

The Affects of Poverty on Women

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If you were forced to choose between putting food on the table and buying your medication, which one would you choose? On a daily bases, many individuals struggle to answer this question in mean of what is needed and what is more important then the other. Poverty is an on going dilemma that most of our society ignores or are suffering from the burden to choose what is more important. Poverty contributes to welfare, homelessness, family dilemmas, education, effects on women, and income gap.

When you think of poverty most automatically think of a women of color with children, but the reality is that anyone can be considered in the poverty class whether you are a man, women, or a child regardless of your ethnicity or age. “There are more than 37 million people in America living in poverty and many more that don’t make enough money to cover basic expenses such as food and housing” (Cornell University, 2009, p. 5). The poverty line was created to determine the minimal standards of living for an individual; “the formulation of the poverty line was based on the smallest amount of money necessary to provide adequate nutrition for one family member, multiplied by three, since food was considered to be one-third of a family’s expenses” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 237). These standards included the “cost of child care, housing, health care, and transportation, in addition to food, now estimated to consume about 10 percent of a family’s budget (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 219). The poverty line was based on the minimal standards of living, but most individuals in today’s society live in a world of technology, in which the poverty line has yet adjusted to or consider as a basic essential to live.

It is outrageous to know that over “50 million people are almost poor, officially poor, or extremely poor” (Mink, 2010, p. 16). No matter who you are welfare is a degrading experience that individuals in poverty must endure to provide the basic essential for themselves and their family. There is a presumption that comes with the word *welfare* and others assume a certain

lifestyle of these individuals as being lazy or unmotivated (DeGenova, 2008). Welfare assists “very poor people, individuals who are pregnant, aged, disabled, or blind and families with depended children” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 242). “Nearly one in six people rely on some form of public assistance, a larger share than at any other time since the government started keeping track two decades ago” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 221). There are different departments of welfare which assist individuals with food, medical, and housing. Some of the popular programs available for food include Woman, Infant, and Children (W.I.C.). “One in nine American participates in what used to be called the Food Programs...and 45 percent of infants born in the U.S. are born to mothers who participate in the Women, Infant, and Children nutrition program” both in which provides women vouchers with an established list of items they are allowed to purchase at their local grocery store (Olson, 2009, p. 5). Though welfare programs are suppose to help you while in the poverty class, many families have utilized all their resources and “no longer eligible for the program” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 221). The welfare program is constantly on the chopping block because “corporate leaders influences legislators to cut back on fund for social welfare because as they are eager for funds to expand their corporations and are eager to dash the safety net in order to lower wages” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 236). The welfare reform law was recently revised in 2006, which created funding “dedicated to promoting married fatherhood: \$1.5 billion over five years (\$750 million each year) for pro-marriage, pro-father activities,” but did not do any revision that will benefit women (Mink, 2010, p. 20). When revised welfare programs became known as “Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) programs” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 242). The TANF program was a “bipartisan welfare reform plan requires work in exchange for time-limited assistance”

(DeGenova, 2008, p. 242). In the mid 1990s TANF was considered a successful program to end welfare because it transformed “single mothers into breadwinners by forcing them to take a low wage jobs in the labor market” (Mink, 2010, p. 20). It was not definitively successful since welfare is still a current issue today. These welfare issues affect the war on poverty and will be an on going gamble on what is best for the poverty individuals.

Housing is not a luxurious necessity, but a basic essential that all individuals are entitled to have in their life and “between 2.3 and 3.5 million people are homeless in a given year” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 231). Many assume that homeless individuals are in this dilemma based on their personal decisions and do not bother to understand the real cause of their homelessness. Homelessness is the result of “poverty, insufficient affordable housing and insufficient money to pay for housing, and a weak or nonexistent safety net of income maintenance and support services” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 233). All Americans are entitled to housing, but with limited affordable housing or shelters it makes it difficult to have this basic essential. Though we assume that many of these homeless individuals have health issues, many are “foster children who have ‘aged out’ of the foster care system” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 233). “According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, two trends are largely responsible for the rise in homelessness over the past 20 to 25 years: a growing shortage of affordable rental housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 240). The federal government has established Section 8 vouchers that provide affordable housing, but “urban renewal and gentrification forced people out of low-rent housing, and wages declined with deindustrialization and out sourcing” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 229). Deindustrialization is “shifts in the economy in which manufacturing work has declined and both high technology and service work have increased” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 235). Once

homelessness has been confronted, it will influence a domino affect on helping individuals in poverty acquire affordable housing.

From the 37 million people classified in the poverty class, most are families that find it difficult to provide the essentials for their loved ones. “Today, the poorest families are likely to be the largest ones, ones headed by women alone, or ones in which the father has little education” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 238). Two-parent families and single-parent families are in a financial pressure to provide more than the essential basics to accommodate the most recent trends or needs, but “single-parent families are much more likely than two-parent families to live in poverty” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 15). Parents struggle with the very few resources available and time to end the cycle of poverty for their children, but the cycle of poverty can be difficult to break and children “growing up in poverty experience a wide range of problems and challenges” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 238). One of the basic essentials parents provide for their family is food; “The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that 36.3 million Americans were food insecure in 2003, up from 31 million in 1999” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 226). Among the 36.4 million Americans with limited food, “more than 13 million were children” and “children from food insecure and hungry homes have an overall poorer health status” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 226). Some children blame themselves for their family’s issues and attempt to either find a job to help their parent(s) or leaving their home. Theses individuals have attempted to get out of poverty and end the cycle, but based on the opportunity theory they are unable to do so. The opportunity theory is when “people are prevented from getting out of poverty because of their lack of social opportunities rather than because of their individual defects” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 33). The financial burden on families to provide more than the basic essentials create many to separate and only emphasizes the poverty dilemma they are struggling to get out of.

