



LIFE IN THE U.S.

CHILDREN

Maternal care in Mississippi

By Joseph Delaney

HOLLY SPRINGS, MS—Pearlie will have her baby this spring, but she is not sure where it will be born.

The 24-year-old unemployed cook will try to give birth in Memphis, Tenn., 45 miles away from her Marshall County, Miss. home. But to make sure she gets into Memphis' E.H. Crump hospital, she will have to begin labor before she gets there and enter through the emergency room.

E.H. Crump, like many Memphis hospitals, won't see Mississippi patients except in emergency cases—such as being in labor—because Mississippi doesn't

adequately reimburse Tennessee for Medicaid patients or those who can't afford insurance.

One family doctor here in Marshall County delivers babies part-time in his office. But he isn't an obstetrician and he doesn't have the facilities to offer obstetrical services to all the women in the county.

Marshall County's one hospital doesn't provide obstetrical services to local women. A former hospital employee says these services aren't provided even though the hospital has received funds from the Hill-Burton program to do so. Hill-Burton funds are provided to hospitals for a promise to provide free or un-

compensated health services to poor patients. So most expecting mothers here must travel to Memphis or other towns to have babies. Jo Lynn Burns of the State Department of Health estimates that at least 100 women in recent months have left Marshall County for maternal services in other areas. Most of these women are black.

Benton County, 14 miles east of Holly Springs, has one local doctor and no hospital. The doctor works limited hours, county residents say, and doesn't see black patients. So residents here don't receive maternal care or much other health assistance. Women who are expecting children must travel almost 50 miles to the nearest hospital in New Albany.

"It is awful that these women have to drive so far," says Pat Cook, a public health nurse in Benton County. "With gas so expensive, some of them don't get to see the doctors as much as they should."

Traveling long distances to give birth increases health risks for mother and child, says a representative with the Mississippi Coalition for Mothers and Babies, a volunteer, non-profit organization dedicated to improving maternal care in the state.

Statistics show that a large number of Mississippi women

have trouble in childbirth. In Marshall County, for instance, 1982 figures show that out of 545 babies born that year 301 (55 percent) were born to mothers considered "at risk." In Benton County, out of 129 babies born that year, 72 (56 percent) were born to mothers at risk.

Elsewhere in Mississippi the maternal problem may not be as serious as it is in Marshall and Benton counties, but conditions are bad nonetheless. For instance, figures released by the Coalition show that one in 50 babies born in Mississippi dies before its first birthday. These figures also show that 51 percent of Mississippi babies are born to mothers who are at risk or who can be predicted to have complications at birth; 29 percent are born to mothers who get no prenatal care during the first critical months of their pregnancies; 33 percent are born in poverty—the highest rate in the nation; 26 percent are born to teenage mothers—the highest rate in the nation; 25 percent are born to mothers who are not married; and 40 percent are born to mothers who have not completed high school.

Predictably, poverty is a major problem in Benton and Marshall counties. In largely white Benton County, 14.1 percent of the work force is unemployed and 92 percent of the unemployed have no health insurance. Almost a quarter of the residents have incomes below poverty level. The county's per capita income is \$5,475, far below the national average of \$10,495.

Sixteen percent of the work force in predominantly black Marshall County is unemployed. As in Benton County, 92 percent of the unemployed here are uninsured. In Marshall County, 31.9 percent of the citizens have incomes below poverty level. The per capita income is \$4,860.

But in both counties, the truly poor are predominantly black and female, according to a 1981 survey by North Mississippi Rural Legal Services. The major source of income in both counties, according to the latest census data, is public assistance.

Poor prenatal care can't help but contribute to higher infant mortality rates. A study issued this winter by the Washington, D.C.-based Food Research and Action Center found that, nationally, the black infant mortality rate is nearly twice that of whites, and that black babies are twice as likely to be born at low birth weights, a sign of poor prenatal care and nutrition. In Mississippi, the study found that the percentage of non-white women receiving inadequate prenatal care rose between 1980 and 1982, from 6.1 percent to 6.8 percent. For white women, the percentage decreased from 2.5 percent in 1980 to 2.4 percent in 1982.

So Pearlle concerns herself with the risk she and her baby will face when she goes to E.H. Crump Hospital later this spring in labor.

"What scares me is I may have to go all the way to Memphis and there is no telling what will happen on the way. It scares me. Sometimes I think it could be a life or death matter. A woman could die during childbirth." ■ Joseph Delaney is a freelance writer and editor in Oxford, Miss.

Infant mortality is rising.

Gender Gap: Bella Abzug's Guide to Political Power for American Women

By Bella Abzug with Mim Kelber Houghton Mifflin, 257 pp., \$6.95

Why and How Women Will Elect the Next President

By Eleanor Smeal Harper and Row, 184 pp., \$6.95

By Joan Walsh

What feminist can think of Election Night 1980 without flinching? I watched the results with a friend on a six-foot TV screen in a Nowhere, New Mexico bar, moving cross-country to California, surrounded by some pretty happy cowboys and feeling personally vulnerable, politically irrelevant.

