What will ERA mean? Opinions differ

By KAREN LEE
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While the effects of the Equal Rights Amendment’s ratification have been much studied and debated, a clear-cut, definitive consensus on the effects has not been reached by debaters on either side of the issue.

“THIS AMENDMENT has confused more people than any other issue,” Mabel Stoudemayer, ERA South Carolina chairman, said. Stoudemayer spoke in favor of South Carolina’s passage of the amendment in a March 24 public hearing at the state house.

“We don’t know exactly what the ERA will mean,” said Sen. L. Marion Gressette, chairman of the State Judiciary Committee, where the senate bill for ERA ratification is now being studied.

“It’s an unknown situation. Nobody knows the ultimate effects,” Larry Weidman, news director of a Columbia radio station, said. Weidman has spoken at public meetings against ERA.

One reason for the confusion is the lack of education, said Melissa Burnette, president of Columbia National Organization for Women and a third-year USC law student.

“The homemakers and rural people are often uneducated about the effects ERA will have. Education is the key,” Burnette said.

ERA opponents have cited as one reason for their stand, that women would become subject to draft.

In a letter to Gressette, Clarence Edens, a doctor from Easley, S.C., states, “I don’t want my granddaughters to go before the draft board.”

“It will take away the right of women to be drafted into the armed services,” states a publication of a national organization, Christian Women’s Viewpoint.

But, Burnette said, Congress has always had the power to draft women. At the end of World War II, Congress was one month away from drafting women when the war ended. ERA does not say 50 per cent shall be men and 50 per cent shall be women. It says to merely apply the same admissions tests to everyone with no quotas. Anyway, only five per cent of those eligible are drafted, and only one per cent of them ever serve on the front line.”

BURNETTE SAID mental and physical stress tests are now applied to all men before they serve. With ERA passage, these tests would be applied equally to men and women, and “only the most strong and qualified would see action,” she said.

The defense secretary sets mental and physical fitness standards, which all inductees must meet. Currently there is a waiting list of more than 100,000 women who want to join the military but are unable to do so because military services have a quota of 10 per cent women. “There will be no quotas at all” if the ERA is ratified, Burnette said.

ERA ratification will also affect the family, Weidman said. “It is the position of the man to provide financial support for the family.” He said this position would change, and this would weaken the family.

However, according to a publication of ERA South Carolina, a group supporting ERA ratification in the state, “the ERA should not weaken the husband’s obligation to financially support the family.”

“If the spouses have equal resources and earning capacity, each would be equally liable for the support of the other. On the other hand, where one spouse is the primary wage earner and the other runs the home, the wage earner would have a duty to support the spouse who stays at home in compensation for the performance of his or her duties,” states the senate judiciary committee’s report to the 92nd congress.

“This would provide dignity to the housewife and recognition for her work,” Burnette said.

Alimony payments after a divorce will come from the one with the most ability to pay to the one with the most need, Burnette said.

“Women are now in a favored position in the law. They will lose their support for alimony” if the ERA is ratified, Gressette said.

Child support payments will also be based on ability to pay, which will be “fair,” Burnette said. Another issue debated by proponents and opponents is the right to privacy issue.

“The ERA could destroy privacy. It could mean there would only be one restroom,” Gressette said.

Burnette interprets the proposed amendment to imply that “what you provide for one, you must provide for the other, but not necessarily in the same place. A women’s dorm bathroom facilities must be equal to men’s, but they don’t have to be together.”

IN HIS LETTER to Gressette, Edens stated he did not want his granddaughters “subjected to live with men like animals.”

In ERA South Carolina’s publication, it states “this fear of shared restrooms and sleeping areas is distorted and unreasonable.”

The current rape law in S.C. is applicable only to women.

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