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Standing Up for 'Singles' Rights'

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Nancy Matthews was incensed. Although her San Fernando Valley health club offered a substantial discount for married couples, it would offer no such savings to her and the man she lives with.

Instead, she and her boyfriend must each pay \$60 a month for an individual membership at the Mid Valley Athletic Club in Reseda, while married couples pay a combined fee of only \$80.

The club says its policy is designed to minimize administrative hassles: Granting joint status to unmarried couples would mean a paperwork nightmare if the pair broke up, it contends. But to Matthews, that argument is just an excuse for blatant discrimination.

"If I buy jewelry or food or go to the dentist, no one asks me if I'm married and charges me accordingly, so why should my health club?" said Matthews, an advertising executive from Woodland Hills. "I don't use any more club services than half of a married couple, but I pay more than half of what a married couple does."

Matthews is one of a growing number of Americans who feel that they have been discriminated against on the basis of their marital status in virtually all aspects of everyday life. They include single adults, as well as unmarried straight and gay couples.

These emerging "singles' rights" advocates, as they call themselves, say that in an age of vastly changing demographics and lifestyles, society must find ways to address the needs and rights of those living alone or in so-called nontraditional households.

The debate underscores an emotional and contentious re-evaluation of a primary element of American society: the basic concept of family.

Those who oppose the "singles' rights" concept argue that the movement would overturn centuries of convention in which marriage has been regarded as a fundamental institution.

Conservative groups denounce the campaign on religious and moral grounds. And others say that extending spousal benefits would be an expensive, bureaucratic mess. Businesses, for example, note that it would be extremely difficult to protect themselves against fraud by unmarried people who claim to be dating or living together.

"Twenty years ago, if you had a conference on the family, everybody would know you were talking about Mom, Dad, Dick, Jane and Spot," said Martha Farnsworth Riche, national editor at American Demographics magazine. "But now, people are so polarized by the changes that if you had a conference on the family today you might have to bring out the National Guard."

In San Francisco, the issue has taken the form of a November ballot measure that would make it the second city in the country, after West Hollywood, to allow all unmarried straight and gay couples to officially register their relationships as "domestic partnerships." Some other cities have extended certain benefits to the unmarried partners of municipal employees.

Pervasive Prejudice

But singles' rights advocates say the effort extends well beyond domestic partnerships. Last spring, a task force convened by the Los Angeles city attorney's office documented what it called "widespread" discrimination against singles and unmarried couples in such diverse areas as housing, credit, insurance, membership groups and medical services.

"The movement is much more broad-based than the domestic partnership effort in terms of constituencies and issues," said Thomas Frank Coleman, a Los Angeles attorney who chaired the task force and heads the Family Diversity Project, which disseminates information about nontraditional families.

"Unmarried and single people are fed up with being denied services and paying higher prices," Coleman added. "It's a pervasive national problem."

High Rates of Divorce

Demographic trends are spurring the debate over singles' rights. According to U.S. Census

The debate underscores re-evaluation of the concept of family

figures from 1988, 45 percent of Californians of marrying age are divorced or have never been married. And the percentage of unmarried people is even higher in major metropolitan areas like San Francisco and Los Angeles.

"Certainly, the whole marital status issue has blossomed in the past few years and seems to be picking up steam," said Steven Owyang, chief staff attorney in the San Francisco headquarters of the California Fair Employment and Housing Commission, which adjudicates discrimination complaints.

Advocates for singles and unmarried couples say that such individuals fall within a gray area of the law. Although many states have statutes forbidding discrimination based on marital status, there are gaps. Even in California, which has such laws, only those related to a deceased person by marriage or blood can seek damages for wrongful death.

Sanctions Against Cohabitation

Many say some laws already on the books are simply overlooked or ignored by overburdened law enforcement agencies. And many states still have statutes outlawing "fornication" or "cohabitation" by unmarried couples, although these laws are rarely enforced.

Standing Up for the Unmarried

'Singles' rights' advocates complain of discrimination

A few years ago, Debbie Deem could not even get an interview when she applied for a job as a juvenile probation officer in Phoenix, despite strong recommendations and stellar qualifications. The reason: In violation of Arizona law, she was not married to the man with whom she had been living.

"It felt like a kick in the stomach," said Deem, who has since moved to the South Bay and works in a nonprofit agency. "I could have lied, or I could have been going out to bars all night, and that would have been all right."

Not surprisingly, some conservative groups, citing moral and religious reasons, are fiercely battling attempts to extend benefits to unmarried people.

Chico Landlady's Battle

In a case that could have wide-ranging effect on how courts interpret statutes forbidding discrimination based on marital status, Concerned Women for America, a lobbying group based in Washington, is defending a Chico woman who refused on religious grounds to rent her apartment to an unmarried straight couple.

After the couple filed a complaint with the state, the Fair Housing and Employment Commission ordered the landlady to pay them hundreds of dollars in damages. The landlady has appealed the decision, saying that forcing her to rent to unmarried couples would violate her constitutional right to freedom of religion.

"The two-parent family is the basis of a stable society, and you end up with social disintegration if the government starts encouraging and protecting different kinds of groupings as the moral equivalent of a married couple," said Jordan Lorence, an attorney with Concerned Women for America who is representing the landlady.

New Standards

But advocates for such protection argue that opponents are ignoring the changing demands of society. "The practical reality is that in order for governments to continue to function effectively, they have to recognize the way people actually live," said Sky Johnson, director of community affairs for the Los Angeles city attorney's office.

In some cases, just pointing out a problem is enough to resolve it. In a letter sent to the Los Angeles task force last year, Wells Fargo apologized for using the term "spouse" in a promotional offer extending a special dining club membership to credit-card holders and their partners.

"We misused the word 'spouse' in our letter; to have been more accurate the offer should have been made to 'the joint account customer,'" wrote Eric Kahn, a Wells Fargo vice president, who thanked the task force for pointing out the matter.

Gay Pressure

The issue is of paramount importance to gay couples because they cannot get married legally even if they want to. Last year, Duane Rinde, a sales clerk at Woodward & Lothrop's department store in Washington, applied for a "spousal discount card" for Rob, his lover of two years.

When the store refused Rinde's request, gay and lesbian community leaders met with management and threatened to call a boycott unless the store changed its policies. The company then agreed to give cards to domestic partners of its employees and added sexual orientation to its list of protected employment categories.

"Rob and I are at this time not allowed to be married," Rinde said. "But we are in a long-term relationship that's equivalent to a marriage, and we should be entitled to the privileges."



Debbie Deem was refused a job in Arizona because she was not married to the man she lived with

BY DEANNE FITZMAURICE/THE CHRONICLE