The horror wasn't just Reagan's victory, it was the defeat of women's rights defenders George McGovern and Birch Bayh, the victory of Right-to-Life Republicans Alfonse D'Amato and James Abdnor and, maybe worst of all, the smugness of the suddenly ascendant New Right groups, flexing their muscles for the TV cameras and claiming credit for the conservative, anti-feminist tidal wave that appeared to have swept the nation. California, where Alan Cranston had beaten back Republican tax rebel Paul Gann, seemed a political sanctuary and I couldn't wait to get there.

But the same election that appeared to set American feminism—and every other promising social movement—back decades also held the seeds of its revitalization, though that didn't show up before the TV cameras. When all the votes were counted, American women had resisted the Reagan tide in significant numbers, supporting the Republican president by 8 percent less than men, splitting their votes almost evenly between Reagan and Carter. With the added news that six million more women had cast votes than men, the trend became significant. It got a name—the gender gap—and the women's movement got a chance to reverse the conservative trend.

These two books by feminist leaders Eleanor Smeal and Bella Abzug try to examine the causes of the gender gap and, most important, predict how it can be channeled into a movement to defeat Reagan in November. Both do a better job at strategy than analysis, mainly because women's new voting patterns are currently engendering a whole industry of theory and speculation and no one has any definitive answers yet. Whether political strategies can direct such an unwieldy trend will be one of the more closely examined questions of this political season.

Saying the books don't quite explain the gap is not to say they lack statistics. Both are useful handbooks on the current polling data, marshaling all the evidence that women disapprove of Reagan's performance as president, don't like his economic program, fear his military buildup, want social service cuts restored. They note the widely reported 1982 election results, pointing out women's role in electing the Democratic governors of Texas, New York and Michigan and their strong support for Democrats across the board.

Each follows the conventional

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wisdom and assigns the breadth of the gap to women's concern about Reagan's militarism and their skepticism about the success—and fairness—of his economic program (though both argue that women's rights issues widen the gap more than most analysts believe). And together they provide an encyclopedic list of the many ways current administration policies have hurt the interests of women, from its massive social service cuts to its Title IX apostasy to its arbitrary restrictions on the career advancement of military women. Scanning the debris, it's conceivable that some reactionary Reagan policy change has affected the life of every woman in the U.S.

While both books draw on the recent gender gap scholarship, neither is scholarly and both suffer and profit from that. Abzug and Smeal are charismatic and contentious leaders—Smeal is the former president of the National Organization for Women (NOW); Abzug is a three-term Democratic congresswoman and Senate candidate—and their books argue for their own politics. Smeal makes the case for non-ideological NOW-style feminism, Abzug for feminist liberalism.

Out on a limb.

Thus, Smeal's *Why and How* goes farthest out on a limb to link the gender gap with women's rights issues. The book's lead—and longest—chapter, "Women's Rights and the Gender Gap," challenges the analysts who find that ERA, abortion and economic equity issues have a negligible impact on women's voting. Smeal argues convincingly that women's experience of sex discrimination shapes the context of their political choices and accounts for the cross-class lines of the gap. It's also believable that the Reagan wing of the Republican Party's repudiation of its pro-ERA and reproductive freedom stands cost the party votes, given the majority support for both issues expressed in public opinion surveys.

Smeal is on less solid ground when she argues that despite almost equal support for women's rights among both sexes, the gender gap is demonstrably attributable to the fact that those issues guide women's votes more than men's. The role of women's issues in creating the conditions for the gap to emerge are undeniable, but it's not as quantifiable as Smeal and others would like it to be. Post-election studies that found women ERA supporters less likely to vote for Reagan than pro-ERA men have been contradicted by subsequent work, most notably that of Northwestern University professor Jane Mansbridge and CBS News Survey Director Kathleen Francovic.

The fine print on the cover calls the Smeal book "an election handbook"; inside she terms it "a call to action." It succeeds as both, often reading like the stirring fundraising letters she wrote as NOW president. Her electoral strategies, learned in NOW's am-

bitious, well-organized if ultimately unsuccessful ERA battle, will likely be instructive to women at all levels of political power, from the newly motivated volunteer to the seasoned officeholder.

But in its emphasis on the practical application of the gender gap, *Why and How* spends little time on its deeper causes and its broader implications. Smeal says little about the touchy possibility that women may have an innate aversion to Reagan's unjust domestic agenda and bellicose foreign policy. Many feminists have found a useful perspective on the gap in Carol Gilligan's influential *In a Different Voice*, which Smeal doesn't mention. Although not about the gender gap, Gilligan's work outlines a psychology of women, grounded in "an ethic of care," that would make them implacably resistant to the abstract and compassionless theories that shape the present administration's policies. I'd have liked to see Smeal address Gilligan directly.