A common trend in the poverty class is dropping out of school to get jobs, but shortly realize that education is the key to get out of poverty. Parents make several sacrifices to provide the essential to their children, but children often feel obligated to contribute to the household income to help support their family. “This pressure may contribute to some adolescents’ decision to drop out of school after they reach the legal age to do so, as low income families may need children to work to survive” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 239). At times education does not seem like an important trait to have in society, but “a good education is one of the best routes out of poverty” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 240). Higher education is not only essential for children to pursue, but is “even more vital for women because in order to reach the income levels of men with high school diplomas, women need post-secondary education” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 224).

In 2005, nearly “2.1 million women in poverty” which was 400,000 more compared to 2004 (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 223). The poverty class is mostly women who have struggled to define their place in society along with the gender roles they presumed to be responsible for while providing for their family. The feminization of poverty is the “trend toward increasing proportion of women, regardless of ethnicity or age, living in poverty” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 241). The on going struggles for women in poverty make it difficult to overcome since they have become androgynous to make their families survive. “Androgynous people are not gendered-typed with respect to roles, although they are distinctly male or female in sex. They match their behavior to the situation, rather than being limited by what is culturally defined as male or female” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 82). “Many families simply can’t make it financially without both parents working. Factors such as inflation, the high cost of living, and the desire for a higher standard of living pressure families to have two incomes” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 15). Women have a higher chance of being in poverty because they are often “forced

into poverty when the father defaults on child support payments” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 241). Women are assumed to be the caretakers of the family and household while men provide the income, but in today’s society women take on the income responsibility as well as the men. Single parents seek multiple jobs to compensate for the two-parent household income; “38 percent of female-headed households with related children under 18 years of age (no husband present) are living in poverty” (Mandell & Schram, 2008, p. 223). “Single mothers face not just financial poverty but poverty of time. All working mothers are under pressure to juggle child care with work, but single mothers must do it alone” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 224). One of the on going dilemmas single mothers face is affordable child care and including child care cost in their already low financial budget. These mothers tend to have less available working hours and “fewer hours of employment means less income” (Mink, 2010, p. 18). Women will constantly struggle with poverty, but the economy needs to be more female friendly to allow women to be on the same level as men. To make the workforce more female friendly, they need to provide universal subsidized child care, paid family leave, and liberal leave policies at work (Mink, 2010, p. 18). Since the society has been unable to accommodate the women’s equal standards as men, “women are almost twice as likely to live in poverty in their senior years as men (7 percent of men and 12 percent of women live in poverty)” (Mandell & Schram, 2009, p. 223).

One of the most influential contributors to poverty is the income gap between men and women. “Women’s higher poverty rates are the result of their lower lifetime earning, from both lower hourly wages and fewer hours worked” (Hartman, 2009, p. 43). Caucasian men earn a higher income compared to women: Caucasian “women earned about 73 cents; Asian/Pacific women earned about 70 cents; African American women earned 62 cents; American Indian and

Alaska Native women earned 57 cents; and Latinas earned only 51 cents” (Mink, 2010, p. 14).

This significant different in income contributes to majority of the poverty class being women and will only continue to widen; “with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer”

(DeGenova, 2008, p. 244). Gender roles influence the widening of the gap because of their femininity and masculinity characteristics leading to “different expectations of employment and pay for males and females, even among children” (DeGenova, 2008, p. 71). The government has attempted to address the income gap issue between men and women, but discrimination still occurs. The Congress developed the Title VII of the Civil Rights Acts “which forbids discrimination in employment-including sex discrimination...it has provided relatively weak mechanism for achieving income fairness for women workers” (Mink, 2010, p. 17). The government have also created the Equal Pay Act, “which avows that women and men shall receive the same wages for the same work” and protecting “women against wage discrimination only where their jobs are identical to men’s and only in single workplaces or establishments, at that” (Mink, 2010, p. 17). The economic struggles have made it difficult for both genders to get out of poverty by creating an unstable workforce. Though there are attempts to even the workforce for both sexes, there are still on going discrimination and bias as to what is actually happening to the differentiated pay scale based on gender and ethnicity.

Poverty is not an individual issue, but a societal issue. The society needs to not blame the individuals in poverty, but to change the system to help these individuals. If our economy continues to degrade individuals because of their social standing, these individuals will never have the opportunity to get out of poverty. If we were to resolve or reduce poverty issues, we could look forwards to a more friendly economy that allows us all to have the basic essentials without struggling through unforgiving federal systems (Mandell & Schram, 2009).

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