

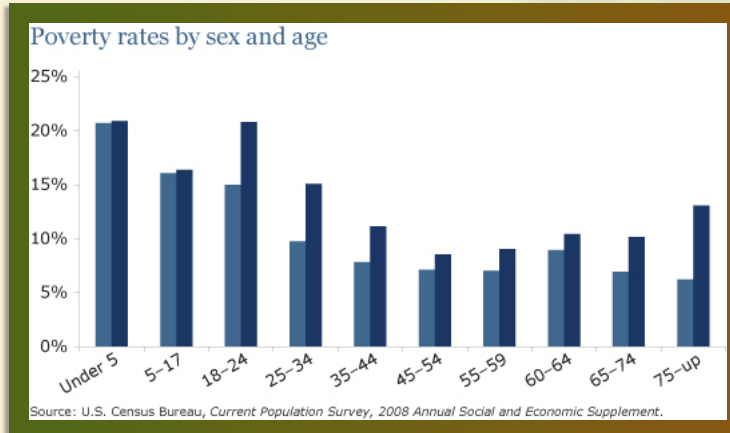
# Women, poverty, and stress

by *Linda Gehman Peachey*

One reason women form such a large percentage of those who are poor is because a capitalist economic system does not recognize much of the work women do. For capitalism values only those activities which earn or exchange money; consequently, all unpaid work is invisible and of little consequence in this system. The work of gardening, preserving food, and caring for children and elderly relatives is considered “unproductive” because no money exchanges hands. It is not “waged” work. Therefore, women can work very hard all their lives and yet receive no social security or health care benefits as a result of that labor. If they are married, they might receive benefits from their husband’s employment but nothing tied directly to their own work.

All too often women’s labor is taken for granted, much like we use the earth’s resources: as something free of charge, rather than a valuable resource to be nurtured and treasured. So women end up in impossible double-binds. They are expected to provide much free labor, yet our society does not recognize this work as truly valid and essential to the well-being of our families and communities.

In fact, people are not considered truly responsible unless they are earning money. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act makes this very clear by requiring all welfare recipients to find paid employment in order to continue receiving government benefits. As Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, observed, this law dismisses the value of “unpaid, family-directed labor” and



**Women are represented by darker blue, men by lighter blue in the chart above.**

forces many women into exploitative and dangerous situations. For according to Ehrenreich in "Chamber of Welfare Reform," in the May, 2002 *The Progressive* it "... requires recipients to take whatever jobs are available, and usually the first job that comes along. Lose the job—for example, because you have to stay at home with a sick child or because you tell the boss to stop propositioning

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you—and you may lose whatever supplementary benefits you were receiving. The message is clear: Do not complain or make trouble; accept employment on the bosses' terms or risk homelessness and hunger."

Meanwhile, most of these jobs do not pay enough to afford adequate housing or quality child-care. Nor do they usually provide paid sick days, family leave or health benefits. The result is often a state of chronic stress for women, as they juggle so many responsibilities and expectations.

Faced with these realities, how should the church respond? We cannot change the global economic system overnight, but we can try some of the following steps:

- Be careful not to equate work with a paid job. Instead of saying, "I'm going to work" we could say, "I'm going to the office, the factory, etc." thereby emphasizing that what we do at home and in our communities is also valuable; it is also real work.
- Make sure all do their share of daily household tasks, and job descriptions don't require having others do this work for us.
- Insist that everyone be paid fair and livable wages.
- Advocate that social security and health care benefits be linked to all labor, including the work of caring for others, rather than only the amount of money earned.
- Advocate for paid family leave, paid sick days and access to health care.
- Support laws which protect women and children, and work to end abuse and violence in our families and communities.
- Ensure that women's voices and wisdom are included at all levels of our institutions.
- Value children as an essential part of our life together and the future of our communities, and provide the needed resources for quality child-care, education and health-care.

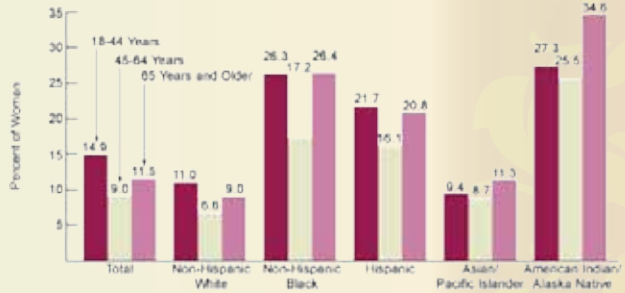
We can also urge our leaders to use more inclusive tools when measuring our economy and making policy decisions. Currently, the most common economic instrument is the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This index calculates all economic activity, whether positive or negative; the only requirement is that money changes hands. Consequently, an oil spill can be good for the GDP, as it creates many jobs; the same is true for pornography or the production of weapons. An alternative would be the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) which rewards only production which serves human need and penalizes activities which harm people and the earth. In a tangible way, it seeks to value people over money, care-giving over consuming, peace-building over the business of war.

Finally, we can emphasize how Jesus brought good news to the poor, and release from the forces which bound them (Luke 4:18). Now as then, this includes women and children.

Now as then, Jesus seeks to heal, bless, and welcome all of us as disciples. Let us follow in his way. 📖

**Women Aged 18 and Older Living Below the Poverty Level,\* by Race/Ethnicity and Age, 2006**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey



\*Poverty level defined by the U.S. Census Bureau was \$20,444 for a family of four in 2006.

## Resources

### Books

- Bacon, David. *Illegal People*. Boston: Beacon, 2008.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Nickle and Dimed*. New York: Holt, 2001.
- Hays, Sharon. *Flat Broke with Children*. Oxford UP, 2003.
- Hartman, Heidi, ed. *Women, Work, and Poverty*. Haworth P, 2005.
- Murray, Anne Firth. *From Outrage to Courage*. Ser.1. Monroe, ME: Common Courage P, 2007.
- . *From Courage to Outrage*. Ser. 2. Monroe ME: Common Courage P, 2008.
- Shipley, David. *The Working Poor*. New York: Knopf, 2004.

### Websites

- [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/10/women\\_poverty.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/10/women_poverty.html)
- [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/women\\_poverty\\_economics/](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_poverty_economics/)