The Feminization of Poverty in West Virginia

by

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, the concept of the feminization of poverty in West Virginia is discussed, with an emphasis on single-parent females. The industrial history of the state is examined, as well as the history of poverty policies which impacted the lives of women. A regression analysis shows the degree to which social and economic factors including education and employment influence the poverty status of women. In conclusion, the anti-poverty policies of current times are examined in order to evaluate their effectiveness.
The Feminization of Poverty in West Virginia

In the late nineteenth century, the Appalachian region experienced significant industrial change as market-based economic systems replaced subsistence agriculture. Since this period, the percentage of women in the workplace increased into the twentieth century. There is a great discrepancy of gender in the labor force, however. The 1990 Census shows that 42.6 percent of women were active in the labor force compared to 64.6 percent of men. Also unfortunate is the fact that while labor force rates have increased, the census shows that factors such as poverty have increased as well. By looking at historical roots one can perhaps understand the economic and social hardships women have to face in today's world. It can be argued that poverty influences women's lives greatly in West Virginia, and that the current system does little to combat the problem. To illustrate these points an analysis will be conducted which shows the influence of several social and economic factors on poverty. Finally, an overview of the effectiveness of anti-poverty programs will be discussed, with an emphasis on female heads of household.

In 1870 ninety-two percent of West Virginia was designated as rural (Lewis, 1993). The entire family worked to make a way of life in agriculture, including women and children. Although women's duties included running the household, they also participated in harvesting crops and butchering animals (Eagan, 1990). Money was not a commodity often needed, as
families bartered with one another for the necessities they could not produce themselves.

Around 1880, the economy of West Virginia began to change as industry in timber and coal production began to replace subsistence agriculture as a way of life. Over the next ten years, the coal industry began a regime of oppression among its workers. At first local labor was not utilized, as coal barons brought in migrant laborers to work in the mines. As mine owners bought more property, however, many farmers and their families were forced to move to coals camps where the living situation and economy were vastly different from their previous subsistence way of life (Lewis, 1993).

The move to the coal camps was accompanied by a large increase in population. In 1880 West Virginia had the highest increase in population in the nation at 5.54 percent (1880 Census).

Wage work, a concept which was rare in the formerly subsistence economy of West Virginia was very difficult to find in the coal camps (Lewis, 1993). Women and children were sometimes able to help support the family by raising animals and crops. Politics prevented women from joining the men in the mines. They could sometimes find work as laundry women and by taking in boarders (Corbin, 1981).

As a result of this new economic system, families often found themselves in debt. The formal wage-work economy was based on credit and lenders, thus not allowing families to be
able to break even. Companies also favored two-parent families, stating that married men were more industrious and less able to leave the coal camps (Corbin, 1981).

There was a degree of solidarity among coal workers which women helped to create. They were very oppressed, however, often having to complete arduous domestic chores (Corbin, 1981). They worked endlessly to keep their houses clean, a very hard task as the air was polluted by coal dust. The lack of running water also made it difficult to do laundry.

Within a few decades, the coal industry turned disastrous. The new technology of the continuous miner put a number of men out of work (Lewis, 1993). During the Great Depression a number of families left West Virginia to work in urban areas in other states (The Charleston Gazette, 1989). Many women were forced to take low-paying jobs to support their families.

Unfortunately, these jobs carried few benefits and assurances. From 1910 to 1950 the largest occupational categories for women were types of domestic servants. The number of women who claimed themselves as farmers increased as well (Pudup, 1990).

Women were also active participants in industries other than coal production. Most of the new women workers in factories were young, unmarried, and white. There were more women than men in mechanical and manufacturing industries. The 1880 Census shows that 91,479 women were employed in cotton mill operatives compared to 78,292 men. There were no women, however, employed
in carpentry and auto manufacturing. Greater numbers did not assure women better jobs, however, as most positions within these industries were low-wage occupations, such as dressmaking and hosiery services (Hensley, 1990).

Another area where women outnumbered men in the labor force was teaching positions. By 1920 women were twice as likely to be teachers as men. Women also became more active in the industry of retail and trade services (Pudup, 1990).

An important point to note is that while a number of women continued to work the land in rural areas they were not counted as being active in the labor force. Data for the census was often taken from formal sector employment of hours worked. Also not included in census material were women who were involved in what is called nontraditional labor activities. These occupations included cleaning houses, taking in boarders and providing child care services (Oberhauser, 36).

Another cause of low labor force rates was gender discrimination. A number of workplace laws were passed around the turn of the century which caused the hiring of women to enact special measures. One such law for example required that men and women use separate toilets, thus allowing employers to hire only men in favor of building separate facilities (Hensley, 1990).

Throughout the decades of the twentieth century, women continued to make gains in different areas of industry. Most women were employed in clothing, textile, and glass making
industries (Hensley, 1990). The Great Depression greatly affected their wages, causing many women to be classified in the lowest paying positions. There was a large surge in employment, however, during the World War II era. More women than ever before sought work in male dominated positions such as coal mining and chemical industries.

In 1980, the coal industry suffered another major collapse, causing more women than ever before to seek employment. Figures 1 and 2 represent the trend in women's employment. In Figure 1, the only drop in female employment occurred between 1910 and 1920. From that point there has been a steady increase in labor participation. It is important to note, however, that the definition of the labor force has changed over the years. In 1880 the labor force consisted of all women working over the age of ten years. This number changed in the early twentieth century to those working over the age of fourteen years. Beginning with the 1960 Census, the labor force was defined as those working over the age of sixteen.

Figure 2 shows the location of high and low rates of female employment in West Virginia. It is evident that the lowest third occurred in the southern counties in 1970 and 1980 and became even more concentrated in certain parts of the state in 1990. The highest rates of female labor participation are more concentrated in the Eastern Panhandle of the state, particularly in 1990. This is significant because the southern part of the state experienced a large loss of labor in the coal
EMPLOYMENT RATES FOR WEST VIRGINIA WOMEN (all women)

- Highest Third
- Middle Third
- Lowest Third

FIGURE 2
mines during this twenty year period. It has been estimated that 42,000 manufacturing jobs and 27,000 mining jobs have been lost since the late 1970's (Oberhauser, 23). This caused a decline in the many retail and sales positions that women occupied in the regions impacted.

Unfortunately, while labor participation has risen, the female poverty rate has also risen, making job training programs hard to fund (The Charleston Gazette, 1989). Many of the jobs women are able to find are still classified as marginal, paying only a minimum wage of $4.25 an hour. Lower paying jobs have increased while higher paying jobs have decreased. This creates a catch-22 situation, as many women are forced to require public assistance because they cannot support themselves or their families.

The situation of women in poverty has been closely studied for many years. The expression known as the feminization of poverty is meant to describe the great contradiction in economics; that while women have entered the work force in greater numbers, the rate of poverty has also risen (Sarvasy and Van Allen, 1984). It is the belief that women are poor due to "the combination of divorce and low-paying jobs which leaves them unable to provide an adequate income for themselves and their children" (Pearce, in Sarvasy and Van Allen, 1984).

Single women often find themselves in a dual role as mother and supporter of their family. While part-time work could provide an answer to this dilemma, it is not feasible for one
who cannot find a job which pays a sufficient salary (Sarvasy and Allen, 1984). Single women also have a hard time getting a job because employers assume they will want children at some point which is believed to affect their job performance.

While there is some evidence to suggest that divorce has led to poverty (high divorce rates in direct proportion to high rates of poverty) there are other factors which may add to the feminization of poverty. Competition from international producers has caused the number of low-wage jobs to rise dramatically. Women socialized under patriarchal system are more likely to be channeled into these types of jobs which often cause them to drop below the poverty level (Jones and Kodras, 1990).

Figure 3 shows a spatial analysis of female heads of households in poverty. Once again those counties in the southern part of the state exhibit the highest rates of poverty while those in the Eastern Panhandle exhibit the areas where women are in poverty the least.

There are several economic and social factors which may cause women to exist in poverty. In order to establish a correlation between these factors and poverty, a regression analysis was run using data from the 1990 Census of Population. The dependent variable was the number of women in poverty by county in West Virginia while the independent variables were the number of women not in the labor force, the number of women without a high school diploma, and the number of women with
WOMEN IN POVERTY IN WEST VIRGINIA
(female heads of households)

Highest Third

Middle Third

Lowest Third

Figure 3
children. The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not in labor force</th>
<th>Without high school diploma</th>
<th>With children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>R squared</strong></td>
<td>0.982418</td>
<td>0.978603</td>
<td>0.971505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Error</strong></td>
<td>0.01544</td>
<td>0.022562</td>
<td>0.011521</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In all three cases, the R squared factor was close to one. Therefore it can be stated that not being employed in the labor force, not having a high school diploma, and having children have a strong correlation to women falling into poverty.

In order to survive a poverty-stricken life, women often turn to public assistance income. There is a long history in the United States of the welfare system. It began in the early seventeenth century with the Poor Laws which made the English government take some responsibility for its destitute citizens. In 1642 The colony at Plymouth, Massachusetts enacted its own Poor Law, which was soon followed by several of its sister settlements including Jamestown, Virginia (Sidel, 1986). Early components of this law included the problem of child care assistance moneys and other methods of dealing with poor children such as foster care.

After the Revolutionary War, almshouses became the common way of taking care of poor. Like many of the administrators today, government officials believed that assistance to people
in their own homes would lead to idleness (Sidel, 1986). Children at this time were often removed from their parent's care if those in power thought that they were not provided for. The social movements of nineteenth century ended this practice.

In 1911, Illinois became the first state to pass laws dealing with aid to parents with needy children. Most of those receiving aid were widowed and white (Sidel 1986). In 1935 the Roosevelt administration implemented the Social Security Act which included Aid to Dependent Children. The federal government realized that industrial restructuring had caused the dependence on family ties for security to lesson. They stated: "Therefore we are compelled to employ the active interest of the Nation as a whole through government in order to encourage a greater security for each individual who composes it" (Stevens in Zinn, 1987).

In the period after World War II, a number of new policies dealing with the female poor and their children were implemented. In 1956, President Eisenhower signed a bill promoting job training programs and allotting funds to research the problems of poverty. Another change caused ADC to be more available to men. Nevertheless, critics of these changes argued that the female-oriented programs encouraged the breakup of families.

During the Reagan administration in the 1980's, a number of public assistance programs were significantly cut. Among those were some forms of Medicaid insurance and parts of AFDC payments dealing with expenses for working mothers (Zinn, 1987).
It has been estimated that 442,000 families lost their benefits in 1981 (Oberhauser, 28). One of the consequences of these actions was that a number of people were thrust into poverty for the first time. Critics of the government's role argued that the programs were cut in a deliberate attempt to target single working mothers.

There is a long history of documentation which shows the population of the United States is very hostile to those they consider the "undeserving poor." It is argued by some opponents of welfare that illnesses and even the lack of health care is preferable to receiving public assistance (Zinn, 1987).

When the economic restructuring during the Reagan administration occurred, many women found themselves in vulnerable positions. Working mothers now had to contend with loss of their benefits in addition to their low wage employment. Most employed women found themselves in marginal occupations such as clerical and service jobs. These types of employment also offered the lowest kinds of job security and health care benefits (Jones and Kodras, 1990).

In 1990 14.6 percent of women in West Virginia were classified as living in poverty compared to 11.5 percent of males. The average public assistance income for women with two children was a monthly benefit of $226.64 (West Virginia Women in Perspective, 1994). According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, West Virginia has the seventh highest number of public aid recipients in the nation (1991).
A number of scholars have proposed solutions to the problems of poverty. Jones and Kodras (1990) argue that welfare payments are necessary in many women's lives, as benefits from AFDC programs have been related to a decrease in poverty rates.

Unfortunately, AFDC payments do not raise families above the poverty threshold in any state (Northrop, 1991). Northrop also argues that Medicaid assistance programs are not designed to help families escape poverty; rather it is merely another system of temporary public help.

Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984) state that the system of public assistance needs to be re-evaluated in order to erase class and gender biases. They also argue that the policies of Western European countries need to be examined and applied to the U.S. system of public assistance.

Due to the inability of the U.S. market system to provide adequate wages, many families are still not able to escape poverty. It has even been documented that some of those who worked full time were still below 125 percent of the poverty threshold (Northrop, 1991). Thus fair-paying jobs become a basis for avoiding poverty traps.

There are a number of job training programs available to women today. One such program is Training for Disadvantaged Adults and Youth which educates and trains women for specific occupations. There are also a number of programs targeted at summer employment for youths in poverty (Northrop, 1991). Headstart has also proven to be a valuable program, providing
medical, educational, and social benefits to economically disadvantaged pre-schoolers.

Unfortunately for women in West Virginia, there are a limited amount of jobs to retrain for and most pay only minimum wage (Charleston Gazette, 1989). Many programs also run out of money before they are completed. A majority of the funds supplied by the federal government are used to retrain women in the positions of child care workers, nursing assistants, and bookkeepers. Those who cannot find employment through job training programs are often forced to leave the state.

Beginning in the 1970's in West Virginia there have been a number of women's organizations created which help women seek employment. Among these were Women and Employment (W&E) and the Southeast Women's Employment Project (SWEP). The programs established job training for women and helped in the fight to create new laws protecting the equal employment opportunities of women (Weiss, 1990).

Though these programs have been ground-breaking, the problems of poverty still persist in West Virginia. Evidence from the past shows that women have a long history of labor participation in marginal occupations. Thus in times of economic stress, women and their children are most severely impacted. Though public assistance has provided some relief, anti-poverty programs also serve to push women deeper into poverty. The results of the regression analysis show that more money needs to be channeled into educational and job training programs,
as the lack of these directly contributes to poverty. Since
the new Republican Congress is threatening to make major changes
in public assistance programs, these factors need to be taken
into consideration. Women are a vital part of the economy and
state of West Virginia. Steps must be taken, therefore, to
insure that their lives are bright and productive for years
to come.
Bibliographical Summary


