right? Well, some reports show that one in every three American women have had some sort of sexual abuse or a sexual assault in their lives. Having been at the receiving end of sexual abuse growing up and rape as a young adult, I can stand to those statistics. So I think we have to take this seriously. And quite frankly the military has a very powerful role to play, as they did in critical issues like desegregation, where they can be out in front of the culture and say this is important. We’re going to take this seriously and we’re going to take sexual abuse seriously. And make a cultural change happen within –

MS. ERBE: But haven’t they done that to a certain extent? Ever since Tailhook – that woke up the Navy, right, but the other services have really been making massive efforts in the last 10 years to try to overcome sexual bias or gender bias.

MS. CZARNECKI: They have been trying to do that, but the things – I think a lot more could have been done in the last 10 years. The PTSD and a lot of that, they funded a lot of research in the past three to four years alone. And I think – only just finding out a lot about these issues. But with regard to women, the latest statistics I looked at weren’t 15 percent. Women are 20 percent of the armed services. And women and men have different responses to PTSD. They need different medical – medical care needs. And if the military has not been establishing women’s centers in some of its major hospitals, there’s a problem with that. And I think some of the people in the Armed Services Committee, a lot of the oversight committees in Congress should be looking into this. They should be doing more because there is a growing number of women every single year who join our forces and who are deployed.

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: And it’s really irresponsible to sit there and have this apparent decision to say that we’re just going to focus our efforts to men because they make up roughly 80 percent, 85 percent of our enrollees. The bottom line is that women
have different concerns. They have different needs and they’ve had different experiences. And issues need to be developed that specifically target their needs and it needs to be done immediately.

MS. DOMINGUEZ: One of my first – actually my first job right after college was as a veterans benefits counselor at the Veterans Administration. And I agree with you, Sam. I think that the culture is so focused on men that – and women are so concerned about – well, if I complain, am I going to stigmatize opportunities for other women? So I think there’s a combination of it, but we do have to have just a sea change in terms of the attitudes, in terms of the way that we go about it organizationally to balance the equation. But clearly everything was focused on women as support, 14 percent of the women and they’re afraid to come forward – unacceptable.

MS. ERBE: Are you seeing that see change starting to bubble up from your young recruits you’re dealing with?

MS. BENNETT: Well, why I love working with the ROTC cadets, the young women and men, is they handle all of these issues much better. But I think we have to look at the military as a male dominated institution that’s been around a heck of a long time. And really, again, I think the military should take this opportunity to reinvent themselves on this issue and then they can set the standard for everybody else. They’ve done that time and time again on other issues. Am I right, Doctor?

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: That’s true. They certainly did, certainly did. They were in the forefront of integration and they can do it here too.

MS. ERBE: All right. Then we end all on agreement on this topic. That’s it for this edition of To the Contrary. Next week, a former abortion addict recounts her journey to eventual motherhood. Please join us on the web for “To the Contrary Extra” and whether your views are in agreement or to the contrary, please join us next time.

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