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A Portrait of Family Caregivers



In a recent survey, *The Washington Post* asked white women and black women about their outlook and priorities when it comes to issues such as money, religion, and marriage. And in many cases, they found very big differences. But when it came to one issue, there was no disagreement at all. You guessed it: Caregiving.

Nearly two-thirds of both African-American and white women worried about family members suffering from chronic disease, according to the survey. And half worried about being responsible for an aging family.

Survey, which was focused on black women, did not look at Hispanics at all. But in 2008, the National Alliance for Caregiving did survey Hispanics. And while the details were different, the story was pretty much the same. About a third of Hispanic households had at least one caregiver and three-quarters are women. That suggests the overall percentage of family caregivers is a bit lower

than the population at large while the percentage of women is somewhat higher. But their experiences would be familiar to the white and black women interviewed by *The Post*.

If you are a woman—no matter your race, educational level, or income—caregiving responsibilities are never far from your mind. It may be a reflection of how the country has changed—and how it has not— that black women now worry as much about being victims of discrimination as they do about caring for aging relatives.

Yet, while the U.S. has made great strides since the 1960s to end racial discrimination, and since the 1970s to reduce gender discrimination, it has done surprisingly little in recent decades to help alleviate the burden on caregivers. If anything, in some respects the nation seems to be backsliding.

For instance, the House of Representatives is likely to vote later today to repeal the CLASS Act which, for all its flaws, had the potential to help support the care needs of the frail elderly and other adults with disabilities. While CLASS will remain alive until the Senate follows suit, its future is limited at best. And few in Washington are exploring alternatives.

Working women pay a financial, emotional, and physical price for caregiving. They suffer high rates of depression and illness. When they take on a greater share of the caregiving burden, they often must cut back on their own working hours and sometimes even quit their jobs. That not only reduces their current household income but also means they'll have less from Social Security, pensions, and other retirement income when they age. And that, in turn, will place a greater burden on their daughters.

That's bad news, no matter what your race. The challenge for society is to find ways to relieve their burdens in an era of fiscal constraints.