

# POVERTY

## A WOMEN'S ISSUE

## WOMEN ARE POOR . . .

- 79% of the poor people in the U.S. are women and children.
- 42% of all female single-parent households with children under 18 live in poverty; 50% of all minority female single-parent households with children under 18 live in poverty.
- Two out of three poor persons over age 65 are women.
- 95% of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) population are women and children.

## WHY ARE WOMEN POOR?

Women's work, both inside and outside the home, is undervalued and underpaid.

Women are considered part of the "expendable" marginal labor force — last hired, first fired.

Women are expected to be dependent on men, not on themselves. (Meanwhile 1 out of 3 marriages ends in divorce)

Sexism is institutionalized — it makes women poor and keeps them poor. The traditional societal solutions to poverty — work and welfare — have been deadends for most women. . .

## WELFARE — A SYSTEM THAT PERPETUATES WOMEN'S POVERTY

The poverty of women is not alleviated by welfare — in fact, the welfare system perpetuates the poverty and dependency of women. The average monthly AFDC payment in 1977 was \$78.05 per person, and more than half of all families receiving public assistance that year were left living *below* the official poverty line (\$6,145 for family of four) *after* receiving benefits.

Welfare jobs programs have failed to place women in jobs that enable them to support their families, or even to pay for actual child care costs so they *can* work outside the home. And recipients lose 66 cents in aid for every dollar they earn above \$360/year. But when they turn down jobs they can't afford to take, in most cases they will lose their welfare benefits.

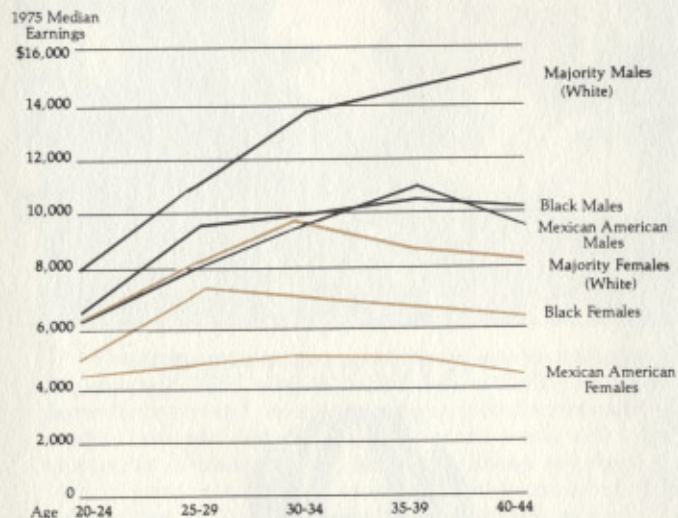
## . . . AND GETTING POORER

- Between 1969 and 1976, the entire increase in the number of families living in poverty was among female single-parent households.
- Women's earnings have actually *decreased* relative to men's earnings in the last two decades. In 1955, women working full-time outside the home earned 63% of what men earned; in 1978, women earned 57% of what men earned.

## WORK OUTSIDE THE HOME— NO GUARANTEE OF ESCAPING POVERTY

Having a job is no guarantee of escaping poverty — 47.6% of all married women, and 51.3% of all single, widowed, and divorced women are in the paid labor force. But in 1976 women earned only half of what white men with similar education and work history earned. And one-fourth of all welfare mothers work outside the home, but don't earn enough to support their families.

White men (and to a lesser degree, minority men) generally "climb the financial ladder," experiencing increases in income as they grow older. Women's "financial ladders" are virtually horizontal, often with decreases in earnings after age 35.



As they grow older, many women who have been financially secure reach deadends in jobs or become widowed or divorced, and suddenly poverty becomes a frightening, inescapable reality.





A scene from WELFARE, by Frederick Wiseman, courtesy of Zipporah Films, Inc., 54 Lewis Wharf, Boston, Mass. 02110. Photo Credit: Oliver Kool.

## The Poverty Perspective

Poverty is not an isolated issue, but a condition — a condition of women. Poor women are hit harder by nearly every social problem, and almost any woman can become poor.

On every issue, in every action, the perspectives of low-income women must be considered.



Abigail Heyman

## Inroads Against Poverty

Numerous goals must be achieved to end the poverty of women. Among them:

- Passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.
- Implementation of a national full employment plan.
- Reform of the welfare system to provide adequate benefits for all those in need.
- Organizing and upgrading of traditional women's jobs — equal pay for work of equal value.
- Placement of women in higher-paying, non-traditional jobs.
- Social Security and pension reform, to eliminate sexism and provide adequately for all our elderly and disabled.
- Provision of affordable, quality, accessible 24 hour child care.
- Enactment of national health insurance, including full coverage for all procedures effecting the reproductive lives of women.
- Recognition of the economic and social value of work in the home.

**The fight against poverty is crucial, for freedom from poverty is basic to economic rights, and economic rights are fundamental to the equality of women.**



"The public seems to forget that when we welfare mothers got married and planned our lives we, just like you, expected our marriages to last.

I wonder if they [the government] know how many of us are up all night wondering if we are going to make it from one check to the next? Or if we are going to make it at all?"

**Letter from welfare mother to the N.Y. Times, May 1978**





Annemarie Deubel



Eleanor Self

The economic situation of women is worse, not better, than 20 years ago. With women barred from attaining economic independence through sex stereotyping and job discrimination, lack of child care, and undervaluing of women's work; with a welfare system that degrades, abuses, and barely allows recipients to survive; in a nation where 6% unemployment is considered acceptable as long as it's concentrated among women and minorities, the youth and the elderly, women will remain poor unless we all fight back!

## THE WOMEN WHO ARE POOR . . .

The battered woman, afraid to leave because she'll have to go on welfare . . .

The displaced homemaker, with children grown, husband gone, and no experience in the labor market . . .

The woman on welfare, trying to raise 4 children on \$218 per month . . .

The young woman deserted or divorced by her husband, with 3 children to feed, no marketable job skills, no money . . .

The older woman who must subsist on meager Social Security dependents' benefits because the system gives her no credit for the work she has done in her home raising a family . . .

The clerical worker, the nursing home employee, the child care staffer, who earn little more than minimum wage, despite the fact that their work is invaluable to society.



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