

Faces of Women's Poverty

Barbara Bonnekesen, Ph.D.

**Dept. of Sociology, Women's and Gender Studies, Anthropology
University of Missouri at Kansas City**

Introduction

- ☞ **Poverty affects all people in basically the same way, but ...**
- ☞ **Women are not a homogeneous group**
- ☞ **To provide useful services to various groups of women, we have to know about their backgrounds, needs, and the various constraints they face**

Overview

- ☞ **A brief overview of the major groups women belong to**
- ☞ **Issues affecting all women in poverty**
- ☞ **Possible characteristics of various client populations**
 - **“possible” because one label does not characterize each and every person in her totality**

Vocabulary

☞ **Poverty**

☞ **Diversity**

☞ **“Race” and Ethnicity**

Poverty

- ☞ **insufficient income and resources to**
 - **reach the poverty line**
 - ◆ **Exacerbated by presence of children and/or dependent elders**
 - ◆ **Depending on location, access to transportation, community services, social networks, education**
 - **afford all services and goods necessary to lead a healthy and safe life**
 - ◆ **Remember: only air is free - still**
 - ◆ **“Bread and Roses”**: mere physical survival is not enough
 - ◆ **Wellbeing dependent on age, physical ability, residence, psychological issues**

- be able to deal with financial emergency situations**
 - ◆ Most people are one paycheck away from poverty**
 - Medical emergencies, child care catastrophes, transportation breakdown, crime, etc.**
 - ◆ Little public knowledge of community services**
 - ◆ Even less public tolerance of use of such services which decreases their usefulness**

Diversity

- ☞ **Women are a heterogeneous population**
- ☞ **Are represented at all class levels and in all "races"/ethnicities, religions, etc.**
- ☞ **There is no portrait of "woman" that does justice to the many different needs and issues facing women**
- ☞ **Women belong to many different groups simultaneously and experience life differently in the many combinations of their identities**

“Race” and Ethnicity

- ☞ “Race”: the cultural (not biological) reality of peoples' differing life chances created by racism**
 - We tend to "see race" and activate certain sets of assumptions (prejudices) because of that assumption**
- ☞ Ethnicity: a cultural category that allows the bearer to access certain traditions**
- ☞ The line is frequently blurred because of the overlap of ethnic traditions and assumed "racial" features**

Women and Poverty

Workforce statistics

- **Caution: workforce statistics, especially those with marital & parent status, are usually often available for women only (there are no statistics showing how many fathers are in the work force)**

Multiple jobs

– Productive work a.k.a. making a living

- ◆ **There are more job categories listed as “male-traditional” than as “female-traditional”**
 - **Most job holders belong to one or the other sex**
 - **Does not refer to traditional division of labor, since most of these jobs were created in the 20th century**
 - **About 40% of the workforce would have to change jobs to even things out**
- ◆ **“Female-traditional” jobs are, on average, under-paid - or, “male-traditional” jobs tend to be over-paid**
- ◆ **Women need four more years of education to make similar salaries than men (globally) - women need to work more hours than men to make similar income - women are rarely acknowledged as “breadwinner” (men are rarely acknowledged as “working dads”)**

But there is more to do ...

- **Work of Social Reproduction**

- ◆ **Domestic work (including shopping and other errands), raising children, caring for sick and elderly**

- **Work of Integration**

- ◆ **Family neighborhood networking and care-giving; volunteering**

- **Work of Social Enhancement**

- ◆ **Mostly done for husbands (many husbands may actually also increase domestic work for their spouses)**

Effects of poverty

– Psychological

- ◆ Public ideologies as well as humiliating experiences at other public offices

– Material

- ◆ Possible lack of transportation and housing, interview & professional clothing
 - Is information about supplemental public assistance available?

– Physical

- ◆ Illnesses; lack of insurance, higher medical costs

Aging

– Young:

- ◆ no or little experience, little schooling; can be forced to work for low wages

– Middle-aged:

- ◆ expected to have “second” income through marriage; has life experience; may have schooling

– Older:

- ◆ victimized by age-discrimination that favors “young” people; has life experience, may have schooling

Disability and poverty

– Most invisible group

◆ Problem defined as one of disability

- People are identified in terms of what they cannot do
- Employers often do not realize how little it takes to accommodate a “disability” or how insurmountable some barriers can be

◆ Economic needs often not realized

- Both acute and chronic conditions increase financial need
- Part-time jobs have no insurance benefits
- Insurers do not cover pre-existing conditions
- Extra services or goods may be required

Ideologies and Realities

 **Don't judge a woman by her marital status or the amount of children she is responsible for**

– **Single women with children**

◆ **If a single adult is responsible for children, shouldn't we increase her resources?**

– **Recognize current society-wide discrimination against single mothers (single fathers are rarely problematized)**

– **Marital-status discrimination can be increased by “race” and ethnicity discrimination**

◆ **Single parents have little or no other adult support**

– **Current workplace ideologies and school day/year planning expect a full-time caregiver in the background**

– **Consider the fact that almost 50% of married women can expect to be abused by their partner - don't counsel a single woman that she should get married (or stay married) for financial reasons**

• **Married couples can be poor, too!**

– Older single women

◆ May have worked as housewife and mother before widowhood or divorce

- Her previous work and management experience may be discounted because it was unpaid
- May not have expected to enter labor force at mature age - need to deal with fear, low self-esteem, sexed age discrimination as well as marital-status discrimination

– Married women

- ◆ In most households, both incomes are necessary for survival (neither spouse has the “second” income)
- ◆ Women work for more than money: self-esteem and status, career-interest, independence, and accomplishment

– Don’t assume that women are in a hetero-, homo, or bi-sexual relationship

- ◆ A woman’s personal life has nothing to do with her need for economic survival!

