

American women face credit woes

Millions of American women carry credit cards and dutifully pay their bills each month, but many are learning that their credit rating is zero.

The problem stems from an era not long ago when women were considered a peripheral part of the working force. Thus, when a woman applied for credit, many companies required her husband to co-sign the account because he often was the

chief wage earner. The account then was registered in the husband's name, though he may never have used it to buy anything. Wives were given credit cards bearing their own names, but all records of payment were recorded under their husband's name.

So when a divorced or widowed woman now tries to purchase a car, a home or to establish an account at the lo-

cal department store, she could be denied credit. With no records to indicate her bill-paying history, few companies are willing to accept such credit risks.

Although the discriminatory practice of requiring husbands to co-sign account applications was remedied when Congress passed the Equal Credit Opportunity Act in 1977, accounts established before then continue to register only the husband's credit history. It's easy to correct the problem, but many wives simply don't realize until too late that the problem even exists.

"Our main difficulty is trying to bring women out of the dark," said Sherry Hatley, a marketing representative with the Credit Bureau of Alaska, "and to enlighten them to the fact that they may be carrying a card with their name on it and paying the bills, but that they may not be getting credit for doing so."

Ms. Hatley recommends that married women find out the status of all their accounts and have them adjusted to provide a dual credit rating:

"It's just like preventive maintenance. I tell them to get something in their own name, regardless of how big or small the account, before they suddenly are forced into a situation with a lot of individual responsibility."