And while she rightly resists the accusation that the women's movement is "an adjunct of the Democratic Party," as Reagan spokesperson Faith Ryan Whittlesley recently put it, she not-so-rightly refuses to examine the notion that women's stand on foreign policy, social spending and civil rights are making them a more natural left constituency. One sentence, "Feminists have been uncomfortable with the left, which is dominated by males who also ignore women's concerns and downgrade women's issues and status," suffices for analysis. It ignores the question of how an independent women's vote could realign the country's misshapen politics, as well as transform the power structure (if one exists) within the left.

Abzug, of course, is not at all timid about tying feminism and the gender gap to a larger political movement. The gap validates her lifelong liberalism, and the strength of her book is placing the women's movement in the context of broader efforts for social change—by labor and min-



Ken Friesione

What is this thing called gender gap?

orities—and the Reagan reaction to it.

From her days as a founder of Women Strike for Peace in the early '60s, Abzug has talked about the emergence of a women's vote—an anti-militarist, pro-social program bloc that would humanize politics. She finds support for her faith at every stage in the development of contemporary feminism, from the social welfare, anti-war stands the Democrats took in 1920 to attract new women voters, to the party's most forward-looking planks in its 1980 platform. And, against the media image of a

white, upper-middle-class, careerist movement, she argues for American feminism's inclusiveness—stressing the racial diversity at the landmark 1977 Houston conference, for instance, and pointing out often the organized women's movement efforts on behalf of poor and minority women.

Her insider's perspective on Democratic women's efforts to open up the party is revealing. The work done by groups like the National Women's Political Caucus (which she helped found) and others to win equal convention representation—and to run feminist delegates to fight for women's rights planks—put party women in a position to channel the gender gap this year. She also helps date the women's movement's political outrage—and resultant electoral fervor—to before the Reagan administration, recounting Democratic women's betrayal by Jimmy Carter, who promised them more than any president and may have delivered less. Interestingly, she attributes the debacle of Carter's Women's Advisory Committee—and her controversial firing as its head—to the committee's persistent criticism of the Carter administration's increasing conservatism—its social spending cuts and military buildup.

Like the Smeal book, Abzug's *Gender Gap*, written with her former congressional aide, Mim Kelber, argues that the long-term implication of the women's vote must be to elect more women to office. That will both advance a women's rights agenda, she believes, and a more equitable social order, since her personal experience as well as recent studies convince her that women politi-

cians of whatever party are more liberal and compassionate than their male counterparts. A chapter on women politicians, "Ms. Supercandidate," is a useful outline of her observations and opinions on successful women's electoral strategies.

But in the short term, the gender gap must defeat Ronald Reagan. To that end she recommends extensive voter registration and education, the current project of her organization, Women USA, and many other women's groups. Detailing the strategies used in a Women USA pilot project in the '82 elections, she recommends community-focused organizing on local women's issues in a combined campaign of polling, voter registration, education and turnout efforts. In California target areas, Women USA focused on women's economic problems. In Iowa, it identified strong concern about nuclear issues; in Kansas City, day care and battered women shelters. A post-election study concluded that "a mobilization effort organized around jobs and women's equality would find a receptive and responsive audience among all types of American women," and Abzug predicts that just such an effort mounted by women's groups can provide a "gender gap coalition" to defeat Reagan.

Together the two books amount to a fairly complete survey of 1984 feminist political strategy, its scope as well as its limits. Its limits are mostly due to everyone's inability to say much definitive about why women are voting differently right now. Unable to assess the weight of the many undeniably important factors that are causing the gender gap, it's difficult for women's groups to know where to concentrate in order to widen it—or for the Republicans to know how to close it.

Will the improved economy make upper- and middle-class Republican women—who now rate Reagan's performance 20 percent lower than similar men—return to their former affiliation based on economic interest? If so, a strategy that concentrates on registering and turning out poor and minority women—along with the rest of the rainbow coalition—is essential to maintain the gap. Or do disaffected Republican women represent the foundation of a new political alignment—after all, poor and minority women could be expected to dislike Reagan—and are they the group the women strategists should reach out to? Right now major women's organizations are doing both—they can't afford not to.

The success or failure of the various strategies Smeal and Abzug outline will probably reveal a lot about what's really going on in the mysterious voting chasm. If the strategies that proceed from their respective analyses, experience, research and intuition work in November, it will show that feminist leaders can articulate what women care about, why they vote and how these concerns of the national majority will shape American politics. If they don't, Election Night 1984 could rival 1980. Except that, with George Deukmejian and Pete Wilson, even California doesn't look so inviting. ■



Anne Ghory-Goodman

Right: Bella Abzug;
Above: Eleanor Smeal