Women and Diversity

- ☞ **Racial and Ethnic Groups**

- ☞ **Religious Groups**

- ☞ **Residential Groups**

- ☞ **For all:**

- **The following characteristics are general possibilities**
- **They do not constitute categorical differences, but all are found in variants in all groups**

European American

- ☞ **Middle-class white women made invisible as the “mainstream” and often mythologized as the “real woman”**
 - Increased burden to live up to a standard that is rarely recognized as raced sexism
- ☞ **Poor white women:**
 - Stereotypes associated with residences
 - Accused of poor choice of spouse or lacking morals

African American

Open racism and sexism

- False idea that more black women than men have jobs
 - ◆ Truth: male black income on average much higher than female black income
- False idea that individual is “affirmative action token”
 - ◆ Truth: AA opens applicant pool / “quotas” are for measuring only by social scientists

More public sector than private sector employment chances

- Most likely to lose jobs first

Asian American

- ☞ **Sexed racism based on Western sexualized ideas**
- ☞ **Stereotypes of submissiveness**
- ☞ **Rarely assumed to be native born**
 - **Lack of knowledge of immigration history**
 - ◆ **Large-scale Chinese and Japanese immigration began in 1850s**
 - **Frequently confused with inhabitants of country of origin**

Native American

- ☞ **Invisibility in media, schools, etc.**
- ☞ **Spoken of often in past tense**
- ☞ **Assumed to be one group**
 - **There are about 500 different nations**
 - **Great variety in national income averages, languages, religions, residences, history, treaty legislation, integration and cultural protection**
 - **One general characteristic:**
 - ◆ **Native Americans are the only “racial”/ethnic group in the US that fights to retain its rights!**

Latinas

- ☞ **Stereotypes of motherhood and “marianismo”**
 - **Irony: this stereotype is also the prescription for the “right” woman - should want to be an economically and socially dependent stay-home mother and devoted wife**
- ☞ **Similar to other groups**
 - **Stereotypes of immigrants, not native born**
 - **Little knowledge of history of these groups**
 - ◆ **E.g., treaty issues like Native Americans, segregation and forced labor history like African Americans**

Immigrants and Refugees

- ➡ **Migration may have been involuntary (refugees, expectations by family)**
- ➡ **Immigrating and refugee women carry triple burden:**
 - **Adjust to a new environment and make a living**
 - **Women often stereotyped as “culture bearers”**
 - ◆ **Made responsible for “proper” public image of group**
 - ◆ **Made responsible for acculturation of children**
 - **Women stereotyped as “family members” of immigrants/refugees, not as active individuals**

- ➡ No or little network**
- ➡ English may be second language**
 - Many are highly educated and speak several languages - difficulties in American English do not indicate lack of knowledge or skills**
- ➡ Discrimination based on who has the “right” to be where on this globe**
- ➡ May come from an area where they are the majority, but here become commingled with a minority**

☞ Need assistance to

- Access recruitment and job placement services**
- Transfer or identify demand for their skills**
- Pick up interrupted education / training**
- Adjust to new society**
- Deal with potential trauma, grief, and guilt**
- Deal with receiving society's cultural (esp. religious) biases and discrimination by employers and/or co-workers**

- **Access resources to support work force participation**
 - ◆ **child care**
 - ◆ **transportation**
 - ◆ **“tools-of-trade” (some tradespeople need to supply their own tools)**
 - ◆ **disability assistance / medical care**
 - ◆ **assistance in dealing with local biases by “race,” gender, age, sexuality, language, etc.**
- **Access resources for continuing education or self-employment**

Help by ...

- ☞ **Providing individualized assessment and job placement**
- ☞ **Provide interpreter and translating services**
 - **Have bi- or multi-lingual (and -cultural) staff available**
- ☞ **Offer intensive assistance esp. at beginning**
 - **Consider need for grief counseling for adults and children**

- ☞ **Train staff in global current events to understand background of refugees**
 - **Most immigrants and all refugees are NOT tourists who just decided to stay**
- ☞ **Offer mentors or internship programs**
- ☞ **Assist in identifying professional networks and/or trade unions for access and re-certification**

Religious groups

👉 High holidays and ceremonies

- National holidays and business hours respect the schedule of Protestant Christianity, but very little else

👉 Dress code

- Wearing a scarf or full-body covering does not symbolize anything about her status as a human being or her professional competency

👉 Not everybody has a religion or is interested in spirituality

- Women may belong to a creed, but not practice it
- Women may hold no religious or spiritual beliefs - don't assume!

Residential Groups

Urban

- **More potential access to jobs and services and more variety of each**
- **Higher crime rate (followed by more cautious behavior)**
- **status and resource difference between suburbs and inner cities**
- **Potentially more diverse**

Rural

- **Less access to jobs and services and less variety of each**
- **Crime can be hidden (especially domestic crime)**
- **Potentially very “racially” and ethnically homogeneous**

Regional

- **each state and geographic region has its own labor force history and specific problems**

Summary

- ☞ **Women are not a homogenous category**
 - **Women’s experiences and life chances vary by the multiple other categories they are a part of**
- ☞ **Poverty is neither a sign of personal failure, nor a moral “good”**
 - **Poverty creates insurmountable problems, such as health problems (physical and psychological), criminal victimization, societal abuse)**

Where to get more information

Must Reads

- **Louise Armstrong (1995) Of ‘Sluts’ and ‘Bastards’: A Feminist Decodes the Child Welfare Debate**
- **Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) Nickel and Dimed: On (not) getting by in America**

 **Local universities**

- **Enroll in classes that focus on women and on “race” and ethnic relations**

 **Electronic sources**

- **The Department of Labor’s web site features many relevant statistics and publications**