THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY: MYTH OR REALITY?

MARTHA E. GIMENEZ

The 'feminization of poverty' is a phenomenon of great concern to the government, social scientists, politicians, and feminists of all political persuasions. This phrase attempts to capture the essence of the following facts: in the United States, the fastest growing type of family structure is that of female-headed households and, because of the high rate of poverty among these households, their increase is mirrored in the growing numbers of women and children who are poor; almost half of all the poor in the U.S. today live in families headed by women. In 1984, 16 percent of all white families, 25 percent of all families of Spanish origin, and 53 percent of all black families were headed by women (Rodgers, 1986: 5). In the same year, the poverty rate for white, Spanish-origin and black female-beaded households was 27.1 percent, 53.4 percent, and 51.7 percent respectively (Rodgers, 1986: 12). Poverty affects not only young and adult women with children but also older women; in 1984, the median income of women 65 years and over was $6,020 (while it was $10,450 for men in the same age category) and 15.0 percent of all women age 65 and over had incomes below the poverty line (Sidel, 1986: 158). The poverty of women is reflected in the poverty of children. There are almost 13 million poor children in the U.S.; 52 percent of them live in families headed by women and the poverty rate for white, black, and Spanish-origin children living in female-headed households is 46 percent, 66 percent, and 71 percent respectively (Rodgers, 186: 32–33).

The facts and figures documenting the increased immiseration of women and children can be found in many recent publications (e.g., Stallard et al., 1983; Sidel, 1986; and Rodgers, 1986), together with analyses that put forth the notion that it is women, *as women*, who are peculiarly vulnerable to poverty. Poverty is being 'feminized' and this idea is nowhere expressed more clearly than in an often quoted statement from the President's National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity (1981):

> All other things being equal, if the proportion of the poor in female-householder families were to continue to increase at the same rate as it did

> from 1976 to 1978, the poverty population would be composed solely of women and their children before the year 2000 (Rodgers Jr., 1986: 7).

Critics have rightly pointed out that this statement suggests that "by the year 2000 all of those men who are presently poor will be either rich or dead" (AAWO, 1983: 6). While those who quote it acknowledge that society does not keep still, that poverty affects men also and falls more heavily among nonwhites, nevertheless the main thrust of the analysis of present trends continues to interpret them as 'feminization of poverty.'

Is this a theoretically adequate notion? What can we learn from it? What are its shortcomings? Does it adequately convey the nature of the processes it describes? Is the 'feminization of poverty' a real phenomenon or a mystification that obscures the unfolding of other processes? These are some of the questions I will seek to answer in this essay. I will examine, from the standpoint of Marxist-feminist theory, the strengths and shortcomings of current explanations to establish whether recent changes in the size and composition of the poor population, growth in female-headed families, and the increased vulnerability of women to poverty can be adequately understood as the 'feminization of poverty.'

Factors Accounting for the Feminization of Poverty

The definition of a social phenomenon shapes the questions that can be asked about its possible determinants and, of course, the questions in turn shape the answers. In this case, it is unavoidable to center such questions around women: why are women more likely to be poor than men? Why are female-headed households and families more likely to be poor? Why is the number of those households and families increasing? This leads researchers to focus on factors which are specific to the situation of women in modern society and conclude that women, as a group and regardless of class, are more vulnerable to poverty than men and that, consequently, women's poverty has different causes than the poverty of men.

The conceptualization of women *as a group* characterizes most discussions of the feminization of poverty. This tendency is encouraged by the manner in which poverty statistics are compiled. Census data do not differentiate between social classes; researchers have information about income, sex, racial and ethnic categories of analysis and this reinforces and tendency to frame the discussion in terms of statistical rather than theoretically significant categories of analysis. The determinants of

women's poverty, it is therefore implied in the analysis, are factors that affect *all* women and place *all* women at risk.

What are these factors? Changes in mortality and marriage rates, divorce and separations, and out of wedlock births contribute to the increase in female-headed households (Rodgers, 1986: 38–42). Women's higher life expectancy contributes to the increasing number of women over 65 years of age living alone and a substantial proportion of these women are poor. Younger women become heads of households through out-of-wedlock childbearing, separation, divorce, or the decision to live alone while they work and postpone marriage until they consider it appropriate.

Male unemployment, lay-offs, and decline in wages are also crucial correlates of women's poverty. Such factors correlate with marital stress and violence, separation or divorce, and can make family formation impossible. Poor men who are chronically unemployed or underemployed cannot form families or stay with their families, particularly in states where welfare policies deny eligibility to two-parent families. Because of the heritage of racial and economic discrimination, these factors are intensified in the black and Spanish origin populations which have a higher proportion of poor female-headed families than the white population.

In addition to these structural factors and the lack of adequate welfare policies, Ruth Sidel argues that women's poverty is also the result of ideological and structural constraints peculiar to women. Women socialized to put family obligations first, to see themselves primarily as wives and mothers and seek in marriage and the family their fulfillment as adult members of the society, are likely to neglect or overlook the need to develop occupational and educational skills that will help them support themselves if they remain single or their marriage breaks up. Women's domestic activities, in spite of their social, economic, and psychological significance, are devalued and time consuming, and interfere with their full participation in the labor force. The domestic division of labor thus interacts with the sex-segregated nature of occupations to restrict the economic and educational opportunities of women. The negative effects of this situation become more salient once women become single heads of families (Sidel, 1986: 25–35).

As the preceding discussion indicates, the feminization of poverty is associated with many interrelated structural and ideological variables. Stallard et al. (1983) sum up the determinants of the feminization of poverty as follows:

> [It] is a direct outgrowth of women's dual role as unpaid labor in the home and underpaid labor in the work force. The pace has been quickened by rising rates of divorce and single motherhood, but the course of women's poverty is determined by the sexism—and racism—ingrained in an unjust economy (Stallard et al., 1983: 51).

It would seem that recent literature has produced not only a detailed description but also some plausible and, some may even say, obvious explanations of the feminization of poverty. That this is really the case, in spite of the impressive documentation and well developed arguments, is not a self-evident as it may seem. The identification of the determinants of the feminization of poverty in sexism, racism, and the operation of the economy does not really tells us much beyond that which is empirically obvious and observable. What is questionable is the meaning given to the trends: are we witnessing the feminization and the minoritization of poverty or something else? I will introduce some additional facts and figures about poverty to highlight the complexity of these issues, and the problems inherent in the 'feminization of poverty' perspective.

Who Are the Poor?

A recent analysis of poverty in the U.S. indicates that, while it is the case that women are more likely to be poor than men and that, in absolute numbers, there were more poor women in 1983 than men (20,084,000 vs. 15,182,000), "*the female share of the overall poverty population was the same in 1983 as it was in 1966 [the earliest available data]—57 percent*" (O'Hare, 1985: 18, my emphasis).[1] Poverty trends since 1983 have modified this conclusion only slightly. Between 1983 and 1986, the female share of the poverty population increased slightly from 57.0 percent to 57.6 percent (Bureau of the Census, 1987: 30).

The female and male shares of the poverty population from 1966 to 1986 show remarkable stability: the female share increased gradually, rising to 59.1 percent in 1978, declining to 57.0 percent in 1983 and 1984, rising to 57.6 percent in 1986 (see Table 1). If only adults over 21 are considered, in 1983—*as it was in 1966*—women comprised 62 percent of the poor (O'Hare, 1985: 18). This percentage increased to 62.1 in 1984, 62.7 in 1985, and 64.2 in 1986 (Bureau of the Census, 1986a: 28; 1986b: 27; 1987: 30).

Mortality differentials increase the numbers of older women living alone, and 27.7 percent of the 6.7 million women age 65 and over who

in 1983 lived as 'unrelated individuals' were below the poverty level. In 1984, the number of women in that category increased to 6.8 million, but the percent below the poverty level declined to 25.2 percent (Bureau of the Census, 1985: 41, 1986a: 29). By comparison, in 1984, 20.8 percent of 'unrelated males' age 65 and over fell below the poverty level. The differences between the poverty rate of younger 'unrelated' women reflects the sharp fluctuations associated with the 1981–82 recession. However, an examination of the average annual percentage changes in the number of men and women below the poverty level between 1975 and every year until 1985, for all ages, shows a greater increase in male poverty in every year from 1982 on. At ages 18–44, there is a higher rate of increase in male poverty for every year from 1979 on.[3] The lower proportion of men below the poverty level makes the percent changes in male poverty higher than what they would have been had sex ratios been closer to unity. On the other hand, the higher percent changes in male poverty cannot be dismissed lightly as statistical artifacts; and it must be remembered that male poverty is an important correlate of female poverty. The sharp increases in male poverty between 1978 and 1983 were real and seem to have lingered on after the "economic recovery" that followed the 1981–82 recession. They reflect the vulnerability of men to unemployment at times of rapid economic decline, whereas women tend to work in more "recession proof" sectors of the economy (Smith, 1986: 3; Sparr, 1987: 11).

As indicated earlier, the proportion of men and women in the 18–44 age group who become poor has been steadily increasing. While in 1983 the poverty rate for families with a householder aged 45–64 was 8.7 percent (up from 6.4 percent in 1978) and 14.2 percent (up from 10.2 percent in 1978) for families with a householder age 25–44, it was 29.5 percent (up from 18.5 percent in 1978) for families with a householder under 25 (O'Hare, 1985: 13). In 1984, the poverty rate for householders under 25 remained practically unchanged at 29.4 percent, while the rate for householders aged 25–44 declined slightly to 13.2 percent (Bureau of the Census, 1986a: 14).

The faster increase in the poverty rate of younger workers of both sexes indicates that the working class is experiencing substantial downward mobility (O'Hare, 1985: 13–14; Harrington, 1984: 46–48). The increase in the poverty of children, usually linked to the increase in the number of female-headed families, is actually the result of the increase in poverty among young adult workers. While in 1983, 49 percent of poor children lived in female-headed households, 81 percent of poor children lived in families where the householder was under 45. Between

1978 and 1983, 4 million children under 18 joined the poverty population and only 25 percent of them lived in female-headed households (O'Hare, 1985: 13–17).

Real average earnings of young male workers aged 20–24 have declined 30 percent since 1973. A comparison between the earnings of men who turned 30 in 1973, and in 1983, shows that the average real income of the older men kept pace with inflation while that of the younger men declined 35 percent (*Dollars & Sense*, 1987: 10). Income inequality among young men is related to education; those without a college degree are reduced to taking whatever the economy offers them, which, in these days, are jobs that pay relatively little. While college attendance by low income men is declining, the gap in earnings between college graduates and high school dropouts is growing: "in 1973, the average earnings of a 20 to 24-year-old male high school dropout were three-quarters of the earnings of a college graduate. By 1984, this fraction dropped to two-thirds" (*Dollars & Sense*, 1987: 11).

In light of this information, it must be acknowledged that the 'feminization of poverty' is only one dimension of a broader process that also affects men, children, and the elderly in different degrees and for reasons that are fundamentally interrelated. *Just as an exclusive focus on 'women' leads to a one-sided analysis that seems to give lesser importance to other dimensions of poverty, it would be equally misguided to focus on the poverty of 'men' or of 'young adult workers.'* These are simple descriptive categories that indicate the composition of the poor population, but cannot serve as the basis for developing a theoretical analysis of the meaning of present poverty trends. Poverty is, furthermore, only a descriptive concept that does not help us understand the nature of the phenomena captured by these and many other statistics.

An important statement critical of the 'feminization of poverty' perspective (AAWO, 1983) convincingly argues that it offers an inaccurate empirical and political analysis of the situation because it ignores, for all practical purposes, the class differences between women and the common basis for class, racial and ethnic solidarity between men and women. Because the focus of analysis is the poverty of women *as women*, their class and race are not considered as crucial in determining their poverty as the fact they are women. It is the case, however, that not all women are in danger of becoming poor; only those who are working class or members of racial and ethnic minorities are thus threatened. Many women are becoming richer and, of course, ruling class women have never been at risk if becoming poor (AAWO, 1983: 2). Poverty is not a phenomenon affecting primarily women; it is a structural component of

the capitalist economy that affects people regardless of age and sex and falls disproportionally upon minorities. It is racism, more than sexism, that determines who works in the worse sectors of the economy. Racism excludes large numbers of minority men from employment and the possibility of forming families, this changing the conditions faced by working-class women of color in ways which the 'feminization of poverty' perspective cannot adequately account for as long as it views all women as an oppressed class (AAWO, 1983; Staples, 1985; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1985; Sparr, 1987).

This critique of the 'feminization of poverty' interpretation of current trends identifies important issues for further theoretical and empirical investigation. These insights, as well as those presented previously, have to be connected to their underlying capitalist structural determinants in production and reproduction, to more clearly understand the significance of these empirically observable phenomena. This process entails the examination of the relationship between capitalist structures, processes, and contradiction, which are not readily observable, and empirically observable changes in the size and composition of the poverty population. *It is my contention that the feminization of poverty is an important dimension of a larger process: the immiseration of the working class brought about by the profound structural changes undergone by the U.S. economy during the 1980s.* It would be beyond the limits of an essay to do justice to the complexity of these issues. The remarks that follow ought to be taken as tentative statements that will provide guidelines for future theoretical and empirical investigation.

Beyond Women as a Category of Analysis: Class Differences Among Women and their Impact on Poverty

The feminization of poverty perspective focuses mainly on the poverty of women *as women*. This starting point introduces problems in understanding why some women become poor, while others do not. In this section, I will argue that gender related factors are relevant correlates (not determinants) of poverty only among women whose class location already makes them vulnerable to poverty. If no class differences (in the Marxist sense) are taken into account in the analysis of the feminization of poverty, it does appear as if it were caused primarily by sexism. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the concept of social class and explore its implications for the life chances of women in different social classes.

From the standpoint of Marxist theory, class is a relation between people mediated by their relationship to the means of production. Ownership of means of production, even in a modest scale, gives polit-

ical and economic control over others, and economic independence. Lack of means of production places workers—male and female—in a dependent situation, vulnerable to the decisions taken by those who, in controlling capital, control their access to the conditions indispensable for their physical and social daily and generational reproduction: employment. Changes in the occupational structure and quantitative and qualitative changes in the demand for labor divide the propertyless class in terms of occupation, income, and education, which are precisely the building blocks with which the average person and most social scientists construct socioeconomic status categories.[4] This is the material basis for the common sense division of people into a variety of 'classes,' in a ranking that ranges from 'the poor' and the 'lower class' at the bottom, to the 'upper class' at the top, with the 'working class,' 'middle' and 'upper-middle class' in between. This is an empiricist understanding of social class that mystifies the sources of women's poverty; it is a simple ordering or gradational concept of class, that focuses only on the different power and resources individuals bring to the sexual and economic markets (Ossowski, 1963: 41–57, Weber, 1982: 61–62). It is a central contention in my argument that, if the social class location of women (not their socioeconomic status) is taken into account, it becomes obvious that it is not sex but class that propels some women into poverty.

Capitalist women and petty bourgeois women are not at risk of becoming poor.

Being a capitalist or a petty bourgeois women entails, theoretically, having capital of one's own and, therefore, a source of income *independent* from marriage or from paid employment. Women who own wealth are unlikely to become poor for gender related factors, though inheritance practices and family accumulation strategies might deny them full control of their property.

Of the top wealth-holder with gross assets of $300,000 or more in 1982, 39.3 percent (1.85 percent of the total female population) were women. Between 1985 and 1986, the proportion of women aged 21 and over in the poverty population rose 1.5 percentage points (from 62.7 percent to 64.2 percent); in the same period of time, the number of women workers (full- and part-time) earning more than $35,000 increased 32 percent; those earning between $50,000 and $75,000 increased 34.5 percent, while the number of full-time women workers earning more than $75,000 increased 55.4 percent. As some women fell into poverty, others certainly became more affluent, although only 3.2 percent of all women workers earn more than $35,000 a year and only

0.3 percent of full-time working women earn more than $75,000 (Bureau of the Census, 1987: 19; 1986c: 447). Women earning over $35,000 a year are certainly far less likely to fall into poverty if they become single mothers, divorce or separate. On the other hand, if they lose their jobs, *lack an independent source of income*, and are unable to find a job with similar pay, they will experience downward social mobility and might even become poor.

Patterns of income distribution and wealth ownership indicate the existence of extreme socioeconomic status differences (income based) and class differences (based on wealth ownership) among women, which constitute the underlying material basis for the notion that virtually all women are vulnerable to poverty: that is so because most women (and most men as well) are propertyless.

Propertyless women (and propertyless men) are always at the risk of becoming poor.

As economist Ferdinand Lundberg has trenchantly observed: "anyone who does not own a substantial amount of income-producing property, or does not receive an earned income sufficiently large to make substantial regular savings or does not hold a well-paid securely tenured job is poor. . . . By this standard at least 70 percent of Americans are poor, although not all of these are by any means destitute or poverty stricken" (Lundberg, 1969: 23).

Propertyless women may attain, at the level of market relations, through family-transmitted advantages (e.g., real estate property, higher education) and/or marriage, a socioeconomic status that appears to place them above the working class. When it is argued that the feminization of poverty places all or most women at risk, including 'middle,' and 'upper-middle class' women, a very important observation is made which does not apply to women across social classes. The often made statement, "most women are just a man or a divorce away from poverty," reflects the conditions of existence of most *propertyless* women whom the capitalist organization of production and reproduction makes dependent on marriage and/or employment for economic survival.

Working-class women with substantial 'human capital' of their own are still a tiny minority; they, and women with stable jobs face a lower probability of poverty than women with less skills or with precarious working conditions. Data on women's income and employment indicate that the vast majority of propertyless women are working class, not only in terms of their location in the relations of production (i.e., they are propertyless and depend on a wage or salary for the economic survival

of themselves and their families) but also at the level of socioeconomic stratification (i.e., the vast majority of women work in low paid, low status, blue- or white-collar jobs). Of the 39,214,000 women who worked full-time in 1986, 72.3 percent earned less than $20,000; 32.3 percent earned less than $10,000 (Bureau of the Census, 1987: 19). On the other hand, there are more men than women in 'middle class' and 'upper-middle class' occupations and in the better paid skilled blue collar jobs. Consequently, most women experience some form of 'upward mobility' through marriage and, if they lack skills or resources of their own, are likely to return to their previous place in the socioeconomic structure in case of separation, divorce, or widowhood.

Most of the 'social mobility' propertyless men and women experience in their life time is not social class mobility in the Marxist sense (e.g., changing from being propertyless to becoming petty bourgeois, small or big capitalist, etc.) but occupational mobility. It is important to realize that men and women can experience mobility at the market level while remaining, at the same time and whatever their socioeconomic status may be, located in the working class or propertyless class. Intra-class differences (i.e., differences within the propertyless class) in the socio-economic status and individual resources that men and women bring to the market is at the core of women's greater vulnerability to poverty and the transformation of marriage into the major source of economic survival for vast numbers of women.[5]

The feminization of poverty is a market level structural effect of intra-class differences in male and female socioeconomic status and mobility; it is fundamentally a class issue although it is experienced and analyzed as an effect of sex and race discrimination. Sexism and racism unquestionably intensify the effects of economic changes upon the more impoverished layers of the working class (AAWO, 1983; Sparr, 1987). Nevertheless, the ultimate determinant of individuals' relative vulnerability to poverty is their class location: "if sexism (and, I add, racism) were eliminated, there would still be poor women (and poor non-whites). The only difference is that women (and non-whites) would stand the same chance as men (and whites) of being poor" (Sparr, 1987: 11).

Conclusion

The data discussed earlier in this essay show that the sex ratio of the poverty population has changed little since 1966; its age composition, however, did change. Today, the majority of the poor are children under 18 and adults under 44 (see Table 1). While, in absolute

numbers, there are still more poor women than poor men, the dramatic increase in poverty between 1978 and 1983 was felt more heavily among men than among women. Since 1983, the modest decline in poverty has also been more rapid among men than among women.

Theoretically, these trends are empirical indicators of the immiseration of the working class. The essence of this argument is that people do not fall into poverty because of their age, sex, or racial/ethnic characteristics, but because of their social class. Age sex, and ethnic/racial groups are not socially homogeneous; they are divided in social classes which, in turn, are stratified on the basis of income, education and occupation. The fact that poverty falls disproportionately upon the young, women and minorities does not invalidate the analysis; those who become poor share a common relationship to the means of production that cuts across age, sex, and racial/ethnic differences.

Sexism and racism are important in determining who gets the worst jobs or is most likely to be affected by unemployment (AAWO, 1983). But sexism and racism are not unchanging entities standing on an independent material base; they are shifting structural effects of capitalist processes of labor allocation designed to increase profit margins and enhance economic and political control over the working class. The general determining dynamics of poverty are, from this standpoint, located in capitalist processes which racialize, ethnicize and sexualize the work force on national and world-system levels—processes whose ideological, political and legal effects, in turn, perpetuate them through time, endowing them with a deceptive universality and antiquity (Wallerstein, 1983; 1985). The specific determinants of recent poverty trends are to be found in the interplay between the historical effects of sexism and racism and recent political and economic changes which have drastically altered the U.S. economic structure. Some sectors of the capitalist class, to become competitive at the international level are lowering the average price of labor; cuts in wages, union busting, right to work laws, 'give backs,' cuts in social services, and recent changes in immigration laws that allow the legalization of undocumented workers under certain conditions are all efforts aimed at cheapening the overall costs of labor (Piven and Cloward, 1986; Harrington, 1985).

Lacking access to the material conditions for their physical and social reproduction on a daily and generational level, over 32 million members of the working class below the poverty level barely survive under the restrictive conditions imposed by the welfare state. Altogether, 43.4 million people live below 125 percent of the poverty level; this includes 9.4 million families (45.9 percent headed by women) and 15.5 million

children under 18 (51.1 percent of which live in families headed by women) (Bureau of the Census, 1987: 28). Nutrition levels and health among the poor have deteriorated; between 1982–85, the food-stamp program was cut by $7 billion and child-nutrition programs by 5 billion. In spite of the large number of people below the poverty level, only 19 million today receive food stamps; 12 million children and 8 million adults suffer from hunger (Brown, 1987: 37–41).

Lack of access to the basic material conditions necessary for physical and social reproduction on a daily and generational basis threatens the intergenerational reproduction of the working class among all races, particularly among racial and ethnic minorities. The immiseration of the working class culminates in the breakdown of its inter-generational reproduction. Poor parents, particularly poor single mothers, are placed under conditions that deprive them of their ability to reproduce people with marketable skills. This situation may be 'functional' for the economy, in so far as the demand for skilled and educated workers is not likely to rise dramatically during the near future. From the standpoint of the working class and minorities, in particular, this is a very serious situation which civil rights, better educational opportunities, and measures designed to help women combine work and parenting, *in themselves*, can not possibly solve.

William Julius Wilson (1978) has written of the 'declining significance of race' and the need to recognize the primarily economic and class-based determinants of the poverty and deprivation of most black Americans. By the same token, *the recent increase in both male and female poverty should alert us to the declining significance of sex as a cause of women's poverty*. The feminization of poverty reflects the fact that women are more than half of the U.S. propertyless class and that the standard of living of this class is noticeably declined in the last ten years (for a thoughtful statement about the need to overcome the limits of an exclusive focus on sex, to the detriment of class and race, as sources of women's oppression, see Thornton Dill, 1987: 204–213).

The media, social scientists, politicians and activists give—depending on their specific concerns, political agendas and the theoretical commitments—greater importance to different sectors of the poor. The notoriety of the 'feminization of poverty,' the poverty of the minorities, the elderly, or children contrasts with the relative silence about the erosion in the standard of living and the growing poverty of the working class. While it is important to uncover the correlates of poverty pertinent to each of these sectors, to the extent the analysis stops there it can lead to the development of theoretically flawed explanations and policies that

pit the interests of women against the interests of men, the young versus the old, whites versus nonwhites.

Stress upon the poverty of those who are disproportionately poor produces a misleading perception of poverty as something that affects mainly women, the elderly, ethnic/racial minorities, and welfare recipients and could, theoretically, be effectively dealt with by measures addressing the needs of women workers, civil rights enforcement, and the welfare reforms. In fact, most of the poor are white (69 percent in 1986), most of the poor between the ages of 22 and 64 are working or looking for work, and only 35 percent of the poor families receive welfare benefits (O'Hare, 1985: 4). Only 10.5 percent of the elderly aged 65 and over are poor and 55 percent of the poor who live in families do not live in families headed by women (Bureau of the Census, 1986b: 22–24). Furthermore, of the 2,453,000 families between the poverty level and 125 percent of the poverty level, only 30 percent are headed by women (Bureau of the Census, 1987: 28–29).

To speak of the immiseration of the working class does not entail the adoption of a mindless economic reductionism nor the callous denial of the plight of minorities, women, children, and the elderly. It simply entails the recognition of the fact that those sectors of the poor population, including men, do not live as isolated individuals but are linked to each other through common relations of production and reproduction. The fate of each sector is tied to the fate of the others because they are all part of the same social class, just as the fate of individuals is tied to the fate of those with whom they share a kinship or emotional and social bonds. People are "an ensemble of social relations" (Marx, 1969: 198) and cannot be meaningfully understood in isolation of those relationships that give them their historically specific place in the world they live.

It is not by reducing people to age, sex, racial or ethnic categories that poverty and its determinants can be best understood; people are poor or become poor because they are subject to common 'socioeconomic and political processes that deprive them of access to their material conditions of existence, tear families apart, or make family formation impossible for vast numbers of working-class men and women, particularly those who are also members of racial and ethnic minorities. Placed in its historical context, the feminization of poverty is a real, important, albeit partial dimension, of a vast process of social transformation resulting in a drastic decline in the overall level of wages and standard of living of the U.S. working class, a significant increase in the size of the

reserve army of labor, the intensification of the proletarianization of women,[6] and the undermining of the material conditions necessary for the maintenance of 'middle class' illusions and for the intergenerational physical and social reproduction of the lower strata of the working class—particularly its racialized, ethnicized, and feminized sectors.

Notes

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1. The lower proportion of poor men in the population below the poverty level might be partially correlated with sex differential mortality. This is a complex issue that cannot be fully examined here, but it is possible, nevertheless, to present some pertinent observations. Occupationally caused mortality and disability are disproportionately high among working class men and women (Berman, 1978; Chavkin, 1984). Death rates among working age males (15–64) are considerably higher than among females of the same age. Death rates from accidents and violence are also exceedingly high for younger males, particularly for blacks (Bureau of the Census, 1986: 72, 76). As mortality varies inversely with socioeconomic status, it is reasonable to suppose that death rates for occupational accidents, disease and violence are likely to be higher for working class men, than the reported rates which do not take class differences into account.

2. Bureau of the Census, "Supplementary Report on the Low Income Population: 1966–1972," Current Population Reports Series P-60, No. 95, July 1974, Table 1; "Characteristics of the Low Income Population: 1973" Current Population Reports Series P-60, No. 98, January 1975, Table 6; "Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level: 1974," Current Population Reports Series P-60, No. 102, January 1976, Table 6; Table 11 in "Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level" for the years 1975 and 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, Current Population Reports Series P-60, No. 106, June 1977; No. 115, July 1978; No. 119, March 1979; No. 124, July 1980; No. 130, December 1981; No. 133, July 1982; No. 138; No. 144, March 1984; No. 147, February 1985; No. 152, June 1986; Table 8; "Money Income and Poverty Status of Families and Persons in the United States: 1985," Current Population Reports Series P-60, No. 154, August 1986, Table 18; No. 157, July 1987; Table 11 and 18.

3. The decline in the poverty rate after 1975 is reflected in the decline, for all ages and both sexes, in the numbers below the poverty level during the next four years. In 1978, the year chosen by O'Hare as the base year, the poverty rate was low (11.3 percent) and the number of poor men of all ages (10,017,000) was the lowest ever since 1966, while the number of poor women (14,381,000) was relatively low if compared to most of the preceding years, but certainly higher than the lowest number recorded since 1966: 13,316,000 in 1973.

4. I am aware of the complexity of the issue of class and class structure within Marxist and neo-Marxist theory. Nevertheless, for the purposes of developing my argument in this essay, I consider that it is enough to point out the crucial differences between classes defined at the level of production relations and classes defined at the level of market relations. If relationship to the means of production is overlooked, it is possible to argue that most women, regardless of social class, could become poor; if the impact of propertylessness is taken into account, it becomes obvious that is the working class women who are at the greatest risk of becoming poor.

5. Intra-class differences in the market resources of propertyless men and women reflect, in turn, differential patterns in the intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic

status which, in turn, are determined by the articulation of production and reproduction within the propertyless class, a topic which cannot be examined within the limitations of this essay.

6. This process in not equivalent to the 'feminization of the proletariat' (Ehrenreich, 1987: 12). Because of demographic reasons (high male mortality) women have always been more than half of the proletariat, whether they were aware of it or not. I refer here to the erosion of 'middle class' and 'upper-middle class' statuses among growing numbers of propertyless women. It in also true that working women are concentrated in the more poorly paid jobs and the demand for female (and male) cheap labor is increasing. These trends can be best understood not in demographic terms (giving emphasis to the sex or age composition of the proletariat), but as effects of current processes of wealth concentration and class proletarianization